
Terrus Ferra

A man wakes up violently, he sits up straight in bed, the same nightmare again, a hazy memory. In a moonlit room the man gets out of bed, and pours himself a drink. From his duster he takes a tattered picture In the moonlight he looks at the picture and smiles a sad smile.

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It has been five years now, since this hell started. I didn't really have a choice, nobody did. Nobody knew what happened, only that people had disappeared and technology failed us. My name is Keyon Durant, and I have been wandering around Europe for five years now, trying to survive and to figure out what happened that day.

Five years ago, I think it was a Thursday, we found out that overnight about nine out of ten people had vanished and all electrical appliances failed. Nobody knows what had happened; I have found some bits and pieces of information but nothing concrete yet. Off course it didn't take long for the survivors to spout wild theories, crazed people screaming that the apocalypse was there and that we all would die. Some said it had been rapture and all good people had been taken to heaven. Some of the people that did disappear certainly didn't belong in heaven.

There was no way of communication with other nations, so people stuck together, trying to hold on to ideals and values. That only lasted for one-and-a-half years, after that the food supplies started to run low. Everybody could have seen the shit storm that what was coming, so I left the group or "community" as they liked to call it, and headed deeper into mainland Europe. Everywhere I saw the same thing happening, people couldn't support each other anymore, there wasn't enough food to go around, and people started to become greedy. They wanted more, so they formed groups, tribes, which were strong enough to take it by force. That was the last absolute fall of what we called modern society. It fell into pieces and people started to form tribes. The strong tribes dominate and bully weaker tribes into serving them and provide them with food, items and services, some tribes became cannibalistic. Now, another three-and-a-half year later, there is the constant threat of tribal wars, but this time they use guns instead swords and spears. Most tribes are far apart in the country, it is the city tribes that are the worst, several tribes packed together in a ghost city. The city tribes are usually also the most aggressive and less humane, you don't want to get caught by them.

It isn't everywhere this bad, in Warsaw they managed to keep everything together and have some sort of a government. All is based on the work someone can do. The government is all build around one man Marek Zielinski, he is basically the sole ruler, a dictator, but he's a good man and cares for people. He'll allow anybody into the city as long as they have the ability and are willing work for the city. Even children have to work, light jobs such as couriers and in return they get food, shelter and even an education. It may not be perfect, even harsh and cruel sometimes, but it works.

With a deep sigh Keyon puts down his pen.

He finishes the rest of his whiskey.

After staring at the moon for a while he stands up and looks around his room, his current home. He never stays at the same spot for more than 3 months in order to avoid the tribes.

Tomorrow he'll write a short manual on living and surviving, in case other non-tribal survivors find the place after he's gone.

He'll return to Warsaw in two more days, to see if Marek found something for him. It'll cost him though, luckily the way there is a straight walk with few to no tribes on the way.

But first his daily routine of checking his hideout's security, after that to bed, tomorrow is going to be a long day preparing for departure. He always destroys his improvements of a hideout when he leaves, leaving nothing for those come next apart from the journal.

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Keyon heads straight to Marek's office, in the last few years he has become quite familiar with Warsaw. He's been here several times and once or twice for a longer period of time. You could say he and Marek are on good terms, he does odd jobs for Marek, and Marek provides him with a residence and any new info he gets regarding the cause of the catastrophe.

Keyon opens the door to Marek's office, but there is no one in.

"Good day Mister Durant, Marek is just left."

Keyon turns around to see Marek's assistant.

"Lidia, it's been a while, you look as good as ever."

"Indeed it's been a while, you look like hell. But I guess that's due to your travelling."

Keyon looks at her and says: "Well I walked all night last night to get here so I probably do look like hell. Can you tell me where Marek is?"

"He is in prison area, questioning a thief."

"So, when will he be done?"

"Not long, but I can take you there."

"Kindly, if you would."

"This place is as bad as always" Keyon remarks when walking through the prison area.

"Well yes, we don't want anybody to be comfortable here for the obvious reasons.

"No point arguing about that."

Keyon already sees Marek, he is standing in front of one of the cells.

"What is your name girl?"

The girl he is questioning remains silent.

"How old are you?"

Still the girl refuses to answer.

"Sir, this going nowhere." one of the guards says.

Marek replies: "Yeah, I noticed." After which he looks at Lidia and Keyon.

"Sir, I brought Mister Durant."

Keyon looks at the girl in the cell, a young girl no older than 12 maybe 13 years old. She is very skinny and looks as if she hasn't eaten in days. Her clothes are dirty and torn except for a blue ribbon in her hair, it almost looks as new part from some stains.

"Is she giving you trouble?"

"No, not really, she's just a thief... and not really into answering questions."

"Can I try?"

"Sure, try all you like, but you know the rules, no violence."

"Aye, I know, just open the cell."

One of the guards opens the cell for Keyon, and closes it behind him.

"Is that necessary?"

"Rules, Mister Durant."

Keyon sighs "fine".

He then turns towards the girl, who is sitting on the cells bed.

He squats and looks the girl in the eyes.

"Hi, my name's Keyon Durant, what's your name?"

The girl just sits there silently.

"Are you hungry?"

The girl does not respond at all. He offers her a piece of bread, still nothing, he cuts a piece from it and eats it.

He offers her the bread again.

She slowly grabs it, the moment Keyon let's go she starts to wolf it down.

Keyon looks at Marek "I'm guessing she was stealing food."

"Yes, my men caught her, apparently she put up quite the resistance. My men are scratched and bruised all over."

Keyon looks at girl and smiles "you're feisty one, huh. Wouldn't say it when looking at you."

The girl looks at him.

"Would tell me your name?"

The girl stares into the ground and softly mumbles something.

"I didn't quite catch that."

Still looking at the ground the girl blushes a bit and mumbles again, this time a little harder.

"A little harder, didn't catch now either."

The girl looks up, this time angry.

And screams: "HAILEY", at him

"Some volume you have there, Hailey. Care to tell me how old you are?"

"No."

"I guess I made her angry, Marek"

"It seems so, but you got more out of her than I did." Marek turns to Lidia: "Get her some food and decent clothes. When you're done bring her to my office."

"Yes sir."

Keyon and Marek head toward Marek's office.

Hailey eyes Keyon when he leaves, eating the rest of the bread. After Keyon is out of sight she then looks at this Lidia woman.

"Come out of the cell."

Hailey looks at Lidia, not moving.

"I'm not getting you new clothes while you smell like that."

"Hmmpf."

Hailey follows Lidia around the place to the bathing area.

"Go take a bath while I get you some decent clothes."

After washing herself Hailey lies in the bath. She wonders how long it has been, since she last got a chance to wash herself.

After a while Lidia returns with some clothes, after she gets out of bath she put the clothes on. She doesn't see her ribbon and starts to panic.

"Were you looking for this?" Hailey hears someone asking behind her.

Hailey spins around and sees Lidia standing there with her ribbon, Hailey nods.

"I washed it since it was dirty." Lidia says while she puts the ribbon back in Hailey's hair. After that Lidia guides her to the mess hall.

There she gets a plate full of what looks like light brown mass.

She pokes it a bit, smells it a bit and makes a face.

"Eat up its good for you."

Hailey looks sceptical at it, but her hunger wins and she eats a spoonful. To her surprise it's nice, a bit sour but nice. After she has finished her plate, Lidia stands up and tells her to follow.

"Come on I have to take you to Marek, but first bring your plate to the counter."

Hailey follows Lidia, until they arrive at what looks like Marek's office. Lidia knocks on the door. "Come on in" they from the other side of the door.

As she enters the office, Hailey takes a good look at it all. It is much simpler than she had expected, since Marek rules Warsaw. There a simple but sturdy desk and the walls are filled with books. Marek and Keyon are sitting in the chairs in the front of the room, comfortable chairs. Is this how business is done? She hears Marek saying: "But, do we have a deal? Otherwise we'll have to follow standard procedure, and that isn't pretty."

"Fine I'll take care of it."

Both Keyon and Marek stand up and shake hands.

Marek turns to Lidia. "Lidia, take Keyon and Hailey and get the paper work done."

"For..."

"Keyon will tell you when you get there."

"Yes sir."

"Take this." Marek says as he hands Lidia a rubber stamp.

Hailey follows Lidia, she looks over her shoulder and sees Keyon walking along. She looks at his face he just smiles at her, though only his mouth smiles, there is no trace of the smile in his eyes. He signs that she needs to look in front of her.

They enter a room with several desks, and a lot of cabinets.

"So what kind of papers will I need?"

"Apprenticeship" Keyon answers.

"What?"

"Instead of banishing her, she'll become my apprentice. You know how Marek is."

"Yes, I know, always the most humane option possible."

After looking in several cabinets Lidia returns with the right forms.

After a couple of hours dragging answers out of Hailey, who wasn't very cooperative, Lidia Sighs and says: "It took a while, but all the forms are filled out."

Keyon sniggers and turns to Hailey: "Well you're going to come along with me, apparently I just gained an apprentice. Let's go."

Hailey looks at Keyon, chewing on a piece of bread. Keyon starts walking and after a couple of steps he looks over his shoulder and sees Hailey still stands at the same spot, still chewing on her bread.

"Well come on then."

Hailey starts toward Keyon and stops when she is next to him. She looks up at Keyon who nudges her towards the exit.

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Hailey sits on one of the chairs in his apartment. He hasn't gotten anything out of her apart from her name and age which had to be dragged out of her when filling out the forms. Apparently her last name is Chance. Which means lucky, combine that with Hailey which means hero it becomes lucky hero or heroes luck. Well she certainly was lucky that she was caught by Marek and that he had been there so Marek could force her onto him.

She hasn't said anything anymore apart from the information needed to fill out the forms. She seems a curious little kid, looking and touching everything. She's a bit awkward, he can tell that she wants to ask him what some objects are for, but doesn't.

"If you want, there are drinks on the shelf, cups are in the cupboard."

Keyon sits back and looks what she is going to do; he has restocked everything before bringing her here. She doesn't answer, but looks at the shelf, looks back at him and nods. Hailey stands up

and walks to the cupboard, takes a cup and stare at the shelf she looks at him and whispers something.

“What did you say Hailey?”

She softly repeats what she said before, Keyon can make out the word milk out of it.

“You want some milk?” Hailey nods, Keyon sighs and says: “well I don’t have milk, but we can get it.” Has still has several trinkets he can trade.

Hailey nods again.

Together they walk to the shop, Keyon talks with the stall vendor. The stall is owned by a farmer from just outside Warsaw and Keyon regularly buy his food from them. Keyon notices that Hailey walks around a bit, she looks at the food for sale and the people who walk by. He realises that she isn’t just looking, but observing. Their eyes cross for a single moment, he recognises her eyes, the way she looked around, at him. When he was still a low ranked officer at the intelligence division, he was send into the slums of Honduras the kids there all had the same kind of eyes. The eyes of someone who looks out, someone who wants to live.

