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1

THE WORLD IS a clock winding down.

I hear it in the wind's icy fingers scratching against the window. I smell it in the mildewed carpeting and the rotting wallpaper of the old hotel. And I feel it in Teacup's chest as she sleeps. The hammering of her heart, the rhythm of her breath, warm in the freezing air, the clock winding down.

Across the room, Cassie Sullivan keeps watch by the window. Moonlight seeps through the tiny crack in the curtains behind her, lighting up the plumes of frozen breath exploding from her mouth. Her little brother sleeps in the bed closest to her, a tiny lump beneath the mounded covers. Window, bed, back again, her head turns like a pendulum swinging. The turning of her head, the rhythm of her breath, like Nugget's, like Teacup's, like mine, marking the time of the clock winding down.

I ease out of bed. Teacup moans in her sleep and burrows deeper under the covers. The cold clamps down, squeezing my chest, though I'm fully dressed except for my boots and the parka, which I grab from the foot of the bed. Sullivan watches as I pull on the boots, then when I go to the closet for my rucksack and rifle. I join her by the window. I feel like I should say something before I leave. We might not see each other again.

"So this is it," she says. Her fair skin glows in the milky light. The spray of freckles seems to float above her nose and cheeks.

I adjust the rifle on my shoulder. "This is it."

"You know, Dumbo I get. The big ears. And Nugget, because Sam is so small. Teacup, too. Zombie I don't get so much—Ben won't say—and I'm guessing Poundcake has something to do with his roly-poly-ness. But why Ringer?"

I sense where this is going. Besides Zombie and her brother, she isn't sure of anyone anymore. The name Ringer gives her paranoia a nudge. "I'm human."

"Yeah." She looks through the crack in the curtains to the parking lot two stories below, shimmering with ice. "Someone else told me that, too. And, like a dummy, I believed him."

"Not so dumb, given the circumstances."

"Don't pretend, Ringer," she snaps. "I know you don't believe me about Evan."

"I believe *you*. It's his story that doesn't make sense."

I head for the door before she tears into me. You don't push Cassie Sullivan on the Evan Walker question. I don't hold it against her. Evan is the little branch growing out of the cliff that she clings to, and the fact that he's gone makes her hang on even tighter.

Teacup doesn't make a sound, but I feel her eyes on me; I know she's awake. I go back to the bed.

"Take me with you," she whispers.

I shake my head. We've been through this a hundred times. "I won't be gone long. A couple days."

"Promise?"

No way, Teacup. Promises are the only currency left. They must be spent wisely. Her bottom lip quivers; her eyes mist. "Hey," I say softly. "What did I tell you about that, soldier?" I resist the impulse to touch her. "What's the first priority?"

"No bad thoughts," she answers dutifully.

"Because bad thoughts do what?"

"Make us soft."

"And what happens if we go soft?"

"We die."

"And do we want to die?"

She shakes her head. "Not yet."

I touch her face. Cold cheek, warm tears. *Not yet.* With no time left on the human clock, this little girl has probably reached middle age. Sullivan and me, we're old. And Zombie? The ancient of days.

He's waiting for me in the lobby, wearing a ski jacket over a bright yellow hoodie, both scavenged from the remains inside the hotel: Zombie escaped from Camp Haven wearing only a flimsy pair of scrubs. Beneath his scruffy beard, his face is the telltale scarlet of fever. The bullet wound I gave him, ripped open in his escape from Camp Haven and patched up by our twelve-year-old medic, must be infected. He leans against the counter, pressing his hand against his side and trying to look like everything's cool.

"I was starting to think you changed your mind," Zombie says, dark eyes sparkling as if he's teasing, though that could be the fever.

I shake my head. "Teacup."

"She'll be okay." To reassure me, he releases his killer smile from its cage. Zombie doesn't fully appreciate the pricelessness of promises or he wouldn't toss them out so casually.

"It's not Teacup I'm worried about. You look like shit, Zombie."

"It's this weather. Wreaks havoc on my complexion." A second smile leaps out at the punch line. He leans forward, willing me to answer with my own. "One day, Private Ringer, you're going to smile at something I say and the world will break in half."

"I'm not prepared to take on that responsibility."

He laughs and maybe I hear a rattle deep in his chest. "Here." He offers me another brochure of the caverns.

"I have one," I tell him.

"Take this one, too, in case you lose it."

"I won't lose it, Zombie."

"I'm sending Poundcake with you," he says.

"No, you're not."

"I'm in charge. So I am."

"You need Poundcake here more than I need him out there."

He nods. He knew I would say no, but he couldn't resist one last try. "Maybe we should abort," he says. "I mean, it isn't *that* bad here. About a thousand bedbugs, a few hundred rats, and a couple dozen dead bodies, but the view is fantastic . . ." Still joking, still trying to make me smile. He's looking at the brochure in his hand. *Seventy-four degrees year 'round!*

"Until we get snowed in or the temperature drops again. The situation is unsustainable, Zombie. We've stayed too long already."

I don't get it. We've talked this to death and now he wants to keep beating the corpse. I wonder about Zombie sometimes.

"We have to chance it, and you know we can't go in blind," I go on. "The odds are there're other survivors hiding in those caves and they may not be ready to throw out the welcome mat, especially if they've met any of Sullivan's Silencers."

"Or recruits like us," he adds.

"So I'll scope it out and be back in a couple of days."

"I'm holding you to that promise."

"It wasn't a promise."

There's nothing left to say. There're a million things left to say. This might be the last time we see each other, and he's thinking it, too, because he says, "Thank you for saving my life."

"I put a bullet in your side and now you might die."

He shakes his head. His eyes sparkle with fever. His lips are

gray. Why did they have to name him Zombie? It's like an omen. The first time I saw him, he was doing knuckle push-ups in the exercise yard, face contorted with anger and pain, blood pooling on the asphalt beneath his fists. *Who is that guy?* I asked. *His name is Zombie.* He fought the plague and won, they told me, and I didn't believe them. Nobody beats the plague. The plague is a death sentence. And Reznik the drill sergeant bending over him, screaming at the top of his lungs, and Zombie in the baggy blue jumpsuit, pushing himself past the point where one more push is impossible. I don't know why I was surprised when he ordered me to shoot him so he could keep his unkeepable promise to Nugget. When you look death in the eye and death blinks first, nothing seems impossible.

Even mind reading. "I know what you're thinking," he says.

"No. You don't."

"You're wondering if you should kiss me good-bye."

"Why do you do that?" I ask. "Flirt with me."

He shrugs. His grin is crooked, like his body leaning against the counter.

"It's normal. Don't you miss normal?" he asks. Eyes digging deep into mine, always looking for something, I'm never sure what. "You know, drive-thrus and movies on a Saturday night and ice cream sandwiches and checking your Twitter feed?"

I shake my head. "I didn't Twitter."

"Facebook?"

I'm getting a little pissed. Sometimes it's hard for me to imagine how Zombie made it this far. Pining for things we lost is the same as hoping for things that can never be. Both roads dead-end in despair. "It's not important," I say. "None of that matters."

Zombie's laugh comes from deep in his gut. It bubbles to the

surface like the superheated air of a hot spring, and I'm not pissed anymore. I know he's putting on the charm, and somehow knowing what he's doing does nothing to blunt the effect. Another reason Zombie's a little unnerving.

"It's funny," he says. "How much we thought all of it did. You know what really matters?" He waits for my answer. I feel as if I'm being set up for a joke, so I don't say anything. "The tardy bell."

Now he's forced me into a corner. I know there's manipulation going on here, but I feel helpless to stop it. "Tardy bell?"

"Most ordinary sound in the world. And when all of this is done, there'll be tardy bells again." He presses the point. Maybe he's worried I don't get it. "Think about it! When a tardy bell rings again, normal is back. Kids rushing to class, sitting around bored, waiting for the final bell, and thinking about what they'll do that night, that weekend, that next fifty years. They'll be learning like we did about natural disasters and disease and world wars. You know: 'When the aliens came, seven billion people died,' and then the bell will ring and everybody will go to lunch and complain about the soggy Tater Tots. Like, 'Whoa, seven billion people, that's a lot. That's sad. Are you going to eat all those Tots?' *That's* normal. *That's* what matters."

So it wasn't a joke. "Soggy Tater Tots?"

"Okay, fine. None of that makes sense. I'm a moron."

He smiles. His teeth seem very white surrounded by the scruffy beard, and now, because he suggested it, I think about kissing him and if the stubble on his upper lip would tickle.

I push the thought away. Promises are priceless, and a kiss is a kind of promise, too.

2

UNDIMMED, THE STARLIGHT sears through the black, coating the highway in pearly white. The dry grass shines; the bare trees shimmer. Except for the wind cutting across the dead land, the world is winter quiet.

I hunker beside a stalled SUV for one last look back at the hotel. A nondescript two-story white rectangle among a cluster of other nondescript white rectangles. Only four miles from the huge hole that used to be Camp Haven, we nicknamed it the Walker Hotel, in honor of the architect of that huge hole. Sullivan told us the hotel was her and Evan's prearranged rendezvous point. I thought it was too close to the scene of the crime, too difficult to defend, and anyway, Evan Walker was dead: It takes two to rendezvous, I reminded Zombie. I was overruled. If Walker really was one of them, he may have found a way to survive.

"How?" I asked.

"There were escape pods," Sullivan said.

"So?"

Her eyebrows came together. She took a deep breath. "*So* . . . he could have escaped in one."

I looked at her. She looked back. Neither of us said anything. Then Zombie said, "Well, we have to take shelter *somewhere*, Ringer." He hadn't found the brochure for the caverns yet. "And we should give him the benefit of the doubt."

"The benefit of what doubt?" I asked.

"That he is who he says he is." Zombie looked at Sullivan, who was still glaring at me. "That he'll keep his promise."

"He promised he'd find me," she explained.

"I saw the cargo plane," I said. "I didn't see an escape pod."

Beneath the freckles, Sullivan was blushing. "Just because you didn't see one . . ."

I turned to Zombie. "This doesn't make sense. A being thousands of years more advanced than us turns on its own kind—for what?"

"I wasn't filled in on the why part," Zombie said, half smiling.

"His whole story is strange," I said. "Pure consciousness occupying a human body—if they don't need bodies, they don't need a planet."

"Maybe they need the planet for something else." Zombie was trying hard.

"Like what? Raising livestock? A vacation getaway?" Something else was bothering me, a nagging little voice that said, *Something doesn't add up*. But I couldn't pin down what that something was. Every time I chased after it, it skittered away.

"There wasn't time to go into all the details," Sullivan snapped. "I was sort of focused on rescuing my baby brother from a death camp."

I let it go. Her head looked like it was about to explode.

I can make out that same head now on my last look back, silhouetted in the second-story window of the hotel, and that's bad, really bad: She's an easy target for a sniper. The next Silencer Sullivan encounters might not be as love struck as the first one.

I duck into the thin line of trees that borders the road. Stiff with ice, the autumn ruins crunch beneath my boots. Leaves curled up like fists, trash and human bones scattered by scavengers. The cold wind carries the faint odor of smoke. The world will burn

for a hundred years. Fire will consume the things we made from wood and plastic and rubber and cloth, then water and wind and time will chew the stone and steel into dust. How baffling it is that we imagined cities incinerated by alien bombs and death rays when all they needed was Mother Nature and time.

And human bodies, according to Sullivan, despite the fact that, also according to Sullivan, they don't need bodies.

A virtual existence doesn't require a physical planet.

When I'd first said that, Sullivan wouldn't listen and Zombie acted like it didn't matter. For whatever reason, he said, the bottom line is they want all of us dead. Everything else is just noise.

Maybe. But I don't think so.

Because of the rats.

I forgot to tell Zombie about the rats.

3

BY SUNRISE, I reach the southern outskirts of Urbana. Halfway there, right on schedule.

Clouds have rolled in from the north; the sun rises beneath the canopy and paints its underbelly a glistening maroon. I'll hole up in the trees until nightfall, then hit the open fields to the west of the city and pray the cloud cover hangs around for a while, at least until I pick up the highway again on the other side. Going around Urbana adds a few miles, but the only thing riskier than navigating a town during the day is trying it at night.

And it's all about risk.

Mist rises from the frozen ground. The cold is intense. It squeezes my cheeks, makes my chest ache with each breath. I feel the ancient yearning for fire embedded deep in my genes. The taming of fire was our first great leap: Fire protected us, kept us warm, transformed our brains by changing our diets from nuts and berries to protein-rich meat. Now fire is another weapon in our enemy's arsenal. As deep winter sets in, we're crushed between two unacceptable risks: freezing to death or alerting the enemy to our location.

Sitting with my back against a tree, I pull out the brochure. *Ohio's Most Colorful Caverns!* Zombie's right. We won't survive till spring without shelter, and the caves are our best—maybe only—bet. Maybe they've been taken or destroyed by the enemy. Maybe they're occupied by survivors who will shoot strangers on sight. But every day we stay at that hotel, the risk grows tenfold.

We don't have an alternative if the caves don't pan out. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and the idea of fighting is ludicrous. The clock winds down.

When I pointed this out to him, Zombie told me I think too much. He was smiling. Then he stopped smiling and said, "Don't let 'em get inside your head." As if this were a football game and I needed a halftime pep talk. *Ignore the fifty-six to nothing score. Play for pride!* It's moments like those that make me want to slap him, not that slapping him would do any good, but it would make me feel better.

The breeze dies. There's an expectant hush in the air, the stillness before a storm. If it snows, we'll be trapped. Me in these woods. Zombie in the hotel. I'm still twenty or so miles from the

caverns—should I risk the open fields by day or risk the snow holding off at least till nightfall?

Back to the *R* word. It's all about risk. Not just ours. Theirs, too: embedding themselves in human bodies, establishing death camps, training kids to finish the genocide, all of it crazy risky, stupid risky. Like Evan Walker, discordant, illogical, and just damn *strange*. The opening attacks were brutal in their efficiency, wiping out 98 percent of us, and even the 4th Wave made some sense: It's hard to muster a meaningful resistance if you can't trust one another. But after that, their brilliant strategy starts to unravel. Ten thousand years to plan the eradication of humans from Earth and *this* is the best they can come up with? That's the question I can't stop turning over and over in my head, and haven't been able to, since Teacup and the night of the rats.

Deeper in the woods, behind me and to my left, a soft moan slices through the silence. I recognize the sound immediately; I've heard it a thousand times since they came. In the early days, it was nearly omnipresent, a constant background noise, like the hum of traffic on a busy highway: the sound of a human being in pain.

I pull the eyepiece from my rucksack and adjust the lens carefully over my left eye. Deliberately. Without panic. Panic shuts down neurons. I stand up, check the bolt catch on the rifle, and ease through the trees toward the sound, scanning the terrain for the telltale green glow of an "infested." Mist shrouds the trees; the world is draped in white. My footsteps thunder on the frozen ground. My breaths are sonic booms.

The delicate white curtain parts, and twenty yards away I see a figure slumped against a tree, head back, hands pressed into its

lap. The head doesn't glow in my eyepiece, which means he's no civilian; he's part of the 5th Wave.

I aim the rifle at his head. "Hands! Let me see your hands!"

His mouth hangs open. His vacant eyes regard the gray sky through bare branches glistening with ice. I step closer. A rifle identical to mine lies on the ground beside him. He doesn't reach for it.

"Where's the rest of your squad?" I ask. He doesn't answer.

I lower my weapon. I'm an idiot. In this weather, I would see his breath and there is none. The moan I heard must have been his last. I do a slow 360, holding my breath, but see nothing but trees and mist, hear nothing but my own blood roaring in my ears. Then I step over to the body, forcing myself not to rush, to notice everything. No panic. Panic kills.

Same gun as mine. Same fatigues. And there's his eyepiece on the ground beside him. He's a 5th Waver all right.

I study his face. He looks vaguely familiar. I'm guessing he's twelve or thirteen, around Dumbo's age. I kneel beside him and press my fingertips against his neck. No pulse. I open the jacket and pull up his blood-soaked shirt to look for the wound. He was hit in the gut by a single, high-caliber round.

A round I didn't hear. Either he's been lying here for a while or the shooter is using a silencer.

Silencer.

According to Sullivan, Evan Walker took out an entire squad by himself, at night, injured and outnumbered, sort of a warm-up to his single-handed blowing up of an entire military installation. At the time, I found Cassie's story hard to believe. Now there's a dead soldier at my feet. His squad MIA. And me alone with the silence of the woods and the milky white screen of fog.

Doesn't seem that far-fetched now.

Think fast. Don't panic. Like chess. Weigh the odds. Measure the risk.

I have two options. Stay put until something develops or night falls. Or get out of these woods, fast. Whoever killed him could be miles away or hunkered down behind a tree, waiting for a clear shot.

The possibilities multiply. Where's his squad? Dead? Hunting down the person who shot him? What if the person who shot him was a fellow recruit who went Dorothy? Forget his squad. What happens when reinforcements arrive?

I pull out my knife. It's been five minutes since I found him. I'd be dead by now if someone knew I was here. I'll wait till dark, but I have to prepare for the probability that another breaker of the 5th Wave is rolling toward me.

I press against the back of his neck until I find the tiny bulge beneath the scar. *Stay calm. It's like chess. Move and countermove.*

I slice slowly along the scar and dig out the pellet with the tip of the knife, where it sits suspended on a droplet of blood.

So we'll always know where you are. So we can keep you safe.

Risk. The risk of lighting up in an eyepiece. The opposing risk of the enemy frying my brain with the touch of a button.

The pellet in its bed of blood. The awful stillness of the trees and the clinching cold and the fog that curls between branches like fingers interlacing. And Zombie's voice in my head: *You think too much.*

I tuck the pellet between my cheek and gums. Stupid. I should have wiped it off first. I can taste the kid's blood.