

ARIANA

Ariana jolted awake.

“Sorry!” Nia tightened her grip on the steering wheel.

“You almost killed me!” Ariana sighed and looked out the window, taking in the scenery. She had never seen such a perfect example of a golden hour. The sun reflected off the leaves onto the yellow, dried up grass by the field they were driving by. She could smell the barn before she saw it. Old stale hay, rusted metal and dust.

“So,” Nia interrupted her train of thought. “do we have a specific plan for the barn?” They had to leave the town because news about scientists creating deadly diseases, outbreaks and radiation levels made Ariana’s stomach churn whenever she thought about it. Nia suggested they should move to her family's old barn and give it a makeover, and after years of friendship she couldn’t say no. They had all the materials and time needed to get it done, except for a plan.

“We’ll figure it out once we get there.” Ariana shrugged. They chatted some more about their plans, occasionally admiring the view. Ariana sighed, leaning back in her seat closing her eyes, there was a long night ahead of her.

NIA

Nia opened the trunk of the car, picking up another box of supplies. Seeing the barn again brought back memories of her childhood, playing in the barn with Ariana when they were younger. Now seeing them together back at the barn made her smile.

“Wait up!” She huffed, hustling over to Ariana. They picked the rest of the boxes and put them down in the barn.

“What should we start working on now?” Nia said, still out of breath.

“We should start by cleaning out the barn so we have room to put things down. And get rid of that weird smell.”

Nia stretched, flipping her long black hair behind her shoulder.

“This is going to take a while.”

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Ariana had been stressed out the day they arrived at the barn. She'd been avoiding thinking about it for as long as she could, but the thought kept creeping into her mind. She knew the reason they came here was to get away from the labs, radiation, and sickness they had heard about. She was trying her best to sugar coat it as best as she could but it got hard. And laying on an old sleeping bag staring up at the ceiling with all the time she needed to think didn't help. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, the strange smell she'd first encountered in the barn filling her nostrils.

NIA

“There are some people that live around here. There's a girl that lives down the street but is making friends right now a good idea?”

“I think it would help us,” Ariana shrugged. “the more the merrier.”

Nia paused, crossing her arms.

“If you say so, but I'm fine with it being just us. You're basically my sister.”

“Alright, well, where does she live?”

“Just down the road.” Nia exhaled sharply, noticing the barn's walls they still had to clean. She didn't want to see anyone right now, but Ariana had a point, they needed better shelter.

“We'll go there tomorrow.”

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The next day they walked down to the girl's house, following a dusty path. It was a two-story house with a small garage that was missing a door. The girl opened the door and they introduced themselves.

“Yeah, we're from down the street.” Ariana explained.

Nia raised an eyebrow at the girl standing in the door frame, her scruffy faded blue hair contrasting her dark stare.

“Any reason we can't know your name,” Nia crossed her arms, her eyebrows furrowed.

“M is nice and all but it's a little weird.”

Ariana glared at Nia.

“Because I can.” M frowned.

“Anyways,” Ariana rolled her eyes. “it's nice to meet you M.”

M shrugged and walked into the house.

“So,” Ariana said, following after her inside leaving Nia standing by the door. “do you live here by yourself?”

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Two days had passed. She'd gotten a lot closer with M, learning about how her parents leave for work so she's alone, and her love for comic books. She thought M was cool, Nia didn't. *She's probably jealous that I'm getting closer with someone else, after all we've been friends for a while.* She shook her head, clearing her thoughts. Today Nia and her were spending the night in a house not far from the barn, next to M's. She said the owners haven't been there in months so it was fine to stay in. *It was something to look forward to, and it wouldn't have that rotting smell the barn had.*

“Well, here we are.” Nia said, putting the box she was holding down and stepping inside the house. *It looked almost identical to M's house, but had a cloudy gray color instead of white.* Ariana sighed, relieved to be in a place with a working sink and unharmed windows. They headed upstairs and entered the bedroom. *It looked like any standard bedroom, white walls, wooden floors, and a bunk bed in the corner of the room. They set the boxes down on a small dresser by the bed.*

“M was right, the owners really haven't been here in a while, there's only a bed and a dresser in here!” Ariana exclaimed, sitting down on the bottom bunk.