Keyon shakes his head and asks the vendor if he has any milk. Hailey touches a lever and the stall slams shut, she stands next to lever looking terrified at Keyon and the vendor. She looks around and sees everybody staring at her. Some people start whisper and laugh. Keyon sees her tearing up, she runs away and dives into the nearest alley.

“Shit” Keyon whispers, and to the vendor “I’ll be back in a minute.”

After a couple of minutes he catches up to her, she is sitting around a corner cowering.

“Look Hailey it isn’t that bad, you were just curious he will understand.”

Without looking up she mutters something.

“You’ll have to talk louder if you want me to understand you.”

Again she mutters and again he can’t understand her.

Keyon sits down next to her and asks: “Can you tell me what happened?”

She looks up her face tear streaked and whispers: “they ...at....”

Keyon can’t understand half of it. “Who? What?”

Hailey bites her lip and says: “all of them.”

“All of them, what Hailey?”

Sounding almost angry she says: “They were all staring at me, all those people. They hate me.”

“Why would they?”

“For breaking that... that stall.”

Keyon laughs, Hailey looks at him. Angry in a way only a child can be.

“I’m sorry for laughing, that wasn’t nice. But it was funny, the stall isn’t broken it just shut. That’s what that lever does.”

Keyon looks at Hailey and sees her expression change from anger to relief.

“Come on, we’ll buy you your gear.”

When he tries to walk away sees her looking at him as if expecting something. He remembers and says: “and your milk of course.”

Hailey lights up and follows Keyon.

When they reach the food stall again, Keyon looks at Hailey and sees that she is her awkward self again. He tells her to apologize, but she doesn’t dare too. So Keyon apologizes to the vendor instead and makes the trade. He tells Hailey to come along, and head to his apartment.

Keyon looks to Hailey who in turn looks questioning at him, he ignores it and walks on. Once inside Keyon puts everything where it belongs and starts going through his closets and opens one of his chests. He tosses several things onto the table. Hailey looks at them, there is a small hunting

knife and several tools. Hailey looks at Keyon again who is now searching his locker, she sees him grab something, look at it, shake his head and put it back. There are several items on the floor, he picks them up and puts them on the table next to the tools. She sees a compass, a flask and quite some trinkets, before Keyon puts the trinkets into a backpack, leaving the other items lying on the table.

He nudges her towards the door. "Let's get you some decent gear."

She looks at him and nods.

They walk through the main street, she hops from shop to shop, while Keyon walks on. She sees that he doesn't stop at any of the shops, she can't believe it. He stops, he looks at her and smiles, nods towards a side street and walks on. Hailey looks at the street, from here she can't see too much what is in there. She walks towards the street and sees Keyon going into, what appears to be a shop, she slowly walks to the shop and peeks inside. She sees Keyon talking to an older woman who is sitting behind a counter. She heads inside, when her eyes have adjusted to the light she sees that the shop is filled with a lot of different things, she sees clothes, but also tools and even weapons. She can't believe it, a shop that sells guns never has she seen that before, and she had stolen from quite some shops, to survive.

Hailey walks through the shop looking from item to item, sometimes looking at Keyon and the shopkeeper. They just stand there looking at her and talking sometimes smiling but mostly talking. She dislikes it when people talk around her and she cannot understand what they say. A mask catches her eye, she stops to examine it. Hailey turns around and looks at Keyon, he doesn't see her.

"What is it sweetie?" The woman asks.

"What is this?" Hailey asks in a whisper pointing at the mask.

The woman looks questioning at Hailey, and sees at what Hailey is pointing at.

"It's something you hope to never use."

"Don't be so cryptic Frida." Keyon says to the woman and continues "It's a gasmask Hailey."

Hailey looks at it: "Gas?"

"Yes gas mask, used to keep you from breathing in toxins."

"Toxins?"

Frida sniggers and looks at Hailey, who in turn turns red. Frida walks over to Hailey and takes the gasmask from the rack.

"It's used to keep you from inhaling poisonous gasses. You know what poison gasses are right?" Hailey nods and Frida asks her: "Do you want to try it?" she asks Hailey.

Hailey looks startled at Frida and then to Keyon who is suppressing a snigger.

"She means for you just to put it on."

Hailey looks back at Frida and nods.

After a bit of fiddling the mask is secured.

"Isn't too nice, is it? Frida asks.

Hailey shakes her head and starts fiddling with the mask, Frida moves to help her, but is stopped by Keyon. She looks at him, he shakes his head and leans back watching Hailey struggle. A couple of minutes pass and Hailey finally got the gas mask off. She looks around, hurt. She continues to look back forth between Frida and Keyon.

Keyon speaks: "Let's gear her up then."

He turns around and walks towards one of the chests and rummages through it, at the same time Frida starts to rummage elsewhere in the shop. From time to time Keyon or Frida put some things on the counter and start to rummage somewhere else in the shop. This goes on for a while. Hailey looks at the items on the counter she sees tools, some small weapons and medical supplies.

Keyon stops searching and says: "I think we got everything.", as he inspects everything on the counter.

Frida and Keyon haggle a bit before settling for a price. Keyon puts the items he took from the apartment and gives them to Frida. He takes the items from the counter and puts them in his

backpack. They say goodbye to Frida and return to the apartment, they find a package on the table with a letter. Keyon reads it and nods satisfied, he turns to Hailey and gives her the package.

“Here is your new outfit, with complements from Marek.”

Hailey looks at her current clothes that she got from Lidia and whispers: “But, I already got clothes from Lidia.”

“What did you just....” Keyon sees her looking down and holding her dress, and continues “Well yeah, but those aren’t very practical out there.” He points out the window.

Hailey looks where he points and realises that he points outside the city. The package falls from her hands as she looks at Keyon. Keyon looks at her and raises his eyebrow, “What did you expect? That I am a craftsman or patron or shopkeeper or even a guard?”

She still stares at him unbelieving.

“Why did you think we got all these items? Normal Warsaw citizens don’t have them, aren’t even allowed to get them.”

Hailey stutters: “But... but, I heard that... that...”

“I know what you heard, some things are true, some aren’t, some are exaggerated” he sighs “and some are underestimated. Sometimes it’s far worse than is told here in the city. But mostly it is exaggerated.”

Hailey still looks at him, not as frightened anymore, but still unsure.

“Go on put those clothes on, then we’ll strap the rest of your equipment on.”

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Hailey lies in her bed, she was sent to bed early by Keyon, since they are leaving tomorrow morning. She isn’t sleepy and the light that falls through one of the cracks doesn’t help either. The light is from Keyon’s candle, he is writing in a journal, he does that at every hideout. She hasn’t dared to ask him yet why. In the half year since she has become his apprentice, he doesn’t talk about himself nor has he answered any of her questions. When she asks him something about himself he always gives some either vague or cryptic answer.

She isn’t unhappy with him being her mentor, he’s good, the best. He teaches her everything she needs to know to survive in the wild and more. And he takes care of her, but she just wish he wasn’t so cold. She has only seen him smile on a few occasions and almost all of those times he didn’t really smile, he just put on a smiling mask, a non-smile. Early after he had taken her in, she had discovered that he almost always wore a mask, careful to never show his feelings, if he had any.

Hailey gets out of bed and opens the door. Keyon sits at the table and looks up, he puts down his drink: “Didn’t you go to sleep already?”

“I need to pee.”

“That’s not how we say it.”

“I need to go to the toilet.”

“That’s better.”

Keyon takes another sip and continues writing, as she walks past him towards the toilet. When she’s done, he is still sitting there writing. And this time her curiosity wins: “What are you writing? You do this before we leave every hideout.”

Keyon looks up and puts down his pen as Hailey sits down at the other end of the table. He looks at her and speaks: “Well it isn’t a secret so there’s no point in hiding it. At every hideout I leave a journal, something of a guide so to say, for travellers like us. Containing the current locations of nearby tribes, and how hostile they are, also where useful resources are and how to obtain them.”

“Why? Tribes can find them and use them.”

“Yes, but the tribes don’t need them, they, they know how to survive albeit not in a pretty way. And I’d like to think that when non-tribe people find them, I help them with these.”

Hailey looked at Keyon, has he always been like this? She has the feeling that this is Keyon, she looks closer at him, he looks tired. No, weary would be better with a hint of sorrow.

“Hailey, go to bed we leave early, it’s going to be a long day.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll finish this and go to bed as well.”

Keyon wakes early, earlier than he’d liked to wake up. He gets out of bed and looks outside through one of the windows. It’s still dark, but in the hour it’ll be light. Hailey isn’t up yet, out of the pocket of his duster he takes a picture. In the twilight he looks at it and smiles a sad smile. He puts on his duster and hat, he takes his hunting rifle and heads out. They’re at the edge of a town, somewhere in what used to be central Germany. It’s a good location, with plenty of harmless wildlife. It doesn’t take long for him to find a prey and take it down, a young deer. Skilful he skins it, good leather is valuable, he cuts of the meat he’ll use and leaves the carcass. He got a couple of kilos of good meat and a deerskin, it’s a good morning. When he arrives at the hideout Hailey is already awake and has prepared breakfast. In the last half year she’s really improved, she’s a fast learner. She always listens to him and has become disciplined. Keyon isn’t sure that someone her age should learn the things he has been teaching her. He would’ve never taught these things to his own kids if they had ever reached her age. After breakfast he teaches Hailey how to clean a deerskin with a knife and lets her at it. He starts to take the hideout apart, all their supplies already are packed and all that left is to process the meat from the deer. After that they’ll strip down the hideout and leave it as they found it. It doesn’t take long, before noon they are done and set to go.

“We are going to Warsaw right?” Hailey suddenly asks.

“Yes.”

“Why? I mean we could stay a lot longer out here, it’s not as it’s going to be winter soon.”

“Yes, well I’ve got obligations towards Marek.”

“Why? You’re a scavenger he shouldn’t have anything on you.”

“It’s good to have somewhere where you can always return to. And if that means doing the odd job for Marek, sure why not.”

“But, you could easily survive out here.”

“Once, yes, but now I have an apprentice I need to teach and guide.”

Hailey looks down and bites her lip and mutters: “Well I’m sorry, it’s not as if I wanted this.”

Keyon starts walking he looks over his shoulder and says: “Come on then, I’m going to leave you behind if you don’t hurry.”

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Hailey was told to wait she sits on one of the chairs in Lidia’s office. Lidia doesn’t seem to mind her hanging around when Keyon is talking with Marek. As Keyon comes out of Marek’s office his face seems a bit more passive than normal. Hailey says goodbye to Lidia before she catches up to Keyon.

“What happened?”

“You’re going to stay with Frida for a couple of days. She’ll teach you, for the time being until I am back.”

“You’re going? Where?”

“Odd job.”

“Can’t I come?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“It’ll be too dangerous.”

“But, I can help.”

“I’m not risking it, I’m leaving before dusk.”

Before Hailey can protest more Keyon flicks her forehead. He does that when she crosses the line. It doesn’t really hurt, but she will feel it for the rest of the day as a reminder.

Keyon didn't barter with Frida over the price for teaching her, from what Hailey heard it was Marek who will pay Frida for her expenses and performed services as Keyon called it. If Marek was paying for everything, then it would be a big job, no wonder Keyon wanted her out of the way on this job.

The sun is setting as Keyon leaves the safe area of Warsaw. Marek has heard some strange rumours that one of the tribal chiefs was driving in an old car. A working and driving car shouldn't be possible, not when no electrical device works. Marek wants him to get to the bottom of it, not that he needs any more reason to go scout it out. Unfortunately this tribe that supposedly has the car, the Potwory. Is one of the worst, He won't even describe them as animals, they are far worse. They hunt people for fun, and don't just kill them, that would be too humane for them. No they capture their prey, and break them physically and mentally and when their victims are completely broken they eat them, preferable alive.

Warsaw isn't that big, but it takes him a couple of days to reach their territory unnoticed. At the edge of their territory their usual warnings are displayed, rotting corpses and skeletons crucified, hanged or strung along a pole. Now comes the dangerous part, finding the car without being noticed. The nasty thing about them is that unlike other tribes they have hunters everywhere in their territory. Most tribes keep all their people in their encampment. But the Potwory are scattered around their territory, only their chief has permanent housing in the middle of their territory. It's going to be hell to reach that unnoticed. Normally he hates violence or killing, but when it's the Potwory he'll do it without hesitation.

Keyon finds a suitable spot, outside Potwory territory, to scout the area with his hunting rifle. He is mapping them, those that he can spot anyway. He hopes to get a good idea of which route he should take to avoid being seen. Just mapping them takes him a good day or 2, luckily they stay pretty put to their locations, that's favourable.

During the night Keyon sneaks into Potwory territory. The first night he can travel at a fast pace, thanks to the debris the Potwory have caused blowing holes in buildings with explosives, it looks like a warzone in this part of Warsaw. He didn't meet or saw any Potwory. Before the sun comes up he finds himself a good hiding place in one of the derelict flats, he finds a small room with no other opening than the door, easy to defend against large numbers.

When he wakes up the next day, he leaves his room and looks out of a window. The sun is setting, that's good. When he walks through the building to find a good exit point he realises that there have been people during the day. To be on the safe side he takes out his knife and stalks through the building. On one of the higher floors he spots the silhouette of a tribesman, the tribesman stands there watching the sunset through a large hole in the wall. Keyon sneaks up to him and pushes him out of the hole, the man didn't even scream before Keyon hears the distinct thump of a body hitting the ground. He shudders and quickly scouts the rest of the building, there weren't any more tribesmen.

During the night he finds the chiefs encampment, but he sees no car, he circles the camp a couple of times and realises that there is no car. When he takes a closer look using his scope he sees that there are tire tracks and that they are pretty fresh, certainly not from 6 years ago. Keyon thinks for about an hour and decides to stay and observe. The days pass and his rations are starting to thin out. The third night he is woken up by the sound of a motor, he looks out and an old modified Rolls Royce comes driving in at high speed and crashes into a nearby flat. The Potwory run there laughing and pointing, dancing around insulting their fellow tribesman. Though Keyon can tell that they are dead, nobody can survive such an impact in such an old car without seatbelts or airbags. The festivities around the car go on till late in the night. When all the Potwory are in a deep drunk sleep, Keyon moves silently towards the car. Without a sound he manages to open the hood of the car, he lights a match. In the flickering light of the match he inspects the motor.

But this can't be most parts are replaced by new ones, crudes but good enough to do the job. These parts were manufactured not long ago. Keyon stands there looking at the engine pondering the implications, if engines work then... before he can finish his thought. He hears a noise behind him, he quickly kills the match and dives behind cover, holding his breath he looks at where the sound came from.

One of the Potwory burps loudly and turns in her sleep. Keyon exhales slowly and silently.

He sneaks back to his hiding place, grabs his gear and only the essential supplies and leaves as quickly as possible. He takes a lot of risk, but he runs ducking from cover to cover. It's dawn when he reaches the border of their territory, he stops running and looks back, silently he lets out a relieved sigh. He takes shelter in one of the buildings just outside the Potwory territory. Tomorrow he'll go hunting first to get the supplies needed to get back to the safe zone.

It's been 2 weeks since Keyon left and Hailey has been staying with Frida. Its morning and Hailey is preparing breakfast for herself and Frida. Frida knows a lot and has been teaching her, Frida says she is teaching Hailey things that even Keyon doesn't know. Frida shouldn't be long now, she had been summoned by Marek. The door opens and she hears two people talking, she spins around and sees Keyon. He smiles his non-smile again. Nevertheless she hugs him before he can say anything. She looks up and sees that he is clearly taken by surprise. She lets go, still looking at him, he smiles again, but not his non-smile. Now it's her turn to be surprised, and Keyon sniggers.

They sit down and start breakfast.

"You know" Frida says: "She clearly missed you, the first day she was chewing on her lip the whole day."

Hailey blushes and focuses on her food.

Frida continues: "So what is your next step going to be?"

"Continue what I've been doing all along. Travel and search for clues, while training Hailey."

Keyon answers.

"But surely you're going to focus on finding who fixed that car, right?"

Did she hear that correctly? A car? Working?

"I would be lying if I said I weren't interested in finding who fixed the car. But I won't search for him, not when I have other things to attend to."

Hailey knows that he means her, she bites her lower lip, and continues to eat silently.

After that the conversation becomes pretty boring with tales of the past. But a fixed car, that apparently ran. She thought that all electrical appliances didn't work anymore, that included cars. At least that was what Keyon had told her, and he seemed surprised by the working car.

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Hailey knows it will be too cold to return to Warsaw for the winter, at least with the gear they are carrying. So they probably are going to travel south or west or east, at the very least not north, for another 3 months before heading to Warsaw again. This will be the farthest they have travelled together, knowing Keyon he has travelled a lot further from Warsaw before. They had spent the day clearing their hideout, and Keyon had called it quits early that day. Hailey already has gone to bed, but can't sleep. She sees a light flicking from the other room, in one-and-a-half year Keyon has taught her enough for her to tell that it is a single candle almost dying out. She looks through a crack and sees him sitting in the big chair in the corner. He is looking at that picture again, drinking a whiskey. He pours another one glass, a triple this time, one of his ways she has figured out. First a single then a double followed by triple, that's how he drinks his whiskey, always. He downs it in one go, kills the candle and goes to bed.

Keyon wakes up, he immediately knows that something is wrong. He looks around and sees his service pistol and knife lying on the table. He notices Hailey sitting in the big chair in the corner, she

is looking at a scrap of paper. He checks the inner pocket of his duster, it is gone. He sees Hailey looking at him and he realises.

“Hailey?”

“She is beautiful, are these your wife and children?” she asks.

“Give it back.”

“It’s been more than a year since you took me with you, but you have never talked about yourself.”

“Just return it.” He says sounding hoarse.

For the first time Hailey sees Keyon distressed, the first time she sees any real emotion in his face. Apart from that one smile he had smiled at her at Frida’s.

After a couple of months together she had noticed that he always wore a mask, around everyone, even Marek and Frida. She had also seen that Keyon wasn’t your regular scavenger; he hated violence and would go to extreme lengths to avoid it, with the exception of the Potwory, but if he had to he could and would kill easier than most. She had seen him jump in between a brawl in a café in Warsaw. He never hit them back, only deflected everything they threw at him until they were worn out. She then also realised that he either must have had received a very thorough training, or he had been in enough fights to pick up all that. Later he had called it aikido, a Japanese martial art where you use your opponent’s momentum against themselves.

“What happened to them?”

“They died.”

“How?”

“It doesn’t matter.” His voice falters.

She returns the picture to him.

Keyon sighs and says: “Don’t take this picture ever again.”

“I won’t, if you tell me how you got that pistol and knife. They both have your name graved into them.”

His face becomes passive and his voice normal again.

“Remnants of my army days, I was a Major in the intelligence division. Just don’t ask so many questions. You know what they say, curiosity killed the cat”

Hailey hears him say it, but can’t believe it, not really. Keyon has been in the army? It did explain a lot.

“You always ask questions to everybody.”

“But I know how to, without drawing attention to myself.”

“You don’t like me, I know, Marek told me that you absolutely didn’t want to take me in, that he had to call in a favour you owed him.”

“Marek talks too much sometimes.” Keyon pauses for a bit and speaks again, softly this time.

“I don’t dislike you.”

“But he said you were dead set against it.”

His mask breaks again, and she sees so much sadness, sorrow in his face, in his eyes.

He sounds exhausted: “Last time I had somebody under my command they ended up dead, all of them. I knew each of them very well, you could have considered them my friends, and because of my mistake they died.” There is so much pain in his eyes.

“But...”

“What is it?” His eyes cold and face a mask again.

“I mean I have been for more than a year travelling with you, but I know nothing about you, about your past I mean.”

“There are things that I will tell you and things I won’t tell you.”

“Then, where did you grow up?”

“South Hampton, UK. Want to know what my childhood was like?”

Hailey nods.

"I had two great parents, my father was a French negro, but that I am black you probably already figured out. My parents always had been supportive of me. I had 2 siblings an older sister and younger brother. I won't bore you with details, during college I was drafted by a special program and ended up in the army."

"Wow, that really lacks detail."

"Told you, now get back to work we got a long day in front of us."

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They've gone further south than before, not on Marek's behalf, but for her training. Keyon said that some things can only be thought in the dry heat. So they ended up in turkey, Keyon hasn't been here after the catastrophe, so he doesn't know anybody or where it's safe or not. It means that they have to travel with care, so to not to piss off any tribes. Dessert training and survival as Keyon calls it, is hard, harder than anything she had to learn in northern-Europe. He had dragged her from east to west and back again, but never so far south before.

Keyon found a bit of information and more working cars and other appliances. His contact said that one man had come by and fixed several things, his appearance fitted with those he had heard before. This man had been traveling and fixing cars everywhere. Even though he had said that he wouldn't do anything with what he had learned a year earlier during his job scouting out the Potwory. He had still picked up on a trail of someone who was fixing cars and sometimes electrical appliances. That electrical device could be fixed had spread through all the safe havens and even through the wild. A lot of tribes started fixing their own devices and cars. Working electronics started to become more and more normal. The trick was to completely build everything new from scratch, the entire electrical part of any device. Keyon had been thinking about it, this meant that only the devices in existence on the day of the catastrophe didn't work anymore and that everything made after would work. Meaning that what had happened was partly fixable, though the people that had vanished would never return. Luckily most of the tribes in Turkey were friendly and were very happy to trade with him. He in turn told them about Warsaw and wrote a letter for them to give to Marek if they ever wanted to trade with Warsaw.

At one of the eastern Turkish tribes he encountered something, something that should not be, ought not to be.

After a hard bargain the chieftain told his concubine to fetch them drink, Keyon takes the offer on. He needn't worry about Hailey, she has her instructions and training to tend to. The hours go by quickly while the two of them are getting drunk, at one moment the chieftain says in broken English: "One of my warriors killed a stranger on our eastern border."

Keyon raises his eyebrow and asks: "Was there anything strange about that stranger?"

"Yes, he was carrying weapons, I have never seen before."

"Which kind?"

"The kind that the US was proud of."

In a second Keyon is fully sober again, he looks the chieftain in the eyes and asks him: "Can I see it?"

In Turkish the chieftain orders one of his concubines, she disappears. After a while she returns holding a pulse rifle. The woman gives it to the chieftain, who is clearly proud of his possession and proclaims: "Here see one of, how do you say? Top of the line?" Keyon nods, and the chieftain continues: "One of their top of the line guns."

"Can I see it?" Keyon ask very careful.

The chieftain looks at him and smiles and drunkenly says: "You? But yes of course, I like you, you're a good man."

Keyon takes the rifle, after a quick inspection he realises that it has been made after the catastrophe, and that it is in working order. Meaning that there is a faction out there with pre-catastrophe army grade weapons, he didn't know yet what kind of faction it was. But the markings on the gun hinted towards Asia, they were too vague to truly make out. He knows one thing though, whichever faction this is, they have superior weapons to everybody else and probably won't hold back in using them. This could become a real problem.

The next morning he cuts Hailey's training short, they pack and leave the same day for Moscow, following the trail of the mystery electrician. Maybe he would know more about the pulse rifle of the chieftain.

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After turkey they had hunted the mystery technician for 2 years without success, they always were too late and sometimes had to return to Warsaw. Hailey was now seventeen, while Keyon's age remained a mystery along with so much of his past. She did pry a few things out of him, among them how his family had died. They hadn't vanished during the catastrophe, but were killed before that during a burglary gone wrong. And maybe because of her prying, but she wasn't sure, but he showed more emotions than when they first met, he smiled more, she liked that.

The last week had been brutal. Marek had sent them into Potwory territory, because they were getting too confident. They had blown up the chiefs' camp, killing quite a lot potwory. Keyon hadn't looked too happy, probably because it reminded him of his army days. And another time they had to fend off a pack of Potwory due to a mistake of her. He had saved them, by doing something he had forbid her to do. He had taken a dynamite and cut the fuse very short and threw it right into the pack, after she had taken cover. He took apart of the blast and was knocked out cold she had dragged him into a hiding place. He didn't wake up for a day, she had been worried, more than she ever had been. At the time she didn't have time to think about it, but now she had and she had become confused, she went to see Frida while Keyon was discussing business with Marek.

"Frida?" Hailey called into the shop, since Frida was nowhere to be seen.

"Hush, hush Hailey, I'm not getting any younger." Frida says that a lot nowadays after she had to get a walking stick on doctor's orders.

"Frida I need to talk to you."

"Oh my, this seems serious, let me guess, it's about Keyon."

Hailey is surprised and nods. Frida grins shortly before her face becomes serious.

"You're in love." She says before Hailey can continue.

"No." Hailey says immediately and mumbles: "well, I don't know."

"I could see it coming for half a year, I think Keyon did as well, but chose to ignore it."

"What? But..." before she can continue Frida interrupts her;

"We had our talks."

"I don't really know if it's love."

"He's your first crush, don't worry there are worse men to fall in love with. However whether he'll accept it is a different story. He'll probably say he's too old for you."

"So what do I do?"

"First you have to think long and hard if you really love him, but I think you will realise that it's just a crush you have on the man that saved you. Your knight in a dusty leather duster, wearing an Indiana Jones hat." After Frida says the last part, she starts sniggering and so does Hailey.

After her talk with Frida she feels that it is the best thing to do, to just let it blow over.

It's been a month since their week of sabotaging the Potwory. And again Marek has asked him to do an odd job that only he and Hailey can do, again it's the Potwory. Marek wants to be rid of them, and has asked him and a lot of mercenaries to place timed bombs in order to blow up all the buildings in Potwory territory and flush them out.

He had accepted the job.

When he returns Hailey has dinner served, she has grown so much over the last four years. He barely recognises her from the skinny girl that was forced upon him by Marek. Still wearing the same blue ribbon, she had told him it was the last memento she had from her mother. Though she couldn't picture her anymore, she had told him that she still would dream of her. Her mood had changed in the last half year, she started to look funny at him, and a month ago Frida told him that Hailey likes him. The way a woman likes a man, Keyon cursed softly, it shouldn't be so.

"So what did Marek want?"

"We're heading into Potwory territory next week."

"What? Again? What for?"

"They're going to be flushed out."

"You mean?"

"All buildings are going to be brought down with explosives."

"But don't we need a lot of explosives for that."

"Yes and a lot of mercenaries are hired as well, though most of them won't return."

"And Marek is counting on that, right?"

"Yes, I told you, deal with him as less as possible."

The evening passes quickly, and Keyon goes to bed earlier than Hailey. She continues to write her journal, it's something she started doing after Keyon had asked her. Now its daily routine, when she finishes it's become pretty late, the sun's already gone from the sky. She looks around the apartment it's a bigger one than Keyon had four years ago. This one has two bedrooms instead of one, in the previous apartment Keyon had slept in the common room while she had the bedroom. She looked out the window, it had a better view as well it looks out over the Wisla in the east. She looks around the apartment again, at her bedroom door and the one of Keyon. She opens his door, he's asleep, she can hear his soft breathing. She sneaks over and kneels next to his face, he is handsome. He had gotten more wrinkles since they first met, but she didn't mind they fitted him. Softly she walked to the door again, only to stop.

She lies down next to him on the bed, he doesn't respond.

She hugs him from behind.

"Hailey? Hailey, what are you doing?"

"Keyon." She whispers.

"Hailey go to bed."

She giggles: "But I am in bed."

Keyon sighs: "Your own bed."

"Keyon." She says again softly.

Now stern Keyon says: "Hailey, get out."

"Keyon... I love you."

She hears him sighing deeply, and mumbling something.

"Hailey... no." he sounds so weary.

Hailey sits up straight.

"Why not?" Her voice quivers.

Keyon sits up straight as well and looks at her and smiles painfully.

"Anything but that."

"Keyon, I..."

"I'm old Hailey, it would be just wasted on me. I took you in against my will. I was forced by Marek."

Before he can continue Hailey cuts in: "Yes, I know, I don't care."

Keyon sighs again and continues: "Hailey, I grew fond of you, I love you, but not like that."  
"How then?"

"As a pupil, as a daughter, but not as a woman."

Hailey jumps out of bed and storms through the door.

Before Keyon can respond she's gone, he knows where, to Frida. He falls back on his bed, sleep won't come to him again. After a while he gets out and pours himself a whiskey, a triple. He washes it down with another triple. He looks at the bottle, it's only one third full.

When Hailey returns Keyon is fast asleep, there is an almost empty whiskey bottle on the table which says enough. She pours herself a glass, emptying the bottle, there is only a mouthful left. She never had drunk it before. In one go she empties the glass, she makes a face. How can anyone like the stuff? She heads to bed, her own bed this time. She has trouble sleeping, and when she finally does she has a nightmare. In the nightmare Keyon is swallowed by darkness, no matter how long and far she goes she can't find him, she wakes up crying.

The next week is awkward, Keyon gives her enough chores to keep her busy and out of each other's way. He seems distracted and a bit off, she hopes he's going to be alright when they are hitting the Potwory.

The next day they leave with the mercenaries ready to hit the Potwory, Keyon still seems a bit out of his element.

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Two shadows in the night one big, one small, running. Shouts come from behind them, gunfire. The two shadows disappear into a building, they move quickly without making a sound. The shouting has stopped, and the streets have become quiet.

The girl whispers: "There were only three pursuing us, I think we lost them Keyon."

"You never really know with these hunters. Stay on your guard."

"I know, I know."

Keyon takes a peak out of the window.

It had been the first time she had seen Keyon making a mistake, he had been spotted by a group of Potwory while placing an explosive. By now they had lost most of the potwory except three hunters. They had left potwory territory when fleeing from the group, but the Potwory had been as hunting dogs and stayed on their tail.

"They aren't in the streets anymore."

"Did we really lose them?"

"I told you Hailey, you never know... AAAAHHHHH"

Before he can finish his sentence they hear a woman scream from downstairs. Keyon and Hailey look each other in the eyes, Keyon signs that she needs to follow him.

"What about that woman?"

"She's dead. Let's go."

Keyon leaves the room first, and stands face to face with a tribal hunter. Before the hunter can move, Keyon punches him in the face, the hunter topples backwards.

"Run" shouts Keyon.

Hailey follows Keyon they run up flight after flight of stairs, until they reach the roof.

"It's a dead end Keyon."

Keyon runs to the ledge. "The next building has an emergency staircase."

"So? There is no way we can bridge it."

"Maybe not on the same level, but we can easily land one or two below."

"Are you crazy?"

“Do you want to get caught?”

“You already took down one of them, the other two shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I was lucky, they out-weapon us. You go first. Hurry up.”

“Fine.”

Hailey sprints towards the ledge and jumps. She manages to get a hold on one of the bars of the railing. Behind her she hears the hunters shout, they must have reached the roof. Quickly she scrambles into the apartment building. She hears gunfire and sees Keyon jump, he manages to land on the staircase. They hear the metal of the staircase creak and moan. Behind him two of the hunters jump as Keyon hurries inside.

The moment the hunters grab hold of the staircase, it creaks louder, and the sound of metal tearing can be heard. The third pursuer, blood on his face from Keyon’s punch, jumps and lands on the stairs, which gives in under the weight of the three men. The three disappear from Hailey’s sight, only a ledge remains. She stays still as Keyon walks towards the doorway where once an emergency staircase was. He turns to face Hailey and grins.

“Your name gives you credit, Chance.”

“Yeah, yeah it means lucky, I know you told me a hundred times already.” As she says it, Keyon’s grin fills with blood.

“Keyon...”

“I’m not that lucky, never was.” He sounds coarse.

“No, please no.”

“I told you, you don’t have to be a good shot as long as you have enough bullets to spare.”

“Keyon, no...” she whispers.

Keyon smiles, such a sad smile, she knows it’s not aimed at her, but his wife, his children.

“Remember what I taught you these past four years, and you’ll be fine. You’re a smart girl, you’ll be fine.” Now he looks at her and smiles fondly.

Keyon closes his eyes, still smiling and topples backwards and disappears from her sight.

“KEYON, NOOOOO.” She hears someone scream as she hurries towards the ledge, as she sees him falling, disappearing into the darkness. A woman keeps screaming Keyon’s name, the screaming dies down as she hears the distinct thump of a body hitting the ground.

And only crying remains, her own.

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Drenched in cold sweat a young woman sits up straight in bed, the same nightmare again, a memory.

In a moonlit room the woman sits with her hands in her hair, she bites her lower lip and softly cries.