



Bella Hangnail

EXCLUSION

SHE WAS EIGHTEEN IN THE PASSENGER SEAT of the Toyota Avalon as it bumped and swerved through twisting dirt roads towards the outer edge of the Zone. The trees clustered close together and watched the dusty black car as it passed by. Her stomach growled.

“Hey, give over the damn Chex Mix.”

The half-empty bag landed in her lap. Pigeon didn't take his eyes off the road, which was turning treacherous the closer they got. He tightened his grip on the wheel, exhaling the stress through his nose.

The cheap, salty food wasn't filling but it took her mind off of her growing anxiety. She glanced at the rearview mirror above her, expecting to see National Guard tanks emerge from the underbrush.

Pigeon noticed the nervous look. “Hey, we're all good here, girl. We passed them checkpoints a while back. They don't patrol these roads

unless someone's gone to ground." He put his hand on her knee and squeezed. She liked it when he did that, even if it didn't help.

Three months since they started dating, and she was intoxicated by him. They'd met at the community college where she studied and he smoked cigarettes in the parking lot. Early on, he'd invited her over to see the basement where he slept and he'd read her some of his writing about the Zone, as if he'd written it for her. And that was that.

Pigeon pulled the car roughly off the road into a ditch and cut the engine. She suddenly became aware of the ocean of sound swelling around them, birdcalls and insects and the distant strangled yelp of a coyote. "This is the spot," Pigeon said, unbuckling. "We gotta continue on foot."

Ahead of them, the forest grew tight and tangled with laurel thickets like barbed wire, the outgrowth of an old nature preserve from before the blast. The Iowa Exclusion Zone lay beyond. She grabbed her pack from the trunk of the car and counted off its contents on a mental list.

She'd told her mom she was going on a camping trip. They wouldn't be coming back for at least a few days, Pigeon had said. And there was no food or drink to be had in the Zone, not if you hoped to see your fiftieth birthday.

Pigeon took a few steps into the woods, then turned back, his own pack hanging off his shoulder. "Emily, you coming? Don't be getting cold feet, now."

She looked back at the road. No tanks. Not yet, anyway.



She was twenty-six, and one of her charges was getting on her nerves as they hiked the familiar trails towards the Zone's perimeter fence, the dusky sky visible through the treetops.

"Hatchet, what do you mean you haven't read Permanent Exclusion?" the kid was saying. "You're a stalker, I thought it was like, the foundational text."

She snorted. “As if. It’s rambling and self-important, and glosses over all the people who died before the establishment of the Zone, not to mention the trauma of the evacuees.” They had paid her to sneak them in; that didn’t mean she had to be friendly.

Behind her, Zeke snapped his fingers. “So you have read it!” he crowed.

“I read an...early version, okay? That was enough.” Ahead the trees thinned a bit, and she led them past thickets of elderberries to the electrified perimeter fence, a hulking metal thing that curved wickedly outward at the top and cut deep through the woods in either direction.

She turned to the three figures behind her. “Okay, listen up. A zap from this fence won’t kill you, but it’ll sting like a motherfucker. This fence is mainly a big tripwire alarm. If one of us sets it off, they’ll be able to pinpoint our location.”

One of the others spoke up, the larger, bespectacled one with a chin-strap beard. “I don’t know if I can climb that thing.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get through just fine. Follow me.” She led them

to a creekbed that still hosted a trickle of brown water. The fence had been built when the small river ran higher, its electrified wires strung at the old waterline. The ghost of a creek, friendly to travelers and stalkers alike. She got down on her hands and knees. “Through here. Watch your extremities.”

Her charges followed behind as she carefully avoided the electrified wires and the fence posts sunken into the creek, crawling through the narrow gap. Once safely past, she turned around to watch the three men take their first steps into the Zone.

Zeke came first, scrabbling and careless, all eager teenage fervor. The larger man, Bancroft, followed, sweat beading in his receding hairline, panting breaths fogging up his glasses. He stood up and glanced around at the trees as if he'd expected them to be bright purple.

There was a sharp discharge of electricity and a cry from the creekbed. Hatchet dove forward and helped her third client clamber out, a thin, wiry man named Shahar. “I can't feel my hand,” he moaned, clutching his left arm.

“It’ll come back. We need to move.” She hurried them into a clearing fifty meters past the border and pointed to an outcropping of rocks in a small gully, the stones blanketed with graffiti. “Get under there, quickly now.”

They hustled down into the ravine and hunkered down in the scraggly bushes. Shahar massaged his hand and groaned. Hatchet didn’t dare to breathe.

A few minutes later, the low juddering of a helicopter swept through the trees, growing louder until the dead leaves in the gully danced. A spotlight crept through the forest. She held her charges back from looking up at the chopper, their ribs vibrating with the din of the rotors.

An eternity passed and the spotlight moved on. Hatchet looked up at the hostile sky. “We’re not safe here. Let’s put some distance between us and the fence before we sleep.”

“I’m sorry, everyone,” said Shahar, nursing his numb hand.

She put her hand on his shoulder and looked in his weary eyes. “It’s not your fault, man, it could’ve been any of us. Roll of the dice.” He didn’t seem reassured, but he said nothing and they continued on, into the Zone and the approaching night.



Pigeon woke her with a kiss on her forehead. “Hey, Em. Sun’s rising.” She opened her eyes, expecting to see her bedroom ceiling back home. She saw instead the rotting timbers of a barn they had bedded down in for the night, a few miles past the perimeter of the Exclusion Zone. They were really here.