“The only truth she's ever told.” Nia mumbled under her breath, turning away from her.

“What is your problem,” Ariana questioned, *her eyebrows furrowed.* “why don't you like her?”

Nia whipped around.

“Are you kidding? You've known her for two days and you fully trust her? She hasn't even given us her real name!” Nia raised her voice.

“Why are you mad about me making a friend,” She paused before exhaling sharply. “this whole week has been super stressful with the barn and not to mention some outbreak going on right now?!”

There was a moment of silence before Nia stormed out of the room. Ariana put her head in her hands, sighing.

NIA

She slammed the front door, walking hastily to the back of the house. She decided to head to the barn to get her mind off of things. Even though she didn't know what caused her to feel so angry, she hated how easily Ariana trusted and made friends with people after it took them years to be so close. Ariana may have been right, she has been feeling weird this whole week. She felt so angry and had the need to express every ounce of emotion she felt. She either felt dizzy, angry, or sick. She always felt hungry but nothing she ate satisfied it. She sighed, looking up at the barn. She walked further, following the path in between M's house and the woods. She was about to turn back as it was getting dark, but something caught her eye. It was a large wooden shed with two large dumpsters behind it and a pile of old metal and wood parts. She walked closer, breathing in a familiar scent.

“Maybe those could be useful.” She shrugged, heading towards the pile of scraps, searching for nothing in particular. As she was looking at the parts, the familiar smell grew stronger. She felt a presence, and that mysterious hunger at her stomach. She heard a strange noise coming from somewhere behind the shed, causing her to freeze. She stepped closer to the shed, letting curiosity win. As she was about to turn the corner she saw something splattered

across the ground. She heard a low growl and what sounded like bones cracking. She felt every hair in her body stand up. She had no choice but to slowly turn to the cause of the noise.

ARIANA

It was getting dark and Nia wasn't back. She sat at the small dining table with M in their newly found residence.

"She'll come back soon, she probably needs some fresh air." M assured Ariana, grabbing an old glass from a cabinet and pouring herself some water.

"I hope I didn't make her too angry. It's just she's been acting weird," Ariana said, anxiously tapping her nails on the table. "I can't blame her, this whole thing has been stressful."

"Hey Ari," M turned to face her. "Something tells me you don't fully grasp the urgency of the country's situation right now."

Ariana raised an eyebrow. Just as she was about to say something the door swung open. That rotting smell filled her nose once again. Nia barged in and shut the door behind her, then collapsed on the floor sobbing. Ariana jumped up and ran to her side.

"Nia, What's wrong!?" She shrieked, holding onto her. Nia explained between sobs and gasps of air that she witnessed something horrifying. M stood back, watching them in shock. Ariana led her over to the couch and helped her sit down. She called M over to bring her some water.

That whole night had gone by in a flash. She lay awake in the bunk bed, this time without Nia on the top bunk. Her head was spinning, only now processing the situation. What had Nia seen? Her mind raced, the closing of the front door snapping her out of it. Was M leaving the house? She decided to get a glass of water to clear her mind. She walked downstairs, the whole

house smelled like a corpse. Before she had time to think about it something shiny caught her eye, lying on the floor near the couch. She continued down the stairs, heading towards the couch.

“Hey, isn’t that Nias ring she always wears?” She squinted her eyes, the dim kitchen lamp being her only light source. Her eyes widened, her stomach twisted. Not far from the ring lay something disfigured and covered in blood, the missing part to the ring. Nias hand. The sound of lips smacking and tearing came from the opposite side of the couch. Ariana used every muscle in her body to look away from the floor. The only thing she could make out was something, someone in the corner of the room eating something, the sounds of flesh ripping apart told her it wasn’t just any midnight snack. She practically exploded. She shrieked, howling, running out of the house as fast as possible. Tears burst from her eyes, pouring down her cheeks. She ran towards the barn which was now engulfed in flames. She could hear her heartbeat as she kept running, her feet hitting the ground hard. She made it to the barn, falling to her knees. The barn was now in flames, but she didn't have time to think.

“NO!” She pleaded, crawling towards the barn, her tears hitting the grass below her. She couldn't think. She felt the heat from the fire on her face. All she could do was cry, watching the thing they had been so excited about burning down in front of her.