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Midnight. Sunday 13 March 2095

The temperature is currently -2°C . I expect it to drop further before the sun rises again. Current rations provide 1,500 calories per person per day.

We are the survivors of the cruise ship *Arcadia*. I believe we number more than a thousand. We've made it through a sub-zero winter with almost no fuel and the most basic shelters.

If you're hearing this, please let me know that you're still coming.

The Coalies could attack at any moment.

We need you.

Days in the camp: 120

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ESTHER

My face stares back from the opposite wall of the alley. Even at midnight, I can make out the white glare of my skin, the eyes scratched out. Above my picture, in block capitals, the text reads **MOST WANTED**.

When the first posters appeared in the camp, people were convinced that Janek hid surveillance cameras in the eyes. No matter how many times the Coalies replace them, they only survive a few hours. Before long, someone brings a crowbar or a shard of glass and slices through the eyes until all that's left is tattered paper and brick dust. The vandalism's a blessing in a way. It means I don't have to look myself in the face.

I blow into my hands. *Come on, Pat. I'm freezing my butt off down here.*

This alley leads away from the quayside shipyards, through the maze of warehouses and backstreets, and all the way to the other side of the camp. The red-brick buildings scrape the sky, but at ground level they're filled with abandoned

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dumpsters and rats. As soon as we'd caught our breath after the Landfall mission went so disastrously wrong, we started mapping out the territory. It took us weeks to feel out the edges of the place. To understand what we'd been left with.

Pat's footsteps clomp down the nearest alley, getting nearer, and the next second he comes into view. He's wearing all black and carrying a holdall across his back.

'All clear?' I say.

'Let's go a different way.' He walks past me without slowing, glancing at the poster I've been staring at for the past five minutes.

I don't move. 'Why do we need to find another way?'

'I scouted the alley for booby traps, but there's a corner at the top of one of the buildings I couldn't get a clear view of. I don't want to risk walking through it in case there's a trap hidden up where I can't see.' Pat carries on down the alley, away from the section of fence we need to get to. When he realizes I'm not following, he stops.

I fold my arms. 'Don't lie to me, Huang.'

'Like I'd dare.'

'You didn't mention not being able to see when you checked for booby traps last night. Or the night before that.'

The air crackles with frost, and Pat's breath streams out in a cloud. 'I'm telling you: I can't see well enough now. Let's go.'

I stare Pat right in his distractingly attractive face and look for signs of lying. Because he is lying. This is the path we've taken every night this week. The routine always the same: him going ahead to look for booby traps. Me hanging back in the shadows, wearing a patched augmented-reality mask to disguise myself. **Copyrighted Material**

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I spin on my heel and make for the alleyway he's trying so desperately to keep me out of.

He grabs me by the arm, not hard enough to hurt. 'Esther.' His face pleads with me, and for a millisecond I think about obeying.

Damn you and your cute face, Patrick Huang.

'We've got a job to do. If we don't make it to the fence in time, we'll miss our window. That's the quickest route. Tell me what's up there.'

He relents. I stride along the backstreet. The shadows bleed away as we walk, and there's the familiar tumble of rats running in the darkness. At first, all I see is the same industrial architecture as always: brick-lined ground, metal fire escapes, blank doors. Everything brutal and lifeless. My breath catches when I see why Pat tried to put me off. There's a new wanted poster. It shows Nik as he was when we first met. Hair slightly too long. Cocky grin on his face. Our eyes are untouched. This time, someone has daubed a word over us in red paint, so thick it runs in lines over our faces: **TRAITORS**.

I bite the end of my tongue between my teeth and try not to let Pat see the flash of pain.

'They don't mean it . . .' Pat whispers.

'There are more?'

'All the way along this stretch of warehouses.'

'Let's find a different way,' I say.

Pat's new route takes us down to the edge of the water. My heart rate triples when I catch my first glimpse of the *Arcadia*. It lies exactly where it fell four months ago. Half out of the

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water, straddling the ocean and the dock like a leviathan. Its anchor chain – the individual links as long as my leg – hangs from a hole in the front of the hull. Each rope dangling from the rail is a reminder of someone who went into the water that day. The smell of rotting seaweed and seawater taints the air. As always, I keep my eyes away from the blackened area at the back of the ship. That’s where the fire spread from the captain’s office, eating up deck after deck.

The ship obliterated this section of dock when it ploughed into it. The prow sliced through the concrete, churning it up in great slabs. The rubble extends in all directions. As we pass in front of the debris, I can’t block out the sounds the ship makes. The structure creaks with the movement of the water, wails echo round its metal hulk like death cries.

Pat checks me with a glance, but doesn’t say anything. He knows being this close to the *Arcadia* triggers memories. *A flash of red, a body drops to the ground.*

When we finally turn a corner and the *Arcadia* slips out of view, the tension in my body lessens. We trudge uphill along an alley until we’re as far from the ship and the ocean as we can go.

After I crashed the ship, people ran for their lives, but the Coalies fenced off a stretch of the coast with terrifying speed. Hundreds of us were trapped inside a finger of land less than five square miles. They didn’t even seem to care what was inside the fence, as long as we couldn’t escape. So we ended up with a handful of derelict industrial buildings and empty factories and a long slice of beach and sand dunes that are now covered in tents and hastily thrown-up shelters. Silas Cuinn claimed the far end of the camp. I’ve had no reason to

enter his territory and have no intention of changing that. Silas saved me from Hadley last year, but I'm not stupid enough to think that makes us friends.

The fence surrounding the camp billows in the breeze like a sail. It's made from some sort of silky mesh that's so thin I can only see the shape of the road and the abandoned buildings on the other side. There's no way to climb it. The gaps in the mesh are too small for even the smallest fingers, and the fact that it moves around makes getting a grip on it impossible. Tonight, that might change.

Pat swings the holdall off his back and unzips it. I turn off the AR mask to ease the tension headache it brings and hug myself to keep warm while Pat gets our gear ready. It feels below freezing tonight, a fact that makes my chest tight with grief. Tomorrow, we'll check the tents and cardboard hovels of the camp to see who didn't make it. We'll carry their bodies to the sandy place we've set aside as a graveyard.

My stomach rumbles, and my mind is dragged to the mealy chocolate-style protein bar nestled in the pocket of my uniform. Not yet. Wait a couple more hours.

'Ready?' I say, looking up at the fence. I've tried climbing it. And I've tried going underneath. And I've tried cutting through, which was the worst option because damaging it brings the Coalies, and then you have to run for your life.

Pat's standing a few metres along the fence, his back to me. 'We've only got five minutes until the next Coaly patrol comes this way,' he says, walking back to me. 'Let's give it a miss.'

'No. The reinforcements might arrive any day. We've got to be ready if General Lall tells us it's time to fight.'

Pat bends down to fasten a set of pads over the tops of my

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boots. ‘Last time you said you could still feel the shock from the fence, so I’ve made the material thicker. It should do nothing but tingle now. And I tightened the strap around the wrist too.’

‘Good. Can we get on with it?’ I say.

I need something, just a tiny win against the people keeping us here. More importantly, I need to know that there are ways through this barrier when the time comes.

‘You’ll be complaining if you get shocked again.’ He tightens the Velcro on my kneepads.

‘Keep an eye out for bots while I’m climbing. And I think we might have a visitor,’ I say, nodding towards the end of the buildings where a small shadow watches us.

I walk as far from the fence as I can get, tensing and releasing my hands.

‘Attempt ninety-three,’ Pat says. ‘Remember: make contact and pull downwards so that the micro-hooks go through the mesh.’

‘Got it.’

My back’s pressed against the brick wall of an abandoned warehouse, so cold I can feel it leaching through my uniform. Pat arranges a wooden box halfway between me and the fence. I take a breath and hold on to the moment of stillness. I run. Pushing myself off from the crate, I hit the fence and lose all hope. It billows away from me like I’m trying to climb a bedsheet. Then my knee catches it, and I manage to grab a section with my hands, and I clamp my knees, my ankles on to it. I’m suspended halfway up, swinging.

‘Yeah!’ A high-pitched voice comes from the alleyway. ‘We did it!’

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‘Go to bed, Dylan,’ I call, making no attempt to mask my irritation.

‘I can help. Look, I got all of these,’ he yells. His footsteps echo closer in the darkness.

I twist round so that I can see him, and get a swirl of vertigo. I’m only a few metres up, but I still don’t fancy the fall. Dylan wafts a bag back and forth, and I know without asking what’s in it. Wanted posters printed in black, white and felony red.

‘Try bringing your knee slightly up before you move away from the fence,’ Pat says. I can tell he’s standing with his arms crossed, like he does, and that Dylan will be copying his movement for movement.

I do as Pat says and feel the pad on my knee reattach. Dylan lets out another whoop of triumph. ‘She’s doing it!’

Excitement forces me upwards. By the time I reach the top, I’m panting and sweaty, but this is the highest we’ve managed to get and, as far as I can tell, we’ve not tripped the security system.

Without the haze of the fence to obscure my view, I can see further and clearer than at ground level. There’s a short stretch of broken tarmac, a few knotty, leafless shrubs, then the train track and a line of saplings. Everything’s bleached colourless by the thin street lights, dusty with frost. There’s an abandoned trailer, tyres flattened against the ground. This territory that the Federated States has temporarily *gifted* us is a wasteland right on the edge of its capital city. It’d be poetic that this is where they’ve decided to keep us if it wasn’t so soul-destroying. In the distance, a bus trundles along the road towards us, turning before it’s close enough to make out

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any details. I can just see the distant twinkling lights of the first high-rise buildings of downtown. We're so close to the life of the city, I can almost touch it. I wish I could go further. Haul myself over the top and run and run.

'Next patrol will be here in two minutes,' Pat says.

'Just another second.'

I take a breath and try to drink in the details. I might not get this far out of the camp again for a while.

'You got any food?' I hear Dylan say somewhere beneath me. The kid's hungry 24-7, which isn't surprising. Eleven-year-olds should be eating three full meals a day. He's lucky if he gets anything at all.

'Will you go home to bed if I feed you?' Pat asks.

'Cross my heart,' Dylan says.

'I've got a protein bar,' I say. I take one arm off the fence and rummage in my pocket with my free hand, pulling out the foil-wrapped rectangle. I toss it. Dylan makes a clean catch, tears into the wrapper and shoves the whole thing in his mouth at once.

'Better?' I ask.

He nods. 'Better.'

'Now get lost,' Pat says to him without unfolding his arms.

'Hey, Dylan,' I shout after him.

'Yeah?'

'Thanks for tearing down all those posters.'

Dylan grins and makes finger guns at us as he jogs backwards, before turning and sprinting into the darkness.

'What's the betting he doesn't go straight home?' Pat says, half to himself.

Above my head, something catches my eye. Silvery, thin

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as money spiders' silk. 'There's something else up here,' I say.

'Describe it.'

'Looks like a wire. Goes all the way along the top of the fence.' Something that thin can't be dangerous. I stretch up to it.

'Esther, don't touch –'

Before my finger even makes contact, a charge shoots through my hand, through my arm, through my head. A burst of static blinds me. Then I'm on the ground, eardrums trilling so loud my whole body vibrates.

I open my eyes to a cloud of stars. Pat's face is in front of me. His eyes are all tight with worry, and his mouth moves like he's talking, but I can't hear anything. He looks along the fence, and his face crumples in fear. Then he's pulling on my arm.

I force myself up. The smell of burning follows me, and there's pain, dull and all-encompassing. 'What happened?' I croak. My brain feels like breath on a mirror.

'What happened is you can't leave things well enough alone.' His voice is stern as he pulls me into the nearest alley.

I'm struggling under my own weight. My legs bend beneath me. Pat manoeuvres us into a doorway so that we're barely sheltered by a fire-escape staircase.

I put my head back against the wall. 'What's that smell?'

'That's the smell you make when you're set on fire.'

'I touched the wire,' I say. 'It hurt like hell.'

'That's what two thousand volts will do for you. And I *think* you triggered the alarm system. They'll be here any

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second. If we can get a couple of alleys away, we'll lose them. Reckon you can walk?'

I push my back into the wall and lift upwards. My legs wobble. There's a strobe of light near the fence. Dread trickles down my spine. 'Go,' I whisper.

Pat puts his finger to his lips. He shakes his head and reaches his hand behind my ear, bringing us eye to eye so that I can smell the earthy jasmine tea his mum brews on his breath. His fingers move around in my hair until he finds the flat button that activates my AR mask, and I feel the tightening ache of it round my temples, see the blue haze wash over my eyes. Now my face is disguised by the holographic image of someone else's. It's not high-tech – this model is so old it sometimes glitches off, revealing my true face, and it doesn't cope well with facial expressions. It won't help if the Coalies get near enough to look closely.

I try to make myself small, pulling my knees to my chest. Pat turns off his torch. This is the worst game of hide-and-seek ever.

We close our eyes.

I hear them coming. Boots on cobbles.

Sitting like this, not seeing, not breathing, every sound is magnified. A set of footsteps scuffs on the stony floor. I sense the light wash over us. *Please. Please.* We're a pile of blankets. We're discarded trash. The footsteps draw closer. Any second now, the beam of the torch will strafe over us again, and this time it will stop, and they'll find us. What comes after that I don't know. We'll be disappeared just like everyone the Coalies snatch from the camp.

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There's a shout. The footsteps stop. My moment of relief turns to horror because that was Dylan's voice. I want to scream at him to run. I want to shout, 'No!' because everything's on its head. He shouldn't be doing this – distracting them. We're the ones who should be protecting him.

The footsteps clatter away from us.

MEG

Ice water splashes over the sides of the boat, soaking through my thin gloves. My skin tingles with salt and cold, and I can feel the burn of it gathering in the corners of my eyes. My hair – grimy after so long in the cells – clings to my face like seaweed. I ignore it. The only thing I can think about is reaching dry land.

‘Cold out here, isn’t it?’ I say to the bloke driving the boat. ‘Bet you’re not cold in all that get-up though. Doesn’t look like the water’s getting through those gloves. You’ve got a definite style, you lot. Very gothic.’

He ignores me. I rub a layer of salt water off my face, feel the flecks of it like acid on my lips.

Hey, Seb, I’m almost home.

There’s a tingle down my spine. ‘Creepy old thing,’ I say out loud, forcing the feeling away and keeping my eyes on the *Arcadia*. Half sunk and tilted on to its side. It could be a rock through the blue haze of dawn. Already there are gulls circling it, their nests of straggling twigs and hotsam making

it even more carcass-like, and I can't help but think of rotting flesh.

'It wasn't creepy when I was a kid. It was home,' I say, half to myself.

Talking out loud seems to take the edge off the memories. My voice somehow stops me from being haunted. It's not that I'm scared of Mum and Dad's ghosts or anything. It's just sometimes I feel as if the sea's not really finished with me. Like I could still drown. The moment I saw my parents' bodies lying blueish and stiff in the morgue was the moment I agreed to help the Feds with their plan. And, in exchange, I'll be able to talk to Seb in real life, not just in my head.

'You talk too much,' the Coaly says.

'You can hear me then?'

'Shut up.'

I pinch my lips together. When it comes to the Coalies, I've learned that you keep your mouth shut.

I've not lost my marbles. But that was a long few months alone, Seb, and talking to you kept me going, didn't it? Those moments when I thought I wasn't making it out alive.

I'm going to do whatever it takes to get back to you.

We lurch over a wave, and I clamp on to the side of the boat. They gave me a life jacket before we set off and showed me how to inflate it using the plastic fob on the front. Even so, I don't fancy taking a dip.

'Get ready,' the Coaly says.

His thick-gloved hand is wrapped round the tiller. My view of the ship disappears as he manoeuvres us to face the shore. The boat slows before we hit the breakers, and when

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the Coaly cuts the engine we rise over quiet humps of water. It's almost peaceful in the early hours.

There are lights along the shore. Handfuls of them close to the ground at the edge of the camp, more spilling from the tall buildings close to the *Arcadia*. Can't tell from here, on account of the bad light, but I remember from the plans that the camp has tents and shacks in this middle section, and big warehouses down the city end. I should head for the warehouse end. Ask the right questions and I'll find what I'm looking for.

'This is where you get off,' the Coaly says.

What? I lean forward and peer down into the murky ocean. No bottom in sight. We're close to the shore, but there's still a wall of breaking waves between us and the beach.

'Go a bit closer, mate,' I say.

He's unflinching. Like he won't be budging a single centimetre.

'Your lot banned swimming when I was a kid. If you plonk me in the water here, I'm going to drown. And I'm guessing it'll be you who's questioned when my body washes up, won't it? Go closer.'

The Coaly's head tilts like he's thinking. He grabs me by the top of the life jacket and uses his fat fingers to pull the cord. It shushes as it balloons. He pulls me to the edge, and I scramble, my boots skidding over the boards. I will myself to stay in the boat, fingernails tearing at the edge as he hoists me over.

Seb, I'm scared.

For a second, I'm hanging over the ocean, staring into my own pale reflection in the Coaly's visor. Then I'm tumbling,

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underwater, the sea shocking and ice-cold and everywhere all at once so that it feels like the universe is made of frost. Loud and silent.

I won't scream, Seb. I won't let them beat us.

I force myself to relax. I hold my breath in the dark water. The life jacket tightens round my shoulders. All I have to do is let the thing pull me up. My head breaks the surface and I splutter through streaming water. Somewhere in the distance the boat's engine is whining away from me. That Coaly left me without a backward glance.

I float on my back and breathe deep, air like ice filling my lungs, waves lifting me up and down. Then I bat my arms in the water until I'm facing the right way.

There's the *Arcadia*. There's the camp.

ESTHER

I wake to the sound of canvas flapping above me and sunlight seeping through the tent door. My body aches. Feels like I'm crackling when I move. I close my eyes and breathe, wanting just a few more seconds of rest.

'You're awake,' a woman says, ducking her head under the flap of the tent beyond my feet.

'Mrs Huang, I –' I start to say.

'You nothing. Lie yourself down until Patrick has had a look at you. And if I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times: it's Niamh.'

She places the tray she's carrying down on a low table by the door, then pokes her head back out. 'Patrick, your friend's awake.'

Pat appears in the doorway. He sees me and smiles. 'Having a lie-in, are we?'

'Your mother threatened me with violence if I tried to get up,' I say.

Mrs Huang pours tea from a pot, adds a spoon of something,

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and places the cup in my hands. I prop myself up to take a sip. It's spicy and hot. I can feel it soothing my muscles.

'Is Dylan safe?' I say.

'He got back here about an hour after us. Spent a while running in circles to shake the Coalies off before that though,' Pat says.

'Wish that kid would listen when we tell him to go home. He shouldn't be out at night.'

'He's got no one to look after him. My mum's tried, but he's as wild as they come. It's rich coming from you anyway. How many times have I got to tell you not to touch anything that looks suspicious?'

'It won't happen again.'

'We both know it will. Because you seem to have a problem taking other people's suggestions, even when it's for your own good.'

'I had enough of taking orders on the *Arcadia*.'

'Like I'd be stupid enough to try and give you an order. Maybe take some advice once in a while.'

Mrs Huang unfolds her arms and says something in Cantonese to Pat. He replies, quietly, over his shoulder. Mrs Huang dips out of the tent.

'She's hates me,' I say.

'Hate's a strong word. She's angry at us though. She can't understand why I got out of the gang if I'm going to put myself in danger trying to find a way through the fence.'

'Maybe she has a point,' I say.

He sits down and leans forward on his elbows so that we're face to face. I don't leave Curn's gang because I'm

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scared of a fight. I left because some girl persuaded me the enemy we need to be fighting is the Coalies.'

'She sounds like she's got genius-level intellect.'

He breaks into a grin. 'Oh, she does, does she?' Pat slides his hand under the blanket and takes mine. Warm and steady.

'We should be careful for a few nights. Coalies might increase their patrols after we set the alarm off again,' I say. 'I'll go north instead. Carry on mapping the fence up there.'

Pat leans away and takes a sip of tea, looking at me through the steam. 'And what am I supposed to do while you're out having fun?'

'You can mess about with whatever little project you're working on.' I look over his shoulder to where there's an upturned crate being used as a workbench, the surface cluttered with broken machinery and wires.

'Little project? I'll have you know I've got some very complicated explosive devices in the pipeline.'

'Good. Because when help arrives, we're going to need all the firepower we can get.'

'I don't want you out there alone. Skip tonight. I'll come with you tomorrow.'

'I'll be careful,' I say.

'Obey this order: drink your tea.'

'You need a haircut,' I fire back. He laughs and pulls the blanket up over my waist, tucking it in round me.

There's a yell outside.

'Stay there,' Pat says. He dashes out.

I kick the blanket off, push myself up, pause a second to check my balance, then take the three steps to the door. Pat and Mrs Huang are just outside. I blink in the sunlight, even

though it's grey and overcast. Pat stretches his arm round my shoulder to hold me up, and I lean into him. It's nice to feel the warmth through his sleeve.

'Told you to stay in bed,' he says.

'Didn't want to miss the excitement.'

A group of kids are huddled round an upturned saucepan on the ground. Dylan's among them, a feverish grin on his face. He spots me and waves. From inside the saucepan, there's a sound like rain on metal, and the kids jump back, screaming and running in circles like midges. Mrs Huang laughs. The adults gathered around shout in Cantonese. Either spurring the kids on to be brave or heightening their play-terror, I'm not sure.

The pan goes quiet. Dylan creeps towards it, touching the handle gingerly with the end of his wind-bitten fingers. As soon as he tilts it up, there's a flash of metal leg under the edge, and then the sound reverberates again. Dylan drops the handle and runs off, squealing. Everybody laughs.

'Go help him,' I say to Pat, nudging him with my shoulder.

'OK, listen up!' he shouts, walking into the midst of the kids. 'First off, I don't see a single one of you with your face covered. What's the first rule of dealing with a surveillance bot?'

'Don't let it see your face!' the kids chorus.

'Good. Now, everybody grab a weapon! Whoever stuns the thing gets a lucky dip in the gummy vitamin jar!'

The kids are gone before he's even finished the sentence, grabbing bits of driftwood and long sticks, covering their faces with whatever bits of clothing they can find. One comes back waving a cricket bat in the air.

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Pat kneels next to the pan. ‘Remember, just one whack. We don’t want to kill it because it’ll send a distress signal. Just stun it. Three, two, one, go!’

He swings the pan out of the way. Underneath, the pointed metal legs of the spider surveillance bot scabble in the sandy dirt. Its body spins, trying to record the situation for whoever’s reviewing the footage. The kids don’t give it a chance. Pat leaps out of the way as they try to wallop the bot. He stands back, breathing hard, and flashes me and his mum a grin. The bot has been engulfed in seconds, and a loud thunk with the baseball bat tells me someone landed a good hit.

‘Someone got it. Now, what do we do once it’s stunned?’

‘Pull its legs off!’ one of the kids shouts.

‘We pull its legs off. You have to grab it right here,’ Pat says, and he takes it by the edge of its body like he’s holding a crab and lifts it into the air. Its legs squirm. In a flash, Pat uses his free hand to grab one of the legs, gives it a neat twist and pull, and tosses the leg on to the ground. The kids are feral with excitement.

‘There’s more and more of them inside the camp,’ Mrs Huang says.

‘And not much we can do, other than destroy any we get our hands on.’

‘It’s a wonder General Lall keeps letting the Coalies breach the ceasefire terms. It’s almost as though she’s turning a blind eye to what’s going on in here.’

I look at Mrs Huang in surprise. This is the first time she’s been so blunt about the rebellion. I open my mouth to reply, but she cuts me off with a wave.

‘I’ve been meaning to have a chat with you for a few weeks

now.' She looks at me sideways, and there's no flicker of a smile on her face.

My cheeks flush. The pop of anxiety in my chest gives me a sick feeling.

'My son likes you,' she says.

'I like him too,' I say before I can stop myself. She raises an eyebrow.

Pat's twisting another leg off the bot.

'I'd rather you didn't. I'd rather he stayed half the camp away from you and the trouble you drag after you.'

'I'd never put him in danger –'

'You already do, every time you take him off trying to get out of the camp. Every time you talk to him in public when you know full well you're the most wanted seventeen-year-old in history. While we're on the subject, you put the rest of us at risk too, every time he brings you back here. That AR mask does next to nothing to disguise you, glitching the way it does. Everyone knows who you are.'

The hair on my neck prickles. I look round at the adults in the group. Some of them are glaring at me. An old woman whispers behind her hand to the person next to her. Mrs Huang's right. I'm the guilty one, and I'm putting them at risk just being here.

'Are the rumours true? Your lot are working on something again?' she says. Arms crossed. Just like Pat.

'I can't talk about it,' I say.

'I'll take that as a yes.' She gets closer to me. 'Didn't you do enough the last time?'

I swallow the lump in my throat. My mouth's drier than the sand dunes.

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‘Aye, at least you’ve got the decency to look ashamed. Do us all a favour and leave our Patrick out of it. He’ll be better off without you. You can stop coming round here as well.’ Mrs Huang saunters away and into a tent beyond the kids.

I want the ground to swallow me. It’s all true. I’m the reason these people are here. I’m the reason so many aren’t here too.

‘The final step is to bury the body so that the camera can’t send anything back to the Coalies,’ Pat shouts to the kids.

Mrs Huang re-emerges with a bottle of gummy vitamins. ‘Now, who got a good hit in?’

‘Me! Me!’ the kids shout. They swarm her, reaching grubby fingers into the bottle one by one.

Pat pushes his way through to grab one, then comes and hands it to me.

‘Thanks,’ I say, popping it into my mouth. I chew. It’s strawberry, but tastes like sand in my mouth.

‘You OK?’

‘Sure. Look, I’m going to get back. Corp will be wondering where I am, and I don’t want to put her in a bad mood.’

‘I’ll come too.’

‘No, stay here. Looks like they could use your help finishing that thing off,’ I say, nodding to where the kids have lost control of the bot, and it’s spinning on the dusty ground, carving circles with its last remaining foot.

‘Two ticks,’ he shouts. He jogs back to the gang of kids and drops the pan back on top of the bot so that they can carry it off easily.

‘Wait,’ Pat says, hurrying after me. He grabs my hand and pulls me to a stop. **Copyrighted Material**

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‘See you later, OK?’ I say.

‘Not OK. What have you got going on that means you’re trying to ditch me for the day?’

‘It’s not that,’ I start, and even though I don’t mean to, my eyes flick up to where Mrs Huang is standing.

‘Did my mum say something?’

‘She’s just worried.’

‘Can’t believe she actually said something to you. I asked her – I told her – to mind her own business.’ He crosses his arms and shoots a glare at his mum.

‘Shhhhhh, don’t. I don’t want to cause any problems between you.’

‘Let me guess. Was it *we don’t need your kind of trouble round here?*’

I take a deep breath and let it out in a shudder. ‘That, and I’m leading you astray apparently.’

‘For God’s sake, Mother,’ he mumbles.

‘She’s got a point, Pat. We almost got caught last night, and it wasn’t the first time. My face is plastered over half the camp –’

He takes my hand, and I let him hold it between us. He runs his thumb over my knuckles. ‘You don’t get to decide for both of us.’

‘What?’

‘I’m not going to let you do the whole cutting-me-off-to-protect-me thing. It’s a bit cliché, to be honest.’ He pushes my hair off my face. I feel my cheeks redden.

‘Your mother’s watching,’ I say.

He turns round to where Mrs Huang is still glaring. ‘Let’s get out of here.’

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As we leave, Mrs Huang shouts after us.

Pat waves back at his mum and shouts something that sounds like the start of an argument.

‘What did she say?’ I ask.

‘She told us to stay out of trouble.’

MEG

My legs are shaky from the walk along the wet sand, and my stomach's grumbling like an old boiler. Least my clothes have pretty much dried out. Was a stroke of luck finding this fire. When I smelt smoke, I poked my head through a door and saw it not ten steps inside this warehouse. People are sleeping and sitting round it, and I thought, *Shove this. I'm too cold to be polite.* When I crouched down next to it, nobody said nothing so I've been sitting here for a while.

Once I'd got my breath back and pulled myself out of the water after that bloody Coaly chucked me in, I made for the silhouette of the ship in the distance. First, it was just beach. Then there were lines and lines of tents. Some things that weren't even as nice as tents. Tarps held up by planks and fastened down with beach rocks. People snoring inside. Babies crying.

By the time it was fully morning, the sand had given way to gritty concrete, then some buildings that had seen better days. Now I'm in amongst the warehouses. Huge things like

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cliffs. Some of them don't even have windows, just brick walls that go up and up into the sky. I recognize it all from my training. Handcuffed to that chair in the bare cell, watching hour after hour of footage. Video of the ship crashing. The hull filling with water. The bodies in the water.

I stretch my fingers closer to the flames and wiggle them. An old man's pottering around, clanging pans and generally messing about. He's all wrapped up in a blanket, and every now and again he's taken by these long coughs. Sounds like he's bringing up a lung.

I make myself small, trying to look timid and unthreatening so that he doesn't throw me out.

He pushes a pan of water into the embers of the fire, all blackened like it's been used a million times. Even though it's daytime outside, it feels like twilight in here. The glow from the fire tapers off, then it's just shadows and darkness. I get the feeling the space is so big it'd make my stomach flip.

After a few minutes, the water starts pinging in the old man's pan, and he scatters in a sachet of dried milk and throws in a teabag. He stirs it with his finger – all knotted with arthritis and cracked from the cold – splashes a bit into a bowl, and hands it to me.

'Thanks,' I say. It's not much more than manky water, but it's hot, and it's better than nothing.

He slurps. His face is all saggy like he used to have more flesh on his bones, and the jowls hang in stubbly layers.

'I'm looking for someone,' I say when he's halfway through his tea.

He wipes his mouth on his sleeve. 'Lots of folk in here,' he says.

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That gives me the creeps. I don't want to think about all the others that are lurking inside. Someone shushes us from a dark corner and turns over under their blanket.

The man pulls a long ribbon of paper from a box beside the fire. There's a flash of a boy's face in black and white before the man stuffs it into the bottom of the fire. He blows on it until the flame catches, and the paper crinkles to ash.

'The people on the wanted posters, what did they do?' I say.

He eyes me suspiciously. 'You ask a lot of questions. Don't take kindly to snitches in this warehouse. If that's your game, you'd better get off before we deal with you.'

Next second he's on his feet and shambling into the dark. Bloody hell. Spooked him. I don't want to spend any longer in the camp than I have to, but if everyone's as tight-lipped as this old geezer it's going to be tricky. Thought people would help me. Maybe I really am on my own.

'If someone's missing, you need to check the wall,' a voice says from the shadows, crackling with phlegm.

'What wall?'

'Wall of the missing. You know, the big thing in the Pit with all the pictures on it? Now, get lost so that we can sleep.'

'Fine,' I say. 'This place is a shithole anyway.'

ESTHER

By the time we get to the coastguard station, the only physical reminder of falling from the fence last night is a sensation of thinness that stretches through my muscles. Much worse is the gnawing guilt over what Pat's mum said.

I clench my fists until the nails bite into the palms. This wasn't how it was meant to be. Things were supposed to be better after we got off the *Arcadia*, but now we're all haunted by it. It sits sideways in the water, and I've tried to shake the memory of her, but the moment I rest or close my eyes, or stop moving for even a second, it all floods back.

Her face is pale with shock. Dark waves all around. Metallic smoke. We have to go . . .

I'm trying to loosen her grip, and I'm drawn to the thought of the little white envelope I keep wrapped in my spare pair of socks and stuffed into the bottom of my med bag. The two blue pills that I'd find if I opened it.

I squeeze my eyes closed, and when I open them again I force myself to scan the horizon for signs of Coalies instead

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of dwelling on the *Arcadia*. I've no idea if they'd come by land or ocean. Across the water, the sun is insipid through the milky morning haze. Almost the entire population of the camp lives in the southern area, where they huddle in the shelter provided by the warehouses. Corp and I live here, in this abandoned coastguard station, halfway between the buildings of the main camp and the territory that Silas Cuinn has claimed. Forced to live in isolation because it's too dangerous for us to live with the others.

Silver lining – I can barely see the ship from here. Having it loom over me was a constant reminder of what I did, so when General Lall ordered us out of the main camp I wasn't entirely sorry. At least out here there are moments when I can ease the guilt by pretending the wreck doesn't exist.

Pat kicks his boots against the bottom rung of the ladder, showering sand, and starts to climb. For a second, he disappears, then his head peeks back over the top.

'I'm fine,' I say, ignoring the hand he stretches down to help me. I instantly regret my tone.

'Esther,' he chides.

I reach to him and let him pull me up, feeling the strength and roughness of his hand.

Pat goes inside. I hear the creak-slam of the station house's front door. Even after two months here, I can't bear to call this place home. It's always the coastguard station, or just *the place*.

At the top of the ladder, I pause to listen to the soothing crash of the waves nearby. It's a strange building made of bleached planks the colour of weathered bone. The back portion of the building was built right into the sand dunes;

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the front sits out over the water on stilts as thick as tree trunks. It straddles a wide ramp that leads down to the ocean – a relic that would once have launched coastguard boats in an emergency. When we arrived, some of the walls were so decayed we had to tack tarps over the gaps to make it weatherproof. It still shakes and howls with the wind.

Inside, Pat has already hung his jacket by the front door and left his boots neatly on the shoe rack, a sparse layer of sand covering the wooden floorboards. This is an equipment room, full of the old clothes that were left behind when it was abandoned. It's all so antiquated none of it can be used. Hundred-year-old jackets hang like ghosts on the walls, grey with dust and cobwebs. There's a pile of boots in one corner, an orange float attached to a rope, a first-aid kit, empty apart from the wrapper of a long-ago-used plaster.

I take the rickety stairs up and cross the landing to the kitchen-lounge-dining area. You can imagine the coastguards making their dinner up here, watching the ocean for signs of trouble out of the windows at the front. Down the corridor there's a bunk room and a shower room where the only running water is chunky and brown. There's nowhere to put a clinic, and no resources even if we did have the space, so we do rounds of the camp every day and treat patients wherever they lie.

Corp's standing by the camping stove that's our only source of heat, and the hollow smell of gas tells me she's just boiled the water. There's a cup of tea going cold on the counter next to her, and I get the feeling she's been staring out of that window a good long time.

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‘You decided to come back,’ Corp says finally, turning. ‘I take it you’ve been at the fence again.’

Without thinking, I stand to attention and sense Pat straighten next to me. A throwback to my time on the *Arcadia* when Corp gave the orders. I never got out of the habit.

‘I ordered him to help me,’ I say.

‘You don’t have any business ordering anyone to do anything,’ Corp snaps back.

‘She did not,’ Pat says.

‘Let me handle this,’ I say.

‘I don’t take orders. In fact, I persuaded her to go. Esther said it was getting too dangerous after we set the alarm off last time. But I’d finished the gear I was working on, and I wanted to try it out.’

‘I don’t care whose idea it was. I gave you clear instructions to stay home.’

‘This again,’ I mutter.

‘Watch your tone, cadet.’

Corp’s face is rigid and, despite the fact that we’re a million miles and half a year from the training room on the *Arcadia*, my heart thumps with anxiety. I could never handle being given demerits by Corp.

‘Or what? You’ll stop me treating people with the medical supplies the Federated States don’t give us? Rescind my access to the state-of-the-art medical facility we haven’t got?’

‘We do what we can,’ she says, smooth, quiet. Chilling. ‘Trust that General Lall will tell us when it’s time to take action.’

I clench my teeth and drop my eyes. Corp looks out of the window.

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‘Did they answer last night?’ I say.

Corp sighs. Her expression softens, and I know she’s going to deliver bad news. ‘I tried every frequency used by the rebellion. No reply.’

Every night, I get my hopes up; every morning, my heart sinks a little deeper.

‘We have to consider whether there’s anyone left out there to hear the transmissions,’ Pat says quietly.

Corp catches my eye. I know all three of us are thinking the same thing. What happened on the *Arcadia* changed everything. While Nik worked on rebuilding the ship’s engine, his counterparts on the other stranded ships were doing the exact same. But once we started the *Arcadia*’s engine the gig was up. Pretty soon the Coalies realized if it could happen on the *Arcadia* it could happen on any of the ships still anchored along their coastline. Within months, every ship that could start its engine made a break for it. Each night, we listened to the old radio Corp had found in the coastguard station. Celebrating when ships made it to open waters. Crying on the day the radio suddenly went quiet.

If the radio is silent, it could mean all the ships are gone. Maybe they’ve left us behind. Maybe they’re all dead. My heart breaks thinking about either.

Corp clears her throat. ‘General Lall persuaded the other ships to come back for us. As soon as they arrive, we’ll have enough firepower to mount a coordinated uprising. Until then, any risky behaviour threatens the course of action we’ve worked hard to outline.’ She looks pointedly at me. ‘And, if you need it spelling out, that includes breaching the fence, being caught on Coalie surveillance feeds in the Pit, or

asking questions about missing family that might flag you as a wanted person.'

At the mention of looking for my family, I feel my hackles rise in rebellion. 'It's taking too long. What if the other ships don't get here in time? The Coalies could decide to attack us at any moment, and General Lall's got us here twiddling our thumbs. She should be happy we're out there, looking for ways to escape.' My voice creaks with emotion.

'Our orders are to wait. General Lall is coordinating the arrival of the reinforcements and then –'

'How long do we carry on doing nothing?'

'General Lall would have informed us of any change to the plan. We keep trying to contact the other ships. We wait for orders. Nothing's changed.'

'It's been two months.'

Corp takes a step forward and squeezes my shoulders. 'As long as there are sick people in this camp, we'll carry on treating them. Hold your nerve, cadet. Our best chance of escape is waiting for the others to get here. Understand?'

'We're losing people that we shouldn't be losing. Are you happy watching them die?'

'Take it easy,' Pat says.

I bite my tongue, and the silence thickens like soup.

Pat folds his arms. 'Esther got electrocuted.'

I snap my head round to look at him. 'Not helpful, Pat.'

'You might have concussion.'

'Did she fall?' Corp asks, then she's standing close to me again and looking too deep into my eyes.

Nobody here looks at each other too closely any more. It's too painful to see other people wasting away, too humiliating

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to know they see it in us too. Instead, we skim the surface. Keep each other at arm's length.

She runs her hands over my skull, presses her fingers to the cervical vertebrae at the top of my spine. 'That's just great, Esther. Because what's going to help is if there's one less medic in the camp. Pat, you're off duty for the rest of the day as punishment. Go to bed.'

He looks like he's about to argue, then shakes his head and marches out of the room. I hear him slam the door to the bunk room down the corridor.

'Go and collect our rations. And consider this an order: wait until John has left before you go to the handover site. Do not *accidentally* bump into him. Do not go to the Pit. Do not make enquiries about your parents. It will attract attention, and we can't afford for any of us to be arrested. This is your final warning, cadet. Disobey me again and I'll take your med bag and ask you to leave this facility.'

'You'll throw me out?'

'Without hesitation. You can stay in one of the warehouses with the other civilians. Perhaps you'll learn to be a little more appreciative of the things we've got.'

'Appreciative –'

'We have more than most people here.'

'And Lall is expecting us to keep this entire camp of malnourished people alive with a few multivitamins and wishful thinking. What is she doing exactly? Has she had any contact with the other ships? Because from what I've seen she's happy to sit in her warm headquarters, flying in and out on her helicopter and having endless chats with the Coalies.'

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Corp takes the cup of tea from the counter and throws it in the sink. Liquid glugs down the plughole. ‘The reason we’re here and not in headquarters is that we’re a security risk to ourselves and to the rebellion. Obviously, General Lall can’t let either of us have information that we might pass to the Coalies if we’re arrested. We’ve got to trust that she’s doing everything she can to bring help.’

‘I can’t have this argument again. I can’t keep saying we need to act. I can’t keep being told to wait,’ I say.

Corp’s staring out of the window again. ‘You’re right.’

‘Hang on. What?’

‘I said you’re right. We can’t wait forever. But the general won’t see us. We can’t get into headquarters. Unless someone answers the broadcasts, my hands are tied.’

She walks out. Her feet thud on the stairs, and then there’s the distant sound of the front door closing. Ten seconds later, her coatless figure strides away from the coastguard station, treading a line between the beach and the shallow water.

I sense Pat next to me. He knits his fingers with mine, and we watch Corp get smaller and smaller.

‘I want to believe they’re coming back for us,’ I say.

MEG

By this point, I've got blisters on my blisters. I lean on a wall, and my fingernails dig into it. I pull off one of my boots and inspect the damage under my sock. There's a thick blister that jiggles when I poke it.

It's pretty miserable in this place, Seb. Worse than I expected.

It's taken me the best part of the morning, but I've walked from the waterfront to the other side of camp. I've had a good look round the warehouse my handler told me is rebellion headquarters – careful not to look suspicious, obviously. And I've asked no fewer than twenty people if they know where to find what I'm looking for. They're shut up tighter than clams. Can't decide whether the past four months has made everyone super paranoid or super loyal.

A scuttling noise comes from up the road, like feet on hard ground, then a group of kids appear. They march past in a procession, all of them raggedy and skinny. Every one of them has the kind of sharp cheekbones that come from not

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eating well enough, and their eyes are too deep-set in their faces. The one at the front is holding a bag in front of her, and it's wiggling like there's something alive in there.

A few paces past me there's a loud whistle, and the whole group of them swerves to the opposite edge of the street. All of them at once. They press their backs to the wall of the alley and shimmy along, looking exactly like they're trying to walk along a window ledge. Then, just as quick and at the exact same point, they jump back to the centre of the street and carry on their procession.

I lean back on the wall and watch them pass. The last one's a straggler, a kid of about ten or eleven.

'Oi, kid,' I call. He freezes with his back to the wall again. Both hands flat against the brickwork. 'What you got in the bag?'

'Cat,' he says. 'Going to the Pit so Nan Smokey can skin it for us.' He grins.

My stomach lurches. For everything I went through in those Coaly cells, I was never so desperate for food that I'd think of catching a feral cat. 'What's with the synchronized walking?'

'What?'

'Why'd you all flatten yourselves against the wall there? You playing a game?'

He looks at me like I've got two heads. Then his eyes shoot up to a place a metre or so above my head. 'It's the booby traps,' he says.

Dread drops over me like a sheet of rain. My handler warned me there'd be booby traps. They're meant to keep people's movements restricted to certain areas so that they'll

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be easier to round up. I got distracted by the bloody blisters on my feet and by the fact I haven't got any leads, and I forgot that I should be checking whatever streets I walk along. Craning upwards, I spot the orb of red glass attached to the wall.

Shit, Seb, this is a situation.

The kid's eyes come back to me. 'Sorry.' He jumps to safety, then jogs after his friends.

I trawl through memories of the time I spent with my handler going over plans of the camp. He said they were anti-personnel booby traps triggered by sensors when people get within range. And I've gone and walked right underneath one. How come I didn't set it off already?

I pull my coat up over my head and close my eyes. Can't stay here forever. The kids showed me where was safe, but that spot's a good few metres from here. I press myself against the wall, figuring that I might stay out of range if I'm flat to it. I inch along, the bricks scraping the back of my coat.

Right, Seb, I'm going to do it.

I jump. For a second, I reckon I've made it. Then something hits me with a thwump, and I smash into the ground. And I can feel something wrapping round my ankles. A thin rope over each ankle and at either end something that looks like a metal bar. Bitter panic coats the back of my throat.

'Don't wriggle,' a voice says. And then that kid is next to me on the ground.

'You came back,' I say breathlessly.

'Guess I'm a hero. Just stay still. Still as a statue. It's a snare trap.' He carefully unties my bootlaces like he's defusing

a bomb. 'Right. On three, I'm going to pull your boots off, and you whip your legs out, OK?'

I nod. He takes one boot heel in each hand. 'One. Two. Three!' The second he says three, I snatch my feet away from the lines. They suck flat against the ground like they're trying to catch me.

The kid grins. He holds my boots out to me.

'Cheers,' I say. I take the boots and stare at the kid. My heart's beating nineteen to the dozen. 'That was a close one.'

'No problem,' he says. He jogs away.

'Hey, what's your name, kid?'

'Dylan,' he shouts over his shoulder.

'You want some food?'

He freezes. Turns.

In my pockets, there's ten vacuum-packed meals. They were meant to be used as bribes, but so far no one's let me get close enough to even offer. I pull one out now and wave it in the air. Dylan watches the shiny foil package move back and forth. I toss it to him, then pull another one from my pocket. He looks like I've offered him the crown jewels.

Lured by the food, he comes back to me. I start walking away from the booby trap, following the direction the kids took. Dylan falls into step next to me and tears the top off the first silver packet. He pours cold soup into his mouth. It dribbles out of the corners and down his chin.

'How come you didn't know about the booby traps?' he says, mashing the chunky bits of soup between his teeth.

I shrug. 'I've stayed mostly in my tent. Just forgot where they were.'

'You should be more careful. There's traps everywhere