She sat upright on her sleeping pad and stretched, enjoying the near-unbroken silence. The only sounds she could hear were birds singing in the trees outside and the scribbling of Pigeon’s pen as he wrote in a heavily stickered composition notebook. He stared out the broken shut-

ters of a window and wrote a few more lines, then put his pen down and cleared his throat.

“The Exclusion Zone: a hundred square miles of twisted apocalyptic beauty, in sharp contrast to the humdrum Midwestern dust bowl states surrounding. Thirteen years ago the meltdown of the Cedar Rapids nuclear plant caused around 200 times the radioactive payload of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to run rampant in the Iowan countryside, not twenty miles from where I sit now.”

He took a breath and continued excitedly. “Once its human inhabitants were evacuated, the Zone became a refuge for flora and fauna long thought extinct in these parts. Herds of elk now roam through cornfields liberated from the tyranny of monocultures and pesticides, and buffalo have returned to graze on irradiated wheat and grain. I sit in the valley of Death as it teems with virulent life and I wonder if the real disease is the civilization we’ve built. What the world might look like if all lands were free from our influence and allowed to thrive wildly again! Here in the

Exclusion Zone, I see a preview of the oncoming post-human Earth and I celebrate its arrival.”

He snapped the book shut and grinned at her. “What do you think?”

Emily smiled at her boyfriend. “It’s great. I love the way you put words together.”

They fired up Pigeon’s propane stove in the barn and cooked their first Zone meal, two bags of freeze-dried mac ‘n cheese. “Just add water!” Emily said, frowning at the withered clumps of white goop that clung to the pasta on her fork. It tasted even worse than it looked. She didn’t complain.

In the daylight, the Zone was every bit as beautiful as Pigeon had described, a vast prairie of tall grasses rolling with the breeze. Bright buttercups and golden-green stalks of wild corn grew every which way, slowly encroaching on old dirt roads that had once demarcated rural Iowan farms. Many families of birds sang overhead in oak and hickory trees, not knowing to be afraid of her. She followed Pigeon down a grav-

el road, away from the barn and the distant treeline they had hiked out from the night before.

He looked back at her and smiled toothily. “I’m so glad you’re here, Emily. What I wouldn’t give to be in your shoes, seeing this place for the first time.”

“Well, actually, it’s not really my first time. I grew up kinda near here. I guess I didn’t tell you.” Her feet dragged in the dust and she felt awkward for bringing it up.

“Wait, how long ago?”

She thought back. “I guess I was born here. I don’t remember anywhere else, before the accident.”

Pigeon stopped and looked at her. “So you were living out here when—”

Emily grimaced. “Yeah. We got evacuated along with everyone else. I barely remember, it was so fuckin’ long ago.” The snow falling in summer, glazing the windowsill, chalky and bitter on her tongue, she had

giggled and shrieked with delight and run to show her best friend. Alicia had been her name, maybe.

“Christ, you never told me that! What was it like?” Pigeon had a look on his face almost like hunger. She wondered if everything she said to him now would end up in the zine he was writing.

“Not very incredible at all, honestly. They put us on some buses and we never came back. That’s basically the whole story.”

They passed an elk lounging in the grass by the side of the road. It looked at them dully, unbothered by their presence, its face a mass of swollen tumors.



Bancroft had a camera out and was filming the herd of buffalo.

Hatchet had gone to pee on a bush, and when she returned, the large man was muttering into a microphone, panning the camera around to

take in the prairie around them and the small army of bison that pawed at the dirt and snorted.

She slapped the device out of his hand. Its lens shattered on a rock. “The fuck are you doing?”

Startled, he squared up his burly frame against her slight one. “Why’d you do that for, huh?”

Her voice dropped an octave. “We are, right now, committing a federal crime, and you’re filming it? Video evidence alone could send us all to jail for a long time.”

“I can’t—I won’t—” he started to say. He sighed and picked up the broken camera. “It’s just that people deserve to know that this is being kept from them.”

“What are you talking about? It’s a disaster area.”

“Yeah but—” and his tone became conspiratorial— “is it? Is there actually, probably, any danger still? Or is that just what the National Guard is telling us?”

Hatchet laughed out loud to the sky. “You think the government is lying about the radiation? You think I’m fucking lying to you?”

“I’m not calling you a liar,” he backpedaled. “But it’s hard times for good, honest farmers out there.” He bent down and scooped up a handful of dirt and weeds. “Look how much is growing in this dirt. How come good folks out there are scraping dust and shit when this is here?”

“Because it’s radioactive,” Shahar spoke up. “You eat anything grown here, so close to an ongoing nuclear meltdown, you’ll get cancer and very probably fucking die.”

“Alright, look, pal,” Bancroft was flared hot now, “you don’t get to tell me shit about shit, alright? I’m a journalist, I run a website for concerned citizens. Why is the government so afraid to let people in here? People ought to know, I’m breathing the air, I feel fine. No fucking radiation sickness for me.”

“Look at the bison,” Hatchet interrupted. She pointed out a few. “See that one, with the white spots? Partial albinism, a birth defect. That

one's got horns that are growing into his jaw. That'll kill him in a year or two. Probably half these sorry creatures are blind from cataracts. They've all got tumors. And these are the ones that survived to be born."

That shut everybody up. They all looked out at the doomed animals, harrumphing and snorting and stamping in the dry prairie grass.

"If it's so bad," Bancroft said, "why do you come here?"

Hatchet turned away. "It's a job, that's all. