

Survival City

By Amy Norton

Ready to Play

Rana washed her hands twice before splashing water on her face. She cupped her left hand and used it to lift water to her mouth to rinse the taste of bile from her tongue and teeth. She spat the water into the sink and thought about her family. Her mother was dead, a victim of self-loathing that Rana was afraid was hereditary. She hadn't spoken to her father or brother in a handful of years. To be fair to herself, they hadn't spoken to her either. So, there would be no one to miss her if she lost this game and no one to split the winnings with if she won. The job she had spent her youth thinking she wanted had turned out to be full of deceit and discredit that had nothing to do with the actual work. The only thing she mourned losing there was the income.

Swishing more water around her mouth once more and tasting mostly clean, she swallowed this mouthful. Reaching to her right, she tugged a soft, white towel from the bar there and used it to pat the water from her face then dried her hands. She became immersed in staring at the pristine white cloth, the slightly darker spots where it had soaked up the water. "*Do I want to win this?*" The thought came from some strange and frightening depth of her mind where she desperately tried to avoid looking.

Voices from the room outside the door pulled her back into the warm glow of the washroom. The water was still running. She turned the tap and the faucet obediently stopped flowing. In the mirror, her unruly hair was having an adventure of its own, oblivious to the peril coming. Sighing, as she did each time she was confronted with taming her mane, Rana pulled an elastic hair band from her wrist and backed away from the counter. Bending forward, she flipped all of her hair over to hang, more or less, in the same direction. She used both hands to sweep it into a messy ponytail at near the top of her head. The locks were not quite curly, but far more than wavy. Each distinct lock trying to go its own way, the resulting ponytail sprouted from a bed of lumpy darkness that some would occasionally call auburn, but most would usually call brown. She pulled the ponytail tight, not helping the problem, and turned the handle of the door.

Stepping out into the Green Room lounge at the television station, she saw the owners of the voices that she had heard through the door. A tall and thin, blond woman, the kind that Rana envied and sneered at from a distance, was standing with her back to a wall behind the small, round snack table. A closer inspection of the woman told Rana why she was there. Her mottled complexion and the lank and dull aspect of her blond hair were accented by clothing that fell too loosely on her shoulders and hips. She could have simply been malnourished or ill, but the angry red color of the skin on the inside of her elbows and between her fingers hinted at drug use.

Sitting at the table was a very dark-skinned man with muscle that stretched his t-shirt impressively. His hair was cut short and neat. His black jeans and vibrantly colored athletic shoes were crisply clean. A black leather jacket hanging over the back of the chair in which he sat matched the fingerless gloves he wore. Expensive tastes and a healthy opinion of himself were probably his motivators. Rana reserved her opinion on him, though, thinking that anyone who put that much effort into the outside was probably hiding something inside. Neither of them noticed her as they appeared to be thoroughly engrossed in a conversation comparing their musical interests.

On the opposite side of the room another man and woman sat on a sofa. Rana wondered if they had arrived together. Something in the way they sat and the way they were captivated with each other's conversation made her jealous. She shook her head at her own silliness. "*If they are together and they get put on opposite teams...*" She was just taking a step toward them to introduce herself and find out more when the outer door to the room opened.

The light from the alley outside was bright by comparison, and the man-shaped silhouette that appeared there was featureless. His voice was bored and commanding at the same time. "Room clear." He called back over his shoulder. Stepping further into the room, Rana could make out the officer's uniform and the prod baton in his hand. Addressing the room now, he said, "You bunch just watch yourselves. Prisoners coming in." Behind him, six people filed through the door.

As a group, they looked defeated already. Three men and three women, all dressed in plain blue denim and white t-shirts and grey jackets. The thin white shoes on their feet didn't look at all sturdy. Rana brushed her hands down her own black t-shirt and blue jeans, wiggled her toes in her almost new running shoes and turned her back

on the prisoners. They were all still shackled and connected to each other with a plastic-coated metal cable run through the chains on their wrists. Rana walked over to the sofa and introduced herself as she had intended.

“Hi. I’m Rana.” She stuck out one hand at the woman on the couch.

The woman looked up at her with a blank and uncomprehending expression for a moment. Then she smiled. Her peach complexion suddenly blossomed and her eyes sparkled. “Hey! Sorry, we were just ignoring everyone else. How rude of us. I am Paula.” Paula took Rana’s hand and pumped it quickly. “This is Jerry.”

“Nice to meet you, Jerry.” Rana shook his hand as well. “Do you know each other from before?” Rana positioned herself to sit on the end of the coffee table in front of the two.

Jerry and Paula turned themselves to face her. “No,” Jerry said, “We just met here. But it turns out that we both take the same train every day to get to work.”

Paula grinned at Jerry, “Well, we did.” She paused. Her grin growing. “You know, before all this.”

Rana had her angle. “Wow. Missed connections, right?!”

Paula giggled and squeezed Jerry’s knee with one hand and swatted the air in Rana’s direction with the other. Jerry put an arm around Paula and squeezed. “Absolutely. Who knows? If we had managed to make that connection, neither of us might have signed up to be here today.”

Rana wrinkled her nose and grinned, “But then I would have missed out on meeting you both!” She paid out one of her best disarming soft laughs and was rewarded with genuine smiles from both of them.

Behind her, the guard said, “Benson, I am going to check in with station security. You got this?” He must have gotten an affirmative, because he was walking through the station door when Rana turned around.

Benson was unlocking the chains on the prisoners, each one chafing at their own wrists once they were removed. They remained hobbled at the ankles but were moving about the room now, finding snacks and chatting with each other. The two people at the table had begun to move toward the sofa, leaving the snack table to the inmates. The woman was saying, in a gruff voice, “Yeah, it’s always an even split of the inmates assigned to each team.” The two positioned themselves, standing, at the end of the sofa.

Paula began a conversation with the man about his shoes and Rana completely lost interest. She stood and meandered toward the snacks table. A young red-headed man was there, drinking from a water bottle and poking individual packages of cookies, potato chips, chocolate and candies. “Hello.” Rana reached for a water bottle and a napkin. She turned her head to smile and found the smile becoming genuine and broader when she met the bluest eyes she had ever seen on a man. She felt her face flush slightly and was enormously grateful to genetics for the honey color of her skin that tended to hide blushes. Straightening and wrapping the napkin around the damp water bottle, Rana held her hand out, “I’m Rana. Please tell me you were arrested for murder.” She immediately regretted saying it but backed it up with the biggest grin she could muster, hoping it would play well.

The young man took her hand. “I am Kevin. Kevin Marshall, and no, sorry. I was in for auto theft. Just trying to pay the bills, you know?” He smiled briefly before he turned away to scan the room. He pointed at a woman leaning sullenly against a wall. “She had a murder charge. Something about a guy refusing to pay her.”

Rana squinted at Kevin, unsure if she was being conned. She noticed he hadn’t chosen a snack. “Are you not hungry?”

Kevin looked back down at her, making Rana feel suddenly quite short. “I don’t really like those kinds of snacks.” He patted his thin middle. “I am trying to watch my girlish figure.”

Rana was charmed. She smiled brightly in spite of herself and said, “There is a basket of fresh fruit.” She gestured to the coffee table. At his interest, indicated by raised eyebrows and a searching look in the direction she indicated, she led the way. “Kevin, this is Paula and Jerry.” Kevin waved and they waved back.

Rana smiled at the other man and woman. “Sorry, I never got your names. I’m Rana.”

They sneered back at her, and the woman began to walk farther away. The man began to follow and paused, looking up and said, “I’m Collin. Nice to meet you.” With that, he followed the blond woman away.

The door that led farther into the station opened again and the first guard came back through. He was followed by two station guards and three more people that Rana assumed were more contestants. There was another woman, small with straight black hair and a nearly ivory complexion. The two men were two ends of a spectrum. One was blond and fair like a porcelain doll. The other was dark, with skin like mocha coffee and a shaved head. At that moment, Kevin bit into a pear, crunching loudly. The dark newcomer turned toward them and smiled. He bounded up to the fruit basket and happily began picking out one with each hand.

Kevin laughed, covering his mouth with one hand. "Me too, man."

The fruit plunderer straightened, peeling a banana and smiled with too many teeth. "Hey, man. I'm Phil. It has been a long time since I had fresh fruit."

Kevin nodded, choosing out a small orange. "Me too. I'm Kevin." He lifted an elbow in her direction and said, "This is Rana."

Rana smiled and nodded at Phil. She tried to train her mind back to taking note of the clothing he wore and assessing his fitness. He was wearing a dark suit, similar to her own, of worn denim pants and black t-shirt without a jacket, and shiny new running shoes. Beyond that, she wasn't able to concentrate on him. Her eyes wandered over the people in the room. She mentally catalogued them as easy or hard to defeat, trying not to let her mental voice chastise her too vehemently about her own fitness for the upcoming challenge. *"What fitness? I have joined three gyms in the last five years and never actually worked out more than a dozen times in each. A treadmill for fifteen minutes is not really a workout, now is it? I always intended to eat better, exercise, get more sleep and all of that. Intentions are basically denial with a positive attitude."*

Rana felt a pain in her jaw and realized she was grinding her teeth. Looking at her companions of the moment she was relieved to see that no one had realized her discomfort. Jerry and Paula had joined the conversation with Kevin and Phil about the price of food in general and fruit specifically. Rana was disinterested. "Excuse me." She didn't really intend it for anyone in particular. Without registering if anyone had acknowledged her, she pushed away into the slightly uncomfortably full room. The two station guards were sitting with two of the prisoners playing a card game. *"It looks like multiplayer solitaire. That would be an oxymoron. I am a moron. Okay it looks like they are each playing the same game of solitaire. Still a moron."* She made her way over to the game and stood at a polite distance to watch. At least she hoped she gave the impression of watching the game. She had crossed her left arm in front of her body and was nibbling the edge of her right thumbnail, frowning and watching the way the prisoners moved.

Cards were placed and someone threw three more cards on the table with a groan of irritation. The others laughed and the cards were picked back up and shuffled. One man cut the deck and another dealt ten hands of cards. Five to each of the three men, and another fifteen cards into five piles of descending amounts; five in the first pile, four in the second and so on. Rana watched the top card on the five-card deck be flipped over to reveal a two of spades. The dealer looked to the first player, who took another card. The second player placed an ace of clubs on top of the two and flipped the top card of the four-card pile. It was a king of hearts. He grunted and the next player placed an ace of hearts and a two of diamonds on the king, then he flipped the top card of the three-card pile.

Rana was actually beginning to be interested, although she was still baffled, when someone stepped up beside her, "Who is winning?" Phil's voice was a rumbling whisper.

Rana glanced up at him and then back to the game. "I have no idea. I don't think I have ever seen this game."

Phil watched as the players took their turns. "It is called Empire. This is where it gets a little slow. So, everyone has started taking cards from the dealer. If they get to seven cards in their hands, they are out of the hand, and their hand gets shuffled back into the dealer's deck. The goal is to be the first person to play out all of your cards. That is a winning hand. Three winning hands wins the game. But that isn't the real goal of the game. If you are the last player, and the others have all lost with excessive cards, you are dealt five more cards. You have to play all the cards in your hand, only being dealt another card if you can play a card. If you can play out all of the cards from the dealer's deck and your hand, with or without turning over all of the Tower cards, you have won the game."

Rana understood but made a puzzled expression anyway. "How do you get to the Tower cards?" She gestured to where three cards lay buried in the five-card pile and the two-card pile hadn't been touched.

“By moving the Towers around. If a top card on a Tower can accommodate the bottom card showing on another Tower, or if a Tower Lot is vacant, you can move the face-up Tower into one of those spots.”

Just then, the first player played a four of spades and flipped the top card of the two-card pile. It was a queen of diamonds. He laughed in glee as he scooped up the king Tower and moved it, making it a queen Tower and spreading the cards out again. He then flipped the top card in the previously occupied Tower and the single card of the one-card pile. Phil made a guttural noise of mirth and said, “Here we go.” The single card was a four of diamonds, which the player moved to the queen Tower, leaving the Lot empty. Then he scooped up the queen Tower, depositing it in the empty Lot. Flipping the next card, it revealed a three of hearts, which he played on the four. He flipped the next card. In a flurry of shuffling and flipping, the Towers were suddenly arranged into three building Towers with one card still face down under only one of them. Another Lot showed the last card of its pile face up, a two of spades. The fifth Lot was empty.

The player held up the last card in his hand and studied it. Then he studied the cards on the table. Finally, hanging his head in defeat, he muttered at his feet, “Pass.”

The other players let out held breath and the next player laughed raucously as he swept the board with cards moved and placed. Then he too was left hold a single card and passing the turn. The third player smiled quietly, placed a single card, moved a Tower, flipped a card and placed his last card. The first player tried to throw his card at the table, but an updraft caught it and his bellow of rage was strangled by an exclamation of bewilderment as he watched the card flutter softly down to the table top.

The noises the irate man was making, made Rana giggle. She covered her mouth with both hands and her eyes went wide as they met those of the man. From behind her hands she said, somewhat muffled, “Not me. It was him!” She removed one of her hands to point accusingly at Phil. His merriment at her predicament turned to complete shock and surprise as he stared down the tip of her pointing finger. Grabbing her finger in his left hand, he raised his right hand to point back at her.

Phil looked back at the players and grinned in a shockingly large smile. “Hey, man. That was a tough hand! Do you have room for two more players?”

Rana tried to protest but found herself neatly tucked under Phil’s arm with his hand still over her mouth as he marched her forward to take a seat with the others.

It turned out to be a much more engrossing game as a player than a spectator. Rana played five hands and managed to win one of them, surprising herself and all the other players. She learned the names of the others at the table one at a time. Gary was always almost a winner but still lost every hand. His show of irritated frustration at the end of each hand was always enthusiastic and explosive. Quan was one of the station guards and didn’t speak much. The other guard, Brendan, related how one of the previous contestants had taught Quan the game. When she had died in the City, Quan had stopped getting to know the contestants before the game. Primo was the other prisoner playing. Rana liked him in spite of her better judgment.

He used every clichéd Mexican exclamatory phrase she had ever heard a few that she wasn’t sure were appropriate in mixed company. He kept calling everyone, “Ese,” and telling them to “callate”. She thought she might have to throw a glass bowl at his face for making kissy faces at her and winking every time she passed the hand to him, but she changed her mind and loved him completely when Gary angrily shoved both her and Phil off of their shared seat after he lost again. Primo stood up and, in one stride, was between them and Gary. He let off a string of quietly threatening Spanish that had Gary looking at his feet and apologizing before Rana could even stand up. The two guards were still looking at the table and scattered cards, not registering that there had almost been a true fight.

When Gary had taken his seat again, Primo turned to them and pulled Phil roughly to his feet. “I got you, Mano.” Exchanging slaps on the back, Phil began to straighten the stool and his clothing. Primo, knelt all the way to one knee and held up both palms to face Rana. “You okay, Reina?” He held out both hands to her, and she smiled out of the corner of her mouth, feeling flattered at the way he pronounced her name.

Taking his hands and being lifted lightly to her feet, she dusted herself off and caught the eye of a somewhat abashed Gary. “I am fine. You gotta’ expect an occasional tornado when there is that much hot air trapped in one place.” She held a hand out to Gary.

He looked up at her from his seated position and she almost withdrew when she noticed him glance quickly behind her at Primo. But she didn't and Gary took the hand she offered and said, "Sorry about that. If you want me to leave the game, I will. It is keeping my mind off the City. I would like to keep playing."

Rana felt the sincere expression of empathy cross her own face before she exchanged her mocking grin for a sincere smile. "We can't play without you. Who would lose?" Her smile grew and she was glad to see him smiling back. When she turned, Primo was sitting and not even looking in her direction, but Phil was looking at Primo and sitting tensed on the edge of the stool. Rana took her place next to him again and nudged him with her shoulder. "You good?"

Phil looked down at her and nodded, "Yep. Let's play." He and the guards had gathered the cards and the deck was being shuffled again for the next deal.

From that point on, Primo's overtures of insincere courtship were met by returned gestures of rude affection. Hand gestures, silly faces, name calling; once, Rana kicked his shoe with the point of hers in retaliation for going too far with a tongue gesture. Phil laughed with the others but seemed more uncomfortable than he had before the confrontation.

After her fifth game, Rana excused herself, leaving Phil to play another hand. She walked over to the snack table, largely barren at this point, and got another bottle of water. She wasn't really thirsty, but she wanted to be hydrated before going into the City. She wandered over to where Collin and the nameless blond were trying to keep out of other small groups. "Did I hear you correctly earlier, saying that you were a fan of the early hip hop musicians?" Rana addressed her question to Collin.

Collin gazed at her without expression. "Some of 'em, yeah. The good ones."

Rana smiled and began to ask him about which artists he enjoyed particularly. She threw out a few names that she had seen advertised on billboards and magazines when she was a child. She didn't really know the music, but it was enough to get Collin talking. The blond slumped and tried to be disinterested. The longer the conversation went on, though, the more she was drawn in. Finally, she could hold her opinion no more. She had just begun to emphatically disagree about the third album from Princeling G, when all of the conversation in the room ceased.

Picking Teams

The monitor on the wall between the bathroom door and the hall exit was lit up and a man was speaking into the camera. There was no sound from the man. Instead, a disembodied voice spoke to them. "Hello, contestants. We are about to begin sorting you into your teams. When your name is called and your team is assigned, see Quan and Brendan for your team room key."

Rana looked over her shoulder and saw each man pull a wadded up, thin cloth baseball cap from his pocket and put it on his head. Quan's was green and Brendan's was orange. She saw them shaking hands with the men they had been playing cards with and taking up positions in the center of the room, back-to-back.

"Be sure to step forward and look directly up into the monitor when your name is called. The game begins in 3...2..." The voice paused. There was no "one" spoken. Nothing on the audio of the monitor changed and the disembodied voice instructed, "If you haven't begun to move toward the monitor and into frame, do so now. Leave a little room in front for the contestant whose name is being called. Clear a path from that space to Quan and Brendan."

The man on the screen was smiling and laughing while he spoke. Obviously, he was enjoying his job. The voice came back, "Collin Lindsay." Collin stepped forward. Like a model on a runway, he shrugged out of his jacket, like he had practiced exactly this a million times. As he lifted his face to the monitor, he slung the jacket over his shoulder. "Green." Collin smirked in the most practiced way before giving a tight nod and turning to walk away. Almost out of frame, he turned to look back over his shoulder and make the slightest of upward nods with his chin before continuing on.

"Very well done, Mr. Lindsay. Next, Janice Parker." The now-named blond stepped forward. She did not look like a model. She looked sullen and angry and in need of a zookeeper with a dart gun. "Orange." Janice frowned and furrowed her brow, taking on the aspect of a cornered badger. Clenching her fists at her sides, she spun and stalked away.

“Not bad. Next, Gary Lefsbidge.” Gary walked into the center. “Orange.” One by one, the room began to fall into some sense of order. Rana watched Jerry stand to be sorted and Paula ran into the center after him to kiss him soundly. As she stepped back, Jerry took her hand and held her close to himself. “Green.” They began to walk away but only went as far as the edge of the encircling group. Three names later, Paula was called. When she was also sorted into the Green team. The two of them began to display their affection for each other very publicly, Paula had several tears running down her cheeks and Jerry looked as if he had been near the verge of passing out from holding his breath before they announced Paula’s team color. They made an awkward beast of too many legs but still managed to walk back to Quan and Brendan.

Rana smiled for them, not thinking about what they still had coming. “Kevin Marshall” the voice called. Kevin’s striking figure walked up to the monitor. The severe look on his face only served to make him look rugged and beautiful at the same time. “Orange.” Kevin nodded and moved away.

Phil was called and Primo, both assigned to the Green team. Then, “Rana Stuart”. Rana shuddered all over and she locked her eyes on the monitor. She ran through a mental exercise she had used since she was a child. Envisioning a blade of grass, then all of its neighbors and so on until, one small piece at a time, she had built an entire meadow. She built it with flowers and an outcropping of stone, from which a blue spring bubbled out and over the rocks. She built it with sparkling sunlight playing on that running water and butterflies flitting from flower to flower. Keeping it going occupied all of her mind, all of the power she had to think and consider. She stood in a relaxed posture, looking from the outside as if she had no cares or concerns at all. “Green.” She heard the voice and nodded, turned automatically and walked in a relaxed saunter back through the remaining group.

She stepped up to Quan and he held out a key card. As she reached to take it with her right hand, her left swiftly darted up to his head and took the cap. In a smooth motion, she put the cap on her own head, backwards. “Smile, Quan. Be happy for us. In all the time we all spend living in this world, we all feel powerless to fight back against the monsters and enemies all around us. At least in the City, fighting back is the point. If we go down, we go down powerful.” She smiled and he gave her a half smile in return. Taking the hat off and handing it back to him, she said, “Thanks for teaching me to play Empire.”

With that, she turned away from him and followed the dim Green LED trail that led her out the hall door of the room and off to the right.

T.V. Ready

The hall was carpeted with a green and orange check pattern with thick black trim on either side. It was hideous. Still, it was just a hall on the way to another part of her adventure. *“I didn’t go to the gym. I did go dancing and skating and I explored every inch of the park on the river. I trained. Sure, but I never had to go without bug spray or water or without medical treatment after a building caved in on me. I have never had a building cave in on me. I am going to die.”* With that last dire thought still echoing in her mind, she reached a large green door. She waved the keycard in front of the magnetic pad and it too became green. The door clicked and she pushed it open.

Inside were the rest of the team who had already been chosen. Jerry and Paula were holding hands and feeding each other some kind of dessert. *“I guess if you know you are going to die the day after you meet the love of your life, you try to squeeze in all of the old classics.”* She shrugged the idle thoughts away and began to focus on who she shared a team with.

Along with Jerry and Paula, Collin and Phil were also in the room. Primo and the small woman Rana had seen arrive with Phil were standing to one side sharing space, but not really talking. Behind her, the door opened again. Rana paused where she stood and glanced over her shoulder to see that it had admitted another woman, also a stranger to Rana. As Rana walked closer, Primo smiled broadly and gestured to the woman standing with him. “Reina. This is Mel.”

Rana smiled and shook the woman’s hand, “Good to meet you.” She turned to the woman who had arrived behind her and gestured to Primo. “Hello. This is Primo. Primo, this is someone I have never met.” In her mind, her disembodied voice rolled its eyes at her and then wondered, *“How do I hear an eye roll? Maybe I didn’t. Maybe I just retroactively thought I heard an eye roll when I told myself that is what I had done. Ok yeah, I need a nap. Bedtime, Head-case. Buh-bye!”*

In the outer world, shared by other minds, the other woman had smiled and said, with a breathy and excited voice, with a high-pitched, sing-song lilt that almost sounded Southern, "I am Terryanne. I kind of hate it but I hate Terry and Anne worse, so, if you don't mind, can you call me T?"

Rana nodded and reached to shake her hand. "It's your name. I always thought having to go through a million miles of paperwork to change your name as an adult was just wrong. Hi, T. I'm Rana." The others were moving closer, and Rana said, "Everyone, this is T and Mel." She then realized that Jerry, Paula and Collin didn't know Primo. She started over. After coaxing everyone into introducing themselves, she led them all to the lounge area of the room to sit and wait for further instructions. Phil was still grazing on the snacks in the small kitchen area.

Collin found a low-backed lounge chair and sat in it. He let his knees hang wide open and hooked his elbows over the corners of the chair back, scooting forward so that he sat slightly slouched but still with his head in an alert position. The effect of the posture was to make him look larger overall than if he had sat up very straight. Rana smiled inwardly, the voice in her head said, "*Only a man with low confidence in his own efficacy puts that kind of effort into looking relaxed and in control. Like a puffer fish when it feels threatened. Or a porcupine. Be careful. We are on the same team. Teams aren't required to win together, just not help people from the other team.*" Rana blinked hard on her thoughts and took the seat next to Collin.

She emulated him in a feminine way, slinging one leg over the arm of her chair and leaning in a twisted and not at all comfortable posture to prop herself on an elbow against the other side of the chair. "Hey, Collin. Do you have a speech for the intake interview?"

Collin started slightly as if at a sudden loud noise. He tilted his head at her and said, "Not really. I hate those things. They are like listening to someone give their own eulogy. I mean, who wants to know that some idiot's favorite song is your favorite song, too, only to see that idiot die in some grisly way forever messin' up that song?"

Rana laughed a short bark of mirth. She hadn't expected that kind of reasonable or emotional response. "Sorry. You have a point. So, I guess I am just going to have to list all the songs I hate the most. Really bring those blond bimbo pop singers down in the charts."

Collin surprised her with his own sudden laughter. She would have prodded for more conversation, but Phil came striding over then and handed them each a water bottle. "Hydrate up, ladies and gentlemen. I can't be on a team with folks who lose steam because they didn't drink enough water."

Rana twisted the cap off of her water bottle and raised it in a toasting gesture. She took a deep pull and said, "We were just discussing our intake interviews. We plan to associate bloody atrocity with some already offensive pop culture references. What about you?"

Phil furrowed his brows briefly in confusion then shook his head. "I have a very specific statement to make regarding the landlord of a particular apartment complex. Otherwise, I don't really have anything planned."

Collin leaned forward, straightening his posture a bit, and asked, "You are going to make your last statement to the world a rant against high rents?"

Phil smiled, "And you are going to impugn the popular cultural preferences of thousands of viewers. Don't judge, man."

Rana laughed and leaned her head back, closing her eyes. She listened to Phil and Collin banter for a while before the sound of the door clicking open drew her attention. A television technician and several light, makeup, sound and camera people bustled into the room. The technician was short and somewhat round with the distinct complexion of Asian heritage reinforced by the unmistakable result of bottle-blond used on Asian black hair. Her head-set held her brittle hair back from her face and the tiny microphone attached to the left side hugged the curve of her cheek. She carried an electronic clipboard that she was clacking against with her lacquered nails, calling out instructions to her crew members.

As the camera and sound men were setting up their equipment in one of the side rooms, the makeup crew arranged their tools at three separate stations. The technician called out, "Terryanne Hughs, station one."

One of the makeup crew members raised his hand. "Over here, Baby." Terryanne giggled and walked over.

"Meli..." The technician stumbled over the name.

Mel spoke up, “Just call me Mel, but it is pronounced Mel-ee-ah.”

The technician nodded, “Station two.” Mel walked to the young woman waving a makeup brush at her.

“Rana Stuart, station three.” The technician looked up, glancing around to find Rana.

Rana stood and walked toward the last makeup station. She smiled and nodded toward the man holding a color palette swatch and took the seat he gestured to. He flipped through a few palette cards, holding each up to her cheek and next to the back of her hand before moving to the next. Rana said, “Please keep it simple. Nothing too heavy please. I want to look like there is no makeup there at all.”

The man stopped and looked at her critically. “Don’t worry. I have just the thing.” He nodded to someone over her head and suddenly the chair seemed to melt. She yelped as it tilted backward and left her lying between four people all looking down at her. Two were doing something uncomfortable to her hair and a third was working on her arms and hands and fingers. The man with the swatches had traded them for a full-sized painter’s palette which rested on his left hand. He smiled down at her, taking her water bottle away, “Close your eyes. We only have about ten minutes.”

Rana obliged and tried not to think about what was happening. Light touches caressed every part of her face and neck, from her hairline down to somewhere around her breastbone. Even her ears got attention. A few minutes later, she felt a light mist being spritzed over her face just before the chair righted itself and her with it. A mirror was placed in front of her and she was confronted with a fresh-faced and significantly more defined version of herself.

The makeup artist said, “This stuff is semi-permanent once the sealant dries. So, avoid touching anything for the next half an hour. You are camera-ready for the duration of the show. After two weeks, you can wash it off with soap and water. If you need to remove it for some reason before that,” he handed her a small pouch of wet wipes, “these will do it but try not to get it in your eyes. Wash and otherwise behave as you would normally after the half an hour is up.”

One of the hair technicians interjected, “The product in your hair will work roughly the same way. Except it will wear away after 14 washings with soap or shampoo.” The whole team then stood shoulder to shoulder and flashed a picture-pose smile at her.

After a single heartbeat of stillness, they broke the pose, and the lead makeup artist looked over at the others who were waiting. “Next! Yes, you, Dear. Don’t be shy.”

Rana scrambled out of the chair and scooped up her water bottle. She stumbled away from the frenetic little bubble of people and back toward the chair she had been lounging in before. “*It does look good. Not at all the sallow and dumpy you of normal days. Maybe you should look into investing in some of this stuff and learning to use it if you make it out alive.*” Rana collapsed into her chair. She was realizing that she was feeling very tired. She leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes.

Phil shook her shoulder gently. “Rana, you’re up next. Paula is in there now, but they said you go in when she comes out.”

Rana reached up with one hand to rub her eyes with her fingertips and pinched the bridge of her nose. Briefly remembering the warning about not touching the makeup until the spritz had dried, she looked at her fingers. No makeup smudge was there, but she glanced into the wall mirror across the room anyway. Everything looked like it was still where it belonged. The door into the interview room was next to the mirror. A small red light was lit up on the door frame above another unlit light which would be green. “Thanks, Phil.”

Rana stood and walked slowly to the door to wait near it. She realized she was still holding her water bottle and drank some. The red light blinked out and the door opened. Paula came out of the room, blinking and Rana thought she caught an expression of sad worry before her cheerful façade slammed back into place. She smiled at Rana and swung the door wide as she walked swiftly past her.

Rana straightened and walked through the door. The technicians motioned her to the single straight-backed chair positioned in front of the camera. A screen just above the camera showed the faces of the show hosts. A small microphone hung in the dim reaches above the chair. Rana sat and faced forward, donning a demure look. The

sound came on from a small speaker at her feet and a spotlight covered her in a white glow. “Joining us now is Rana Stuart. Hi, Rana. Tell us a little about yourself.”

Rana smiled, a small curve of her mouth, and then allowed herself to say what was expected. Completely irrelevant to her as they were, . “I’m just a simple woman looking for adventure. I have a family and they worry about me. Hi, Mom and Dad!” she waved at the camera. “If I make it out of here, I am going to take care of my family and we are going to enjoy life together.”

The female host tittered a pitchy giggle, “Well, isn’t that sweet!”

The male host laughed a throaty agreement and said, “So sweet. But, Rana,” his tone took on a serious rumble, “Aren’t you scared? Why would you volunteer for this program?”

Rana smiled more broadly and said, “Honestly? I am bored.”

The hosts both laughed and turned away from the camera that fed to Rana’s screen. The sound cut out and a few moments later, the spotlight also cut out. A dimmer light still highlighted Rana in a more isolated way and the camera technician said, “You can begin your personal message now. The audience can see you talking but they can’t hear a thing.”

Rana nodded and began to babble. “I really did do this out of boredom and a loss of hope. My mother is actually dead and my father and brother could be for all I know. If they see this, they may not even recognize me. I don’t even know why we haven’t spoken in so long. I do know that the world is a horrible place full of greed and aggression, and it is spoon-fed to us every day on shows just like this and on the street. No one can make enough money to take care of themselves or their families unless they do something extreme. There is no joy in life. Whatever good might be out there is locked away for the private enjoyment of the elite who hoard it behind walls and... “ She trailed off. When she started again, she said, “Love and joy and fun and relaxation and friendship and all the things we are told are good are myths and fairytales. There is no such thing. So I can do this, run this gauntlet. I won’t be less lonely and I won’t be less angry or sad. But I will have the money to not worry so much about the day-to-day ridiculousness of living in our society. Or I will be dead and none of it will matter anyway.”

Rana realized she was breathing easier, actually smiling, and felt more relieved than she ever had. She nodded quietly and stood. She didn’t wait for instructions or for the technicians to tell her the camera was off. She just walked back out the door.

The rest of the evening was filled with idle chatter, more games of Empire, a large dinner and sleep. She woke twice and realized, upon checking the clock, that the show staff would not appear to wake them until it was actually time to be transported to the City. When she could not sleep anymore, Rana found the shower and stood in nearly scalding water for almost a half-hour. Then she re-dressed and went to join the few members of her team that were milling about in the common area. She found a salad in the refrigerator and helped herself to a large serving with another bottle of water. Phil and Primo both came to chat with her and left when they failed to get a conversation to take root.

The whole group became solemn and quiet close to transport time. When the show staff arrived to escort them, they were ready and followed without comment. The elevator took them to an underground tunnel where they boarded a short train. The train ride took about an hour and they arrived at a starkly lit and barren station. Each of them was given a pair of leather work gloves, a small belt pouch and a belt-mounted canteen. Then the staff left, and the platform to the train tracks was sealed with a steel door that rolled down from the ceiling on tracks. The doors to another elevator opened, and they filed in like sheep.

Into the City

The rapid ascent made Rana’s ears pop and she noticed several of the others working their jaws to cause the equalization of their own inner ears. The elevator car stopped suddenly, jostling the occupants. The doors slid slowly open, and the bright sun, nearing the western horizon, streamed into the elevator car. A loud buzz sounded from the back of the elevator and they all exited. A quick scan of the ramshackle remnants of the buildings and structures around them showed Rana three shiny new cameras, all pointed at them.

A large arrow painted on the ground in bright yellow outlined in green pointed south, straight away from the elevator. Phil stepped forward with Primo by his side. "Only one way out. We have to make it to the extraction point before the others. Better get a move on."

Rana stepped up between Phil and Primo. She looked at each of them in turn with a genuine grin of jubilant euphoria. She knew she was high on anticipatory adrenaline, but she also knew that she didn't care. She wiggled her eyebrows at the men, quickly raising them up and down again on her forehead, and laughed. "Let's do it!" She took off at a fast jog and heard the others following.

The next hour was relatively calm. The only challenges that they encountered were mounds of rubble across their paths and the closing darkness. The majority of the buildings had been wrecked to look like they'd been bombed and everything that had once resembled a flowering tree or plant was long dead. The streets were littered with debris and rubble from hundreds of these matches. Old cars and bicycles and buses were abandoned at random intervals, and mounds of mysterious debris filled every other alleyway or street, making them impassable. As night fell, the street lights came on. It became apparent from inside the City that the broken street lights were staged extras that may never have worked. Where there was not enough light from the street lights, the fortunate building security light or working business sign added to the glow. It was a television show after all.

Just after full dark, Primo led the group into the shelter of a blocked off alley. In his already thick accent, made heavier by the grit and dust they had all been breathing, he said, "The big teeth are going to start prowling any minute. If we find a place to stay the night, we will be safe from those, but the other team might make the extraction point before us if they keep moving through the night."

"In ten years, I have never seen any team choose to stay holed-up overnight." Mel offered.

"That's because it isn't any safer. There are boogers in the buildings just like in the streets." T explained, nodding sagely. "We need to just keep moving."

There was a round of agreement and Primo said, "Good. Then take five and let's keep moving. I am using that antenna over there," he pointed at a red blinking light in the distance, "as a landmark to keep us moving in the right direction."

Rana smiled and reached out to squeeze Primo's arm. "That is a good idea. Thanks!"

Primo grinned at her and continued to talk to the group about his ideas on getting them into the extraction point. Rana wandered back toward the opening of the alley and peered in either direction down the street. She pulled her canteen from her belt and sipped at the warm water. She could see low shadows moving everywhere and her sense of trepidation began to spread prickling points down her arms and legs. Something bright moving off to her left caught her eye. She twisted the cap firmly back onto her canteen and replaced it on her hip, still trying to decide what she was seeing. Staring, almost unblinking towards the movement, her eyes slowly began to distinguish the terrifying image of low silvery fog rolling across the ground. Thin tendrils reached out of the center mass and dissolved as it spread itself too thin. The center mass acted like water in slow motion following the eddies of the air and the surface of the ground over which it rolled. She looked up at the antenna and realized that left was the direction they needed to go.

She turned back to the resting group of her team mates and said, in a shockingly calm and quiet voice, "Guys. Silver Fog."

Everyone came running to the end of the alley to peer in the direction she was looking. Jerry squeezed Paula close under his arm and said, "It's not that bad. It's a small cloud. We need a way to shift it without letting it touch us."

Collin raised his arms over his head, and Rana could see him from behind the front line of the group. "There's a ton of these board pieces laying around this alley. Pick some up."

Rana moved to do exactly that. She snugged her gloves on her hands and chose two pieces with roughly rectangular shape. She discarded one as too heavy for her and chose another. Waving both experimentally, she said, "We need to get started. When you see the first baddy in the City, the rest follow soon after."

With nodded and grunts of agreement, the group formed a semi-circular knot and began to move at a steady slow pace down the street. Rana positioned one of her makeshift paddles below the other, waving the lower paddle

horizontally and the upper paddle vertically. As they approached the Fog, her method seemed effective and most of the others adopted it as well. As they pushed into the Fog, Primo led them to one side of the street and hugged a building. The group's semi-circular shape worked to create a pocket of clear air that smelled only faintly of copper and hot electrical wiring.

"We are almost clear!" Primo hooted as if he was watching his favorite football team winning. The exuberant loudness was stark and startling in the heavy quiet.

As Rana stepped forward and clear of the Fog behind Primo, she slowed her paddle waving without stopping it entirely. She looked around, still moving forward behind Primo, and surveyed the shadows and dark holes in the ruins around them. Things looked clear. *"Things always look clear. You can't see everything. Not all at one time. Look around and behind you. Even the wall could be deadly. A wall? What is it going to do? Fall down?"* She blinked rapidly to stop the nattering voice in her mind. She turned to look at the wall. She stopped waving her paddles and took two quick steps back from the wall.

Mel had seen it too and shouted, "Away from the wall!"

Monsters and Me

The City claimed the first member of their group. A bright orange vine tendril wrapped around T's neck and yanked her off her feet. The sickly crunch of her neck snapping seemed to fall around them, heavy and threatening and not significant enough to represent a death. The rhythmic thumping of T's body against the concrete wall as she was slowly dragged upward hit like punches to Rana's gut.

Collin suddenly burst forward and made a grab at the buckle of T's belt. It fell loose and he snatched it and skittered backward, out of the reach of the slowly descending vines to either side of where T hung. He held it up and offered it to Primo. Rana raised her eyebrows at that, he deferred to Primo as their current leader. Primo shook his head, "Nah, man, you keep it. We will let you know if we need any of the supplies." He looked at everyone else. "I know it seems callous, but if you have your belt through your belt loops, kindly un-loop it. For the good of your team mates, so if you die, you don't take your supplies with you."

A moment of stillness followed with Primo the only person to unbuckle his belt and pull it free of his belt loops. Slowly, Paula, Mel and Jerry all followed suit. "Not callous, man. Just smart." Jerry clapped Primo on the shoulder, and the group continued.

They walked steadily for the next few hours. Time was marked by the sound of their feet on the rough paving stones. A few encounters with challenges of the City kept them on edge and vigilant. Mel was scratched by a large, shaggy mound of moving teeth that lunged at them from the shadows, and Collin had a long cut on one cheek from a falling brick that had landed on his shoulder and left it bruised and almost black through the rip it had torn in his shirt. The first indication that the other team was even in the City came when a piercing scream from the other side of a row of buildings was followed by an explosion that brought down the remains of one of the buildings. The dust cloud it created chased them for three blocks.

When they stopped to catch their breath, Mel slumped against a pile of concrete slabs and sat heavily, gasping. Rana, walking close, choked on an inhalation and gasped. "Mel, let me see that scratch." Rana pulled her shirt collar up over her mouth and then began to breath through her mouth. *"Idiot, how did you not smell that before? She was walking behind me most of the time. You were not paying attention. It's probably already too late..."* The voices in her mind faded away as Mel straightened her leg and whimpered. Rana knelt close enough to really see what was happening.

The leg had swollen so that her once loose-fitting jeans were tight against the skin of that leg. The gash in her pants leg exposed a green and oozing mass that strained to filter out of the tear. Rana stumbled to her feet and backed away. "Mel. That infection is spreading and you are going to die soon. You need to take off your belt and toss it to me."

Mel was still gasping for air through clenched teeth. She scowled with lips already turning purple. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but her tongue was so swollen that it puffed to fill the created space as soon as she cracked her jaws. Mel's eyes widened and the swelling in her face began to be obvious, expanding at a rapid and unbelievable pace. The fear and panic in her expression made Rana wish there was a way to comfort her.

Collin stepped up from behind her. "Get back." He said gruffly as he stepped over to Mel. Her eyes met his and seemed to express trust and relief as his left hand snaked behind her shoulders to lift her slightly, letting her head lean back a little farther. Perhaps it did help to open her swollen trachea, if even for a moment. Collin lifted his right hand and gently brushed the hair back from her temple. "I got you." He said to her, softly. His fingers caressed her hair once more before his hand darted down and back up. Mel never stopped gazing at him with that trusting and relieved expression as he slammed a brick down on her head, just at the temple he had exposed with his caresses.

It was over in a moment. He dropped the brick and bent down to pull the belt from her corpse. As he turned back to the rest of the group, he said, more as an explanation than an apology, "Once it gets to the face, it's suffocation that kills them. Then they explode and infect anyone nearby. The swelling should stop now that the blood isn't flowing. We should be safe." He offered the belt to Rana. Rana took it.

They traveled a winding path through the maze of the rubble-strewn City. About an hour after Mel's death, they stopped in the shelter of a building that might once have been a convenience store. Sitting on the corner of an intersection, with the front wall blown out, the location provided relative safety while allowing them to keep a watch. Paula opened her belt pouch to find out what provisions they might contain. It was different for every show. Sometimes, they held nothing of worth at all. Sometimes, they contained food, or some tool unlikely to be helpful in the City, like a small sewing kit. This time, more than half of their belt pouches contained small nutritional wafers. There was a single bottle cap, three matchbox cars, six iodine swaps, a few rubber bands and pencils, and several other plastic and metal pieces that looked like they had once belonged to something bigger, but alone they were just nameless junk. When everyone had discarded what they found no use for, Primo and Paula retrieved the rubber bands, pencils and a few of the nameless junk items. When Paula saw Rana watching her, she offered, "Maybe a really ineffective slingshot?"

Rana smiled and nodded. She thought about picking through the junk pile herself, "*Stay out of the trash, Rana. You have no idea how to make a primitive weapon. I can throw things. Throw a brick. I could maybe sharpen a piece of metal... Just stop. Turn around. Keep walking...*" Rana turned her back on the pile and followed the others out into the street.

The group ate two of the nutritional wafers, each, as they marched slowly through the City. When they paused again to rest, Rana and Collin topped off everyone's canteens with the water from the salvaged belts and discarded them. When they stood to begin walking again, the sound of thunder stopped them in their tracks. Primo, Collin, Phil and Jerry began to search the doorways of the ruins around them. Paula and Rana began to gather any bits of wood they could find. When Jerry called out, "I found one!" They all ran to join him. Primo, Phil and Collin each loaded their own arms down with as much wood as they could quickly grab and carry.

Shelter Only From the Storm

Once inside, Jerry pulled the door shut tight behind them. They all climbed the short stairs to the rain platform. At the top, Paula set herself to building a fire in the round fire-pit in the center, and Rana organized the wood into a useful pile. The men took up positions around the center area, sitting with their backs to the fire. Once the fire was burning and Paula was satisfied that it would not go out, she joined Jerry and snuggled up to him, back to back, so she could continue to watch and tend the fire. Rana positioned herself between Phil and Primo looking out away from the fire at the walls of the small room. The room was about fifteen by fifteen feet and roughly squared. There were small lights on the steps up to the rain platform, and the light from the fire illuminated the chimney hole in the ceiling.

They waited less than two minutes before they heard the sound of the rain pouring outside. Shrieks and wails of creatures caught in the acid solution filtered to them through the walls. A few moments later, they were surrounded by relative silence again. They relaxed some then, still watchful for things that might be sharing their shelter. Paula crawled forward to add another piece of wood to the fire and began to chatter. "I think it is just great how we all fell into doing what we needed to do to be safe in the storm. Just like a real team!"

Collin snorted. "We are not a team. We are all part of the same group authorized to survive together. We are not obligated to each other, and we are not going to sit around braiding each other's hair and making smores."

Primo said, "We do not have to be assholes, either. It is fortunate that we all work well together, though."

Rana laughed and looked over her shoulder, catching Collin's gaze from across the fire. "I'll braid your hair if you want." She smiled broadly at Collin, and then turned to share the smile with Primo. Jerry laughed and Paula giggled.

Phil spoke up. "These storms can last for several hours. It might be a good time for us to take turns getting some sleep. I can be on first watch. In three hours, we can switch."

Rana nodded. "I will be on second watch." She slid over to Primo and asked, "Wanna be each other's pillows?" He returned her grin and they arranged themselves so that they were each lying with their head on the other's legs. A loud wind made the building groan and caused a draft in the air. The sulphurous odor it carried with it turned Rana's stomach, but she ignored it and focused on counting her breaths, slowly breathing in and out. Soon she was being shaken awake, Phil's hand on her shoulder. "Is it time for me to be on watch?"

Phil nodded and asked, "Can I lay with my head in your lap? I don't think Collin will want to offer me the same arrangement you had with Primo."

Rana laughed and said, "Sure but if I have to jump up real quick, I am just letting your head bounce back on the ground."

Phil smiled and stood, "Deal, as soon as I get back." He wandered over to a dark corner to relieve himself and Rana looked away, feeling a tug at her own bladder.

Jerry was sitting up on the other side of the fire where he had slept snuggled with her. Paula added some more wood to the fire and scooted back to settle into a similar, comfortable position against him. Collin was already snoring. Primo wasn't moving. Rana shrugged and left him alone thinking, "*Some people just really need their sleep. I wouldn't have guessed it of him, though. Like your brother. Your brother, too.*" She shook herself mentally and excused herself to the dark corner opposite where Phil had gone. Squatting over the edge of a step near the grating at the bottom, she looked around the walls as high up as she could see. She knew there were cameras in there with night vision lenses. Her privy wasn't as private as it might seem or she might hope. But at least she couldn't see them and she could pretend. Still, she concluded her task as quickly as she could and rejoined the others.

She sat and got herself as comfortable as she could, and Phil lay down, snuggling his head into her lap. The howling winds outside were coming in regular intervals. Rana counted them and the time between them and tried to use it as a way to keep herself awake and tell how much time was passing. After about two hours of counting the wind, Rana heard a rattling, rasping noise. It echoed off of the walls and made it difficult to locate the source. Jerry was looking around as well. Paula started awake and crawled forward to lay another piece of wood on the fire. "Where is it coming from?" Rana asked.

Jerry turned to look at Paula and gasped. "Primo!"

Rana turned to look at Primo and shoved Phil off her lap, scuttling sideways. Primo's eyes were open and bloodshot. The noise they were hearing became slowly louder and Rana could see that it matched the timing of Primo's breaths. Phil rolled over to push himself up on his side and blinked in sleepy confusion. Seeing Primo less than three feet from him woke him up quickly. He jumped to his feet and asked, "What the hell happened?"

Rana said, "I thought he was just sleeping."

As they watched, Primo's nose began to bleed and a bulging welt began to travel across his cheek and up toward his temple. As it made its way beneath his left eye, the eyeball ruptured, spilling clear liquid down the side of his face. Paula stifled a scream so it sounded like the muffled yelp of a small dog. The rasping sound of Primo's breathing gained a deeper, gruffer quality for one breath and then continued as before.

Phil leaned in closer and said, "I think it is a stem leech." Phil reached out to unfasten the belt from Primo's waist. "Primo will be dead in the next five minutes. He is paralyzed now, and I hope to God he can't feel anything." Phil looked over at Collin, incredibly, still asleep. "Paula, wake Collin and make sure he is okay. There are probably leeches in the shadows in here."

Paula reached out to shake Collin and jumped in startled surprise when he grumbled, "I'm awake." He pushed up on his elbow and sat up. "Well, is the storm over, yet?"

Rana strained her ears to listen for the storm. The winds had stopped while they were watching Primo. She hadn't heard the rain in a while, either. She walked down the steps and to the door, the metal grating under her feet

creaking. Near the door, the damp evidence of a small leak which had allowed some of the rain to seep under made her shiver. She wondered briefly if the other team had found a rain shelter. Snugging her gloves firmly over her fingers, she reached for the handle of the door and opened it a crack. Peering out from more than a foot back, she saw clouds rolling impossibly fast in the morning sky but no rain. She swung the door wide and called over her shoulder, "It's over." She heard the others scrambling quickly down the steps to follow her.

In Sight

They stepped out into the street and Collin led them off toward the extraction point. At the end of the street, blocked by a row of demolished buildings, they turned a corner and were faced with the Extraction Wall. "We have to go through a building or find a gate or something to climb over it to get to the final sector of the City."

Paula looked around and said, "That old tenement building." She pointed to a solid looking building that seemed to extend past the wall.

Rana nodded and began to walk toward the building. Jerry and Paula outpaced her and Phil walked at her side. Collin grumbled before taking up the rear. Once inside the building, they made their way down long corridors and stairs edging their way toward the back of the building. Finally, Rana looked out of a broken window and was able to see the Central City Park far below and five blocks further in. "Guys!" She waved them over and pointed. "The extraction point is in the park."

There was a collective sigh of relief and a few scattered laughs. Then Phil said, "Look."

Rana followed his pointing finger and felt a chill in her spine as she recognized two of the Orange Team members stumbling over a mound of rubble in the street below them. "Hurry!" She turned from the window and ran for the end of the hall. There was a fire escape exit there, and Rana hurled herself against it. The door screamed loudly as rusty metal hinges swung the door outward. Rana stumbled out with it and clung to the bar of the door handle as it swung her out over empty air. The landing at her door was gone, but the next one down was there and seemed to be solid. She stifled her yelp and swung her legs to try to make the door swing back toward the building. Having no luck at all she looked up at the faces of the people in the door, all mute and staring back.

She grinned, "*You are an idiot. You have nothing to lose. You have no chance. Everybody, shut up.*" She calmly shut a mental door on the voices in her head. With the next swing of her legs, she let go of the door. She landed hard against the side of the building, and the landing groaned with fatigued metal as it caught her. She looked up and said, loudly, "Ow!"

"Is it solid?" Jerry asked.

"Yeah. You guys lower someone down, and I will help guide them onto the landing."

Jerry pushed and positioned Paula to lower her out of the door. Rana caught her legs and helped her down. Then, they helped Phil. Rana left them to help the rest and followed the fire escape down two more flights to where there was a ladder that dropped down to the ground inside the wall. She peered down the street as far as she could see from her vantage and tried to locate the other team with no success. She called up to the others, "Hurry. We have to find them before they make it inside." She pushed the ladder and climbed down to the ground.

"*Are you prepared to kill them?*" The single thought from the lone voice in her mind found no answer.

Hurrying up to the edge of the building, she peeked around the side and looked toward where she had seen the others from the window. She almost missed the shadow that was retreating down an alley further down the street. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the rest of her team sprinting to catch up. She ran out and toward the shadow she had seen. Turning into the alley, she ran down it and slowed, searching. There was an impassable pile of rubble not far from the mouth of the alley. No doors broke the brick walls on either side. Scanning the alley, she finally saw it.

Rana ran toward the right side of the pile of rubble. A cellar door was there, half covered by the rubble. It was a double door. The uncovered half swung open easily, and Rana scrambled down inside. She could hear the faint sound of footsteps running farther away. She could also hear her teammates following her, so she kept going, not looking back. She chased the retreating footsteps and found no turn-offs and no alternate paths. She soon caught sight of someone's back as they turned a corner.

She could hear her team breathing heavily and running hard to keep up with her. She pushed herself to go faster and turned the corner. The floor fell away and she fell, sliding down a rough stone wall to land in a heap on top of a blond woman whose face was unrecognizably crushed. She rolled to the left and called out, "Be careful, the floor is broken!" Collin came to a rough stop on the dead woman just then. Rana reached over and tugged his arm. "Come one at a time so you don't land on each other!" Collin looked at her, frowning. Then his eyes went wide and he rolled toward her just in time to miss being Phil's landing pad.

Rana nodded at Collin as he reached for Phil and she looked around the room. There were two small openings in the wall behind where she had landed. The faintest light came from one, the other was pitch black. She scrambled into the light and crawled. She could immediately see the end of the tunnel and, soon, crawled out into a dimly lit courtyard area. Once open to the sky, it now was shaded by the wall of a neighboring building, which leaned across the opening, left to right, to precariously enclose the courtyard. A broken glass door on the opposite side, directly across from the tunnel from which she had emerged led into a wide lobby with tall, broken, glass walls on the opposite side. Through them she saw an open street. Standing completely still in the middle of the courtyard, half-way between her and the lobby, were three people from the other team.

The red head of Kevin turned to look at her with anguish in his eyes. "Don't move! Just stop!" His heavy breathing punctuated each word with desperate pleading.

Rana threw her arms out wide and heard her team fanning out beside and behind her. She scanned the scene trying to understand. Then she saw it.

The collapsed wall looming above them was from the upper stories of the building in which resided that beautiful wide lobby. That lobby was their hope for freedom; their way out. Through a fault in the concrete of the patio in front of the lobby, Rana could see that it sat atop an unstable, underground parking deck. That fault looked new. The woman standing with Kevin, Rana thought her name was Janice, shot a quick glance at Rana and her team before her eyes locked back on that fault line. Facing away from them, Janice said, "When we got close to the lobby, something underneath gave way. If it collapses now, it will bring the whole building down on all of us."

Rana felt the smirking savage that she had become straighten in her skin. She felt the struggle to remain rational and reasonable. Behind her, she heard the others debate aloud a parallel version of the argument she was having silently with herself. Kevin met her eyes and listened too. She was distracted for a moment as it seemed he could hear her private debate, but she shrugged it off. She didn't want to lose the argument because she wasn't paying attention. Then she realized, alarmingly, she already had. There were no voices. The thoughts were formless, more emotion than reason. The parts of her mind that always seemed to be whining and berating her and instigating doubt were muffled and she grinned crookedly at the mental image of them all hog tied and gagged in the corner of her mind.

Too many moments were passing. Whether they made a choice or not, the situation was not stable. She didn't know the right choice but she knew she didn't want to be literally crushed by indecision. Collin was arguing with Jerry when Rana began to run. She aimed straight for the door and didn't look back. She heard the curses behind her and then running feet. As she approached the glass doors, she put her arms in front of her face and didn't slow down. The small shards of the shattered glass still hanging in the frame fell and chimed in its destruction as she blew through. She could hear the groan of the collapsed building falling farther in and she kept going. She heard structures hitting the ground, impossibly loud. The sound reverberating so that she felt it in her legs and stomach and chest as the dust cloud began to billow around her. She ran harder, pulling her shirt collar up over her mouth and nose and squinting into the cloudy air. She focused on the wall of the building across the street.

The rumble of the collapsing building, the wind of the displaced air and the cloud of dust and grit chased Rana as she ran at full speed through the lobby and out the broken windows on the other side. Rana slammed into the wall of the building across the street and followed it, trying not to lose momentum as she let it guide her like a pinball until she felt it break and she slumped around the corner of the alley. She sank to her knees coughing. Phil was right behind her, looking behind him and asking, "Did either of them make it through the building before it collapsed?"

"No, it looks like the building took out the last of them." Jerry said as he and Paula dropped to their knees next to Rana.

"So that means we get out right?" Collin, leaning with one shoulder against the corner of the alley, looked carefully back at the cloudy rubble filling the street behind. Finally, he turned to the rest of the group and stomped over to where Rana knelt, dry heaving the grit from her lungs.

Rana closed her eyes and tried to stop breathing. Her lungs and her very veins were screaming for oxygen. She resisted it, spoke to it like a wayward child, "*Stop. Calm down. You can have more when you can mind your manners.*" That almost never worked. Miraculously, this time, it did. The momentary cessation of the moving irritants through her lungs allowed the spasms of coughing to calm. When she took a shallow, experimental breath, the muscles there began to flutter again, softly. She stopped breathing again. Slowly, she went through the steps of the exercise several more times. Her forehead began to sweat and her ears began to ring. But finally, she was able to take a breath without instigating more violent and useless coughing.

She looked up to see Collin looming, staring down at her. He was still angry. She grinned broadly, almost maniacally. "After what we just came through, do you think that anything any person can do to me is going to scare or intimidate me?" Collin blinked at her, startled. He brought himself back under control with a loud curse and turned to walk a few steps farther down the alley. Rana pushed herself to her feet and found Phil there offering her a supportive shoulder.

Rana put her hand on his shoulder and tried not to lean too obviously. She could feel her strength returning and the bruises on her elbows and left hip where she had slammed into the building wall. In a voice gauged to not strain her sore and gritty throat, she said, "We get to go to quarantine, now. Beating the other team was only half the challenge. We have to survive the diseases too. If we can make it through the two-week quarantine and come out clean, then we're free."

Phil nodded and pulled her arm fully around his shoulders, wrapping his own arm around her waist. "C'mon. We have to get to the extraction point door to begin quarantine. The longer we stay in the City, the more diseases we get exposed to."

Everyone breathed raggedly in the now clearing air and shuffled their feet as they followed Rana and Phil to the City Central Park. The abandoned piles of the detritus of civilization required both hands and feet free to climb over most of them. Rana had to step away from Phil at the first obstacle so that they could both make their way over it. While climbing over an abandoned bus further on, Jerry yelped and pulled his hand back. Broken glass in one of the window casings of the bus had left a deep gash in his palm. Paula tore his t-shirt into a long strip and wrapped it the best she could, and they continued on. In the next block, Collin, while ducking under the trailer on a big truck, misjudged the distance and cracked his head. The pain drove him down to his knees. Phil helped him up and, when Collin's vision had cleared, they continued again.

They were weary and hungry, and they all felt a distinct need for a hot shower. They didn't speak as they plodded relentlessly forward. Even stopping to help each other, aid was given and received in silence. Eventually, they reached the park gate. It was the one structure in the City that still looked reasonably secure and solid. Or unreasonably if you compared it to its surroundings. Rana had always thought it probably had something to do with the electrical charge running through the structure that kept animals and humans from touching it until a match was resolved. The threat of disease and the inescapable quality of the City were the two driving factors in guaranteeing a match would result in at least a fifty percent death rate for the participants. There was no way out if your teams joined forces, and eventually a disease would kill you all. But the match was over now. They had every right to expect the gate to open. Phil reached up, turned the latch on the gate and swung it open.

As they all filed through, the gate swung slowly shut behind them. A click and a hum resonating from the structure seemed to indicate the electrical charge had been reset and turned back on again. Rana sighed deeply and led them down the concrete path that cut through the hard-packed brown dirt. Just over a slight rise, a disturbingly small, gleaming, metal building rose from the ground and shined in the fading sunlight. Their pace didn't quicken, but it might have been described as more determined in its plodding rhythm. Rana reached the structure first and pushed the call button on the box by the door. "We won. Let us out."

The simple answer came in the form of the doors sliding open to reveal a small lit room with artificially cooled air. There was even a small couch against the back wall. Everyone walked in, almost not caring what was coming once they were inside. The doors slid shut behind them automatically. There was, of course, no other door or hall or window. The room began to move slowly and they understood it was an elevator. The show never televised this

part. Rana, her eyes getting heavy, thought the transport of the prisoners must be too boring for the show. Her vision faded and sleep washed over her. She struggled against it. Each time she fought her way back to consciousness, the weight of sleep dragged her under again.

She was completely uncertain how long their transport lasted, but when the motion stopped, sleep released her and the door opened again. A well-lit corridor with pleasantly-colored tiles along the floor and a neutral tan paint on the walls led them away. They walked calmly and unchallenged, following the smooth, spiraling curve of the hall. Finally, they turned a corner and found themselves in very comfortable living quarters.

Quarantine--DAY 1

There was fresh, hot food on the table in the main room and they all took seats around the table to eat. As they sat, a panel on one of the facing walls came to life and a kindly face with a reassuring smile appeared. "I am Cayla. I'll be monitoring your quarantine period. You will find plenty of food and drink in the kitchen. You will have to prepare your own from this point as no one is allowed to enter the living area until the quarantine is over. There are only a few rules.

"First, anyone who becomes sick or dies must stay in their own bedroom. You may visit each other but do remember that the sick could still infect you. If one of you dies, you will need to lock that bedroom from the outside and that will seal the ventilation off from the rest of the living quarters.

"Next, do not try to escape. No matter what happens. You are several hundred feet below ground and it is unlikely you will be able to reach the surface. If you did, you would find yourself back in the City Park.

"And lastly, remember, you are all still on the same team. If you were to get the misguided idea that harming any of the others would benefit you, be assured that it won't.

"Otherwise, I hope your stay here is pleasant. If you need anything that is not provided in the living area, just call me by pressing the green button on the wall panel. All you have to do is relax, take care of each other and survive the next two weeks. Anyone still living at the end of that time, will be free to go, richly rewarded for your efforts. Do you have any questions?" There was a general mutter of negative response. Cayla said goodbye and was gone.

Rana finished her second large plate full of food and said, "I'm going to pick a room. Does anyone object or care what room they get?"

Jerry and Paula glanced at each other and then at the others. Phil laughed, "I think we had all already decided to lock the two of you in the largest room." Paula blushed prettily beneath the grime on her cheeks.

Rana stood and left the table and chose the third room she came to after determining they were basically all the same. This one had lavender and lemon color accents, though, and she was particularly fond of that color palette. Closing the door behind her, she began to shed her clothing and found her way into a shower. She washed her hair and skin methodically four times before she began to feel clean. She stepped out of the shower and toweled slowly, feeling decadent after the deprivation of the City. Looking at her reflection for a moment, she wondered, amazed, "*Was it really only two days?*"

She spied her discarded garments on the floor as she left the bathroom and wished she had thought to shed them into a waste disposal unit instead of the floor. She shuddered at the thought of touching them again. Looking around, she found clothing, more like pajamas, and slippers. Among them, in the closet, she found wooden hangers. She used two of these to gather her discarded clothing between them like pincers. She threw each piece carefully into a hole in the wall. She pushed the cycle button on the panel and watched a metal door slide closed. She listened with satisfaction as an incinerator burned the clothing and the hangers to ash.

She opened her bedroom door onto the living space and scanned it. Only Phil was up, pattering in the kitchen. "What are you doing?" She noted his wet hair and the clean clothing that clung to his still-wet skin. As he turned to face her, she noted the red, raw look of his skin and wondered if it was sunburn, scalding from a too-hot shower or something he had picked up in the City.

"I'm taking inventory. I really like to cook so I thought I would make the effort for all of us." Rana nodded and smiled then waved goodnight as she yawned expansively and walked back to her room. Not bothering to close the door, she fell across the bed on her stomach and promptly fell asleep.

Quarantine--DAY 2

The next morning, Phil had a modest but filling breakfast on the table awaiting them when they awoke. They all sat quietly around the table looking across the spread of food at one another. The reserve was more than politeness or exhaustion. Collin, sprawling in his chair, laughed and bit into a bagel. "We are all wondering the same thing. Who is going to get sick and what will their symptoms be?" He sipped his coffee. "I for one feel great. I intend to stay feeling great. There is a small gym in that room on the end of that wall. I am going to go have a workout before lunch. And before that, I am going to do some reading. There is a packed bookcase in here too." The night's rest, food and a shower seemed to have brought the old Collin back in force.

Rana smiled wryly at his enthusiasm and everyone else seemed to breathe a little easier. Phil said, "One of us should monitor the conditions of everyone in here. There is a spare bedroom that can be used to conduct basic exams. Paula, aren't you a nurse?"

Paula nodded, "Six years, now. I can take standard exam info. Nothing invasive. Probably enough to let us know if any of us is coming down with anything."

Jerry kissed her forehead. "Perfect. I'll go first and then I'll help you examine yourself. Can we call the rest of you as we are ready?"

Rana, Collin and Phil nodded in agreement. Rana watched them walk together to the vacant room and wondered exactly what they would do about it if any of them turned up sick after all.

Rana's exam showed a model of health, as far as they could tell. She was five feet, six inches tall and weighed 170 pounds. She felt that was a little odd since it was 15 pounds heavier than she had been before all this began. But she shrugged it off. She could maintain a steady run on the treadmill with a heart rate never topping 120. The only complaints she had were a constant hunger and unrelenting tiredness.

Quarantine--DAY 5

Three days later, she was still able to maintain a very healthy heart rate but her weight had increased another seven pounds. She was still very tired and hungry all the time. Paula recommended she be quarantined to her room until they could determine if it was just a case of stress and fatigue or if it was a disease. Rana quietly acquiesced thinking she would be in there sleeping all of the time anyway. She spent the next several days taking long naps and reading in between. Phil brought her meals to her. He began bringing her double servings, because she would inevitably ask for more. It was when he came to clear away her lunch dishes and sit with her that he first noticed the bulging, red knot on her left side.

Calling for Paula, Phil helped Rana to lay flat and Paula did a gloved examination of the area. Gently palpating the raised area, she furrowed her brow and applied a strip thermometer directly to the skin. She used a stethoscope and pursed her lips as she listened. Finally, putting away her tools she said, "The area is hard and your ribs are actually bulging out there. I can feel them under the inflammation. Though, it is hardly inflammation, the temperature is barely a half-degree above normal. So I don't think you have any broken ribs. I am concerned that you punctured a lung or bruised one and it is swelling but I can't hear any stressed breathing sounds. I can't really hear your breathing at all, and I should be able to."

Rana looked up at Phil, a little amused in her self-concern. Occasionally, Paula would chatter on when she was talking, more to explain all of the variables to herself than to relay information to others.

Phil patted Rana's hand. "Paula, do you think we should worry?"

Paula gave her head a tiny shake and raised her eyebrows, turning her gaze back to Phil and Rana. She smiled and said, "I don't think so, not yet. I can't find any of the normal things to worry about and nothing abnormal to worry about is making itself available, so I would just watch it and be careful, maybe wrap the area with a soft bandage just in case it is bruised ribs or lung tissue, so you don't irritate it." She nodded decisively, picked up her things and smiled once more as she walked out the door.

Rana sighed and said, "Alright, please help me find a bandage to wrap it with. I will pretend I don't notice as you feel me up if you do the wrapping for me, too."

Phil looked at her, startled by the inappropriate comment, realized it was a joke, and blushed cherry red as he averted his gaze and began to choke on an embarrassed laugh.

Quarantine--DAY 6

By the next morning, the seemingly benign bruise-growth had become tender and sore, Rana was having trouble breathing while lying flat and could not lay on that side at all. She could not take herself from a lying position to sitting up or standing without extreme discomfort. Phil suggested that she allow him to arrange her bed so that she could sleep sitting upright. Rana agreed and found that it helped ease her breathing.

Her exhaustion and hunger were competing for precedence now, she found it difficult to stay awake long enough to eat much at once. Particularly, things that required a lot of chewing tended to also be time-consuming. Phil began to bring her soups and puddings and soft scrambled eggs and anything he could think of that was nourishing without requiring much effort. When he brought her lunch, Rana began to sob. Phil arranged her meal tray on the bed and took a seat next to her. "What's wrong? Is it your ribs?"

Rana, shook her head and tried to pull herself together. "I feel like one of those people that is stuck in their bed and relies on someone else to bring them food."

Phil cast his gaze to the floor and bit his lips. Rana began to chuckle, but it sent a shock of pain up her ribs and down her spine. Phil's gaze of worry examined everything he could see of her before he took her hand and held it between both of his own. "You can rely on me. I don't know exactly what is happening to you but we will figure it out and we will get you through it."

Phil sat with her just like that until she fell back to sleep.

Quarantine--DAY 8

Two days later, Phil brought Rana's breakfast and sat with her while she sipped weakly at the protein smoothie. He told her that Collin had been quarantined as well. "He began to hallucinate and lost all motor coordination. An hour later, he spiked a really high fever. The fever is even higher this morning and we can't get him to eat or drink anything."

Rana let her head fall back against the pillows that cushioned her in her upright position. "It sounds kind of like bone flu."

"That is what we suspect, too. If we are right, Collin will be dead by tomorrow night." Phil looked pained, "I feel so bad for him. I wish there was more we could do."

Rana shook her head, weakly and said, "You know there is nothing you can do but treat the symptoms and keep him quarantined. I feel bad for him, too."

Phil brushed the hair from the side of her face and asked, "And how are you doing?"

"Other than continuing to gain weight rapidly and watching the magical, expanding stomach-slash-ribs?" Rana's smile looked faint and forced. Phil returned it and nodded. Rana sighed and said, "At least I haven't developed any more symptoms of anything else."

Later that afternoon, Rana was nauseated when she awoke. She tried to stand, but it caused horrible pains in her abdomen and side. Phil helped her get to the shower and hesitated briefly before he shed his clothing and stepped in to help hold her up. He gently washed her hair and then used a soft towel to pat away the water before helping her get back into the bed.

Paula came to examine her and discovered a temperature of 101 and an elevated heart rate but wasn't able to do a full exam. Every time Rana tried to move, she felt excruciating pain. Jerry went to the bookshelf to try to find a diagnosis. None of them had heard of anything like it. Rana fell asleep, breathing hard.

Quarantine--DAY 9

Rana awoke to the sound of Jerry and Paula coughing violently. She heard Phil order them to their bed and promise chicken soup later if they would stay there. Phil came to check on her right after that and told her, "Collin is almost gone. We haven't been able to break his fever and he locked his gaze before lunch. He hasn't responded

to any of us since. Jerry and Paula, I suspect, have a parasite called lung worms. The coughing will probably start producing blood by tomorrow night. Oddly, lung worms can be killed by enough hot liquids. They don't cause a fever themselves but if I can convince them to stay wrapped up and drink hot coffee and soup all day, they might actually survive."

Phil took Rana's hand then and said, "You though... I found a reference in one of the books out there to Cloning Spores. Your symptoms match. If I am right, there is a clone growing in your abdomen, lodged just under your ribs and over your lungs. Its first two developmental stages are extremely rapid. It should reach the end of normal gestation in about another 48 to 72 hours. I could operate and remove it in half that time and it might survive. But if you can suffer through the next two days after that, however, it should be able to be taken care of like a normal child. This is a better option for you, because at that stage, I'll be able to better tell where the clone is exactly and make a smaller incision to remove it.

"If my diagnosis is correct, we will know when the clone is at the end of stage two because your extremities will begin to go numb from decreased blood supply. It will be very painful. You will not be able to breath well, and you will feel like you are starving. But it is only three or four days. And removing it too early would kill it. It is up to you but those are your options."

Rana could barely breath as it was. A deep breath felt as if she was moving and brought on those horrible pains. She thought for a moment about the clone, wondered what it would be like. Wondered if those strange jerking spasms she sometimes felt was the movement of the clone. "Three days is not so long. I can wait three days."

Quarantine--DAY 11

Rana could not catch her breath enough to eat. Phil held a glass with a straw to her lips, but she could not create enough suction to pull the thin liquid into her mouth. At lunchtime, Phil came in with her food in a turkey baster. What should have been a comical moment was robbed of its levity by the news that Collin had died. Phil had sealed the room.

Jerry and Paula were huddled together in a sweaty knot trying to kill their lung worms. They had taken to standing in a very hot shower and wrapping in several quilts alternately. The temperature controls in their room were set at 98 degrees and they were keeping each other on the hot liquids diet. Another day and they should be cured. Neither had coughed blood at all. It looked promising.

Phil patiently attempted to drop small quantities of the protein smoothie into her mouth with the baster. She managed to swallow nearly three ounces before she felt too breathless and began to lose conscious awareness. She did not realize when Phil kissed her forehead softly and left her to sleep.

Quarantine--DAY 12

The next morning, Phil came into Rana's room with a stethoscope but she couldn't get enough breath to ask why. He pressed it to her abdomen, off to the side, and silent tears poured from her eyes. The clone was taking up too much room, pressing her organs and ribs out of its way and stretching her skin. Phil patted her hand and her eyes widened in shock. Her hand was totally numb. She tried to tell Phil but at first she thought he was not going to understand. She tried to yell at him and the sickly croaking noise that escaped her lips got his attention. He went through a series of questions about hunger and thirst and cramping and bones breaking and then finally asked, "Are your hands numb?"

Rana blinked rapidly at him and closed her mouth to avoid accidentally crying. Her vision was getting spotty and she stared straight up at the ceiling as he tested each extremity. She could not feel her feet at all. Her hands were slightly numb but still had more sensation than her feet. She could at least tell when he touched her hands. Phil nodded and kissed her forehead. "I will remove the clone this evening. I would do it now but I have to prepare just a little. I've never done this before."

Rana blinked at him and tried to smile. A raucous from the other room sent Phil running and she drifted back into fitful sleep. Some time later, Rana awoke to the feeling of being gnawed in half. Her abdomen was stretched far too tight and she was starving. She couldn't get enough breath to scream, and she was so tired all she could think to do was lay back, relax and resign herself to the probability that this was going to kill her. Phil came in just a few moments later and gently stroked her head. "Jerry and Paula are dead. The lung worms died but they left a toxin

that was released as they decomposed. It happened rapidly and there were too many worms. The toxin fried their brains. Jerry was worst. He killed himself. Paula might have survived but when she saw Jerry dead, she killed herself too. Its just you and me and in a little while, the little clone."

Quarantine--DAY 13

Phil pressed a damp, rolled up cloth to her lips and squeezed. "This will numb everything. If anything twinges at all, not just hurt but any sensation, suck a few more drops out of that. I will try to make this fast." Rana locked her gaze on the ceiling and Phil rolled the sheets up to lay over her chest and expose her abdomen. She felt a pressure as she assumed he made his incision. She sucked another gulp out of the cloth. She had the strangest sense of being able to feel her body being wiggled and rocked but not really feeling it at all. Then, as through a dim fog, she heard a child whimper and cry. A small child about the size of an underinflated football with legs was laid between her arm and her body. She couldn't really turn her head to look. She eventually succumbed to unconsciousness before Phil announced he was done and all her organs appeared to be functioning if a little bruised.

The drug was wearing off and though she felt extreme pain and soreness throughout, it was nothing compared to what she'd just endured for several days. Phil left the room to go get her some food and drink and find something to dress the baby in. Rana squeezed the baby she still couldn't really get a good look at. She must have fallen back asleep. Phil was at her side. "You have got to eat. That was nothing less than a parasite eating off of you everything it couldn't get through food."

"Where is the baby? I want to see her."

"Rana, the baby is sleeping soundly in another room. I will bring it to you shortly; after you eat. First you have to understand, the clone spore was fertile before you ingested it. It is not a clone of you."

Rana stopped breathing for a moment. The shock and surprise were obvious on her face. "Who is it a clone of then?"

"One of the men on the other team. Apparently he ingested a spore before he died. Once he died, the fertile spore was released and found you."

"Do you know which?"

"Not yet. The baby is not old enough to really look like anyone yet. Cayla is having me send some samples to test the DNA. The clone's development will slow now that he is removed from you. If you promise to keep eating, I'll go get him."

Rana agreed and cleaned her plate while she awaited Phil's return. He came back carrying a bleary eyed little boy with dark auburn hair. Rana's breath caught. She recognized this little face. "That is Kevin. He was only about 20. We met him in the intake office. He was nice." Rana reached for the boy and remembered the short time she'd had to talk to Kevin. Before they had been assigned to opposite teams. The little boy snuggled into her and fell asleep quickly. Rana kissed his soft little head and vowed to take care of him.

Quarantine--DAY 14

Rana was still unable to move freely without excruciating pain from the bruising in her abdomen and ribs. She spent the morning and most of the afternoon cuddling and cooing at the baby between naps. Phil took the baby four times to measure his growth and development. By mid-afternoon, he brought the baby back to Rana and announced, "His growth has slowed to perfectly normal as far as I can tell. He measures about the size of a three to three and a half month old infant. None of his measurements have been off since I examined him this morning."

Rana smiled and stroked the furry red top of the baby's head. "Did you feed him?"

Phil nodded, "Little monster ate a whole cup of mashed-up milk and bread and plums."

Rana snuggled the baby and listened to him coo.

Phil said, "I used the call button and talked to Cayla. I have been keeping her updated about the events down here, they already know of course, but I wanted to make sure. She said the baby and you both surviving is a miracle. No one has ever survived a Clone Spore infection before. She said she hasn't ever heard of anyone gestating a spore from someone else."

Rana laughed softly, "Neither have I. Of course, I don't know everything. Part of the reason I ended up here was hoping I would be able to take some of the money and travel a little. See if there is anything left in this world worth looking at."

Phil nodded. "I went to college for a year. I flunked out. Went to work as a mechanic actually and then as a chef's assistant. Up until five weeks ago, I was a sous chef for a big fancy place in Manhattan."

Rana focused her gaze on the baby. "I went in to cure debt and depression. How about you?"

"I need an operation, intestinal... Can't afford it and I'll die anyway without it. I figured, why not? At least in here, if you die it's relatively fast. If I make it out, I'll be able to get any treatment I need or want and never have to worry about it."

"It will be nice to be so much better off... Not have to worry all the time." They smiled at each other and got quiet for a while. Rana eased herself over a little in the bed and Phil stretched out next to her. Rana laid her head on his shoulder and they watched the baby fall asleep.

After a few minutes, Phil asked, "Are you going to keep him?"

Rana laughed quietly and said, "I'd be insane not to. After going through all that pain to get him here..."

Phil grinned and said, "Well he needs a name then."

Rana smiled down and said, "Monster?"

Phil laughed and then mock frowned at her, "Cayla said Kevin's last name was Marshall. How about Marshall?"

Rana nodded, looking into the tiny face and remembering the scared face in that building, "That fits. Marshall Stuart. He gets my last name. Kevin is not here to argue, and Marshall Marshall would be stupid." She laid her head back against his shoulder and drifted off to sleep.

Phil woke her for dinner that night and took one last set of measurements from the baby to make sure his growth was normalized. After dinner, Rana stood and walked slowly to the couch in the common room, with less help from Phil than they had thought she would need. Phil surmised, "The rapid growth hormones from Marshall probably effected your healing as well. I would be surprised if you aren't up to snuff by the welcome luncheon tomorrow."

A new message from Cayla came in to them late that evening. "The two of you have survived. Congratulations. You are scheduled to be retrieved at 10:00 a.m. tomorrow." Her eyes narrowed and focused on the infant in Rana's arms. "This however is a complication. The computer system is programmed to scan you for identity matching. No member of the opposite team is allowed to leave. We recognize that this is a distinct person, different from the one who died on the other team but the computer may not. In fact, we have had to shut down the scanning devices in the living quarters for a maintenance cycle just to make sure it did not attempt to take action against you all. You will have to stay there until we have cleared the exit procedures. We only have another 14 hours before the cycle ends and the scanners come back online. We do apologize for the inconvenience, but this is a new situation. One we never expected. For all of your safety, please remain calm and I will call back when there is news."

The message screen flickered off and Rana sat staring down at Marshall. Silent tears rolled down her cheeks. She looked up at a very concerned Phil and asked, "Do you think they are going to let us out? Is this some kind of set-up to keep anyone from winning this game? There hasn't been a single survivor in three years."

Phil started shaking his head slowly then more violently. "No, it's just a complication. If they were going to kill us, they wouldn't warn us. They'd just vent the place with gas. Stay calm. They just have to figure out how to clear Marshall in the system."

Rana looked back down at the sleeping infant, breathing heavily. She suddenly thrust him away towards Phil, barely giving him the chance to catch the child as she let go and scrambled to her feet. "Take it! Take it! It is going to kill me!" She ran into her room and slammed the door behind her.

Phil was baffled and bewildered. He took the baby and laid him in a soft bed on the floor in the corner. He found Rana curled in a tight ball on her bed and sobbing. "Rana, calm down. It is not over, don't give up. You were

the one who was so determined and who fought so well. You were the one who led the rest of us when we couldn't decide the right action. Come on now. Let's get some sleep and I'm sure they will have it figured out by morning."

Rana listened to Phil and felt his caressing touch on her hair. She snuggled her cheek against his thigh and breathed deeply the scent of him. Phil tucked her into bed, murmuring nonsense and kind things to her. He stayed to caress her hair as she drifted off to sleep. Rana found calmness in her mind and stillness in her body and fell quickly to sleep, listening to the voices in her head listing out her options.

Quarantine--DAY 15

The next morning, Rana awoke to the smell of breakfast cooking and went into the common room to find out if there was any news. "How are you today?" Phil asked. Rana nodded quietly and looked around. Phil placed a small bowl with a brightly colored mash on the counter, "Will you feed this to Marshall, please, while I finish cooking?"

Rana asked, "Have you heard anything?"

Phil shook his head. "It's only 8:00 o'clock. They have two hours before our scheduled release and it may take a couple hours longer than that to get the system back up. We might as well just relax."

"I can't feed that thing. It is going to get us killed." Her voice was quiet but firm. Rana turned and walked back into her room with her head hanging low and shut the door. She sat against the far wall on the floor and hugged her knees. Her mind was racing and she walled off that part of her that was a breaking heart. She had gone through so much in her life. She had learned the hard way that there was no help for people like her. Humanity is cruel and cold and society is careless, like a machine. She had tried to just quit, take an emergency exit out of life. This place seemed like the perfect option at that point. Win and be care-free and happy for the rest of your life or die trying. *"Well, life managed to screw us on that one too, didn't it? Did you ever really think it was going to work out? I expected to die in the first two hours. But you didn't, and you got this miracle baby out of the deal. Some miracle. The little miracle that is going to convince the security system to kill us all? Yes."*

Rana blinked at herself. The voices had all just stopped after that one little word. It was as if she had thought her way all the way around and back to the exact same place she had started from. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back. *"I am not done trying yet. Still alive, still trying."* With that she stood and walked to her door, pulling it open a crack.

Rana heard the speaker in the common room projecting Cayla's voice. She listened. "...stay there until then. This might be your wiser course of action."

"I will talk to Rana about it and call you back." Phil responded and turned off the call.

Rana walked into the room and scanned it for Marshall. "Where is he?"

Phil narrowed his eyes at her, "Are you feeling better?"

Rana nodded, "I have pulled myself together. I am as sane as I ever was. I am ready to work on getting us all out safely."

Phil nodded and walked to his room to retrieve the baby. "Cayla has two options for us. Neither are exceptionally wonderful in my opinion." Phil handed Marshall to Rana and sat next to them on the sofa. "Whatever we decide to choose, they need to know in the next forty-five minutes. That's when the system cycle ends.

"Our first option is to stuff Marshall into the oven here and leave when the doors open. The system will log us out as we pass through the corridor to the outside. At that point the staff that resets the quarters can come in and retrieve Marshall."

"Why the oven?" Rana was befuddled.

"Because that is the one place big enough for Marshall that the system doesn't scan. If, by some chance, the system detected him, the oven would shield him from the gas long enough to vent it back out once we pass the scan in the corridor."

"Okay," Rana nodded, "That sounds plausible. What is the downside other than having to tell Marshall when he is older that I once shoved him into an oven?"

Phil brushed the hair on Marshall's head. "We would have to all move very quickly. The oven is air tight."

Rana kissed the top of Marshall's head and asked, "What is the other option?"

Phil took a deep breath and sighed. "We could walk back out through the City."

Rana's eyes widened and she gasped. Holding Marshall protectively against her chest, her eyes flitted quickly back and forth as she remembered all of the dangers of the City. "No. If we were cornered by a Pack or if a Swarm... No. We will just have to move as fast as possible." Rana stood and strode quickly and confidently to the call panel. She pushed the call button and cuddled Marshall while she waited for Cayla to answer.

"Rana! Oh, I am very glad to see you are feeling well." Cayla looked genuinely relieved. "Have you made a decision?"

Rana nodded. "Yes. We will try walking out through the corridor. Can your crew be standing at the scan point so they can move in as soon as the system deactivates? Would it be faster if I ran back from that point myself? What can we do to ensure that Marshall survives the interval? How long is the corridor?"

Cayla had begun nodding as soon as Rana began speaking. "The corridor is quite short. The scan point is only one hundred meters or so beyond the door of the quarantine chambers. The problem is that the system cycle is going to have to end no less than thirty minutes before the unlocking sequence will begin. It is a security measure built into the system and we cannot override it. It will be best if my team is waiting for clearance and they retrieve Marshall. If he has suffered any ill effects of the situation, they will be able to tend to him. There is a medicine that you should administer to him before the system cycle ends that will put him into a deep sleep and slow his need to breathe." Phil nodded and listened carefully to the instructions on combining ingredients to create the anesthesia for Marshall. Rana busied herself with feeding the baby and bathing him and calming him. She was filled with the most intense apprehension she had ever experienced.

Phil approached a short time later with a medicine dropper. Rana took it from him and cooed at Marshall until he drank every drop. The three sat on the sofa awaiting the signal. The call screen came to life and Cayla informed them, "The cycle ends in five minutes. We are displaying a countdown on the screen."

Rana shifted the thoroughly unconscious Marshall in her arms as she stood and walked into the kitchen area. Phil followed carrying a thick but small blanket. He opened the oven door and removed the racks. He began to line the bottom of the oven with the blanket and suddenly stopped in his task. He glanced at the countdown clock reading aloud, "Two minutes." He began to bustle into action. When he had finished padding the inside of the oven as best he could, he pulled the oven out of the cabinet as far as he could and reached behind it. He felt around for a moment and pulled hard. Then he stood up straight, pushed the oven back in place and checked the time again. He turned to Rana and said, "In he goes." He gently took Marshall from Rana and tucked him into the little oven nest.

Rana gasped and said, "Wait!" She turned and ran into what had been the makeshift clinic and came back quickly with a small oxygen bottle and mask in hand. She was awkwardly juggling the bottle and mask while trying to twist the regulator. Phil grinned as she handed him the bottle. She pushed the mask to her face and confirmed that the oxygen was flowing, slowly, from the bottle.

"Oh, good thinking!" Phil tucked the bottle into the space under the rack on which Marshall was nested and laid the mask on the rack next to his face.

Closing the door firmly, he led Rana to the call panel and reported. "He is in."

Cayla nodded and asked, "What did you do?"

The timer struck zero and there was a significant lack of any noise or event to mark the return of the bio-scans which so endangered their lives. Three pairs of eyes were trained on the oven for the length a single, slow breath. Phil finally turned back to Cayla and said, "I unplugged it. Then Rana thought of putting an oxygen bottle in with him. It isn't much but maybe it will help."

Cayla nodded again. "I am restarting the timer so you will know the moment the door opens." The following half-hour was tense and dragged on in Rana's mind forever. Finally, the outer door clicked and she and Phil ran through. At what seemed an interminable distance later, men in bio-hazard protective suits passed them running the other direction. Phil grabbed Rana's arm and propelled her forward and out into the shower-lock. Twenty minutes later, one of the team came walking through the shower-lock door holding a drooping Marshall. Rana scooped him

up and quickly and intently confirmed he was alive. Through joyful tears she and Phil helped each other and the baby get through the decontamination showers and out the other side. They began to laugh through their sobs as they donned new clothing.

There were lawyers and awards and television cameras and crowds. Then, hours and hours later, after the doctors had declared they were all healthy and the lawyers had gathered their release forms, and the compensation checks and packages and been signed over, Phil and Rana sat quietly in the floor of their temporary apartment, on a soft and fuzzy rug with Marshall babbling and playing between them.

Phil looked up and smiled as he took in Rana's face, flushed with health and smiling at the baby between them. He sighed and smiled, contentedly, and said, "Marry me."

Rana looked up and met his gaze, "Absolutely." she said quietly and took his hand in one of hers. They leaned closer and exchanged a soft, lingering kiss. They shared a long gaze into each other's eyes, then both bent their heads to look down at Marshall.

Marshall babbled up at the two of them. They laughed softly and babbled back.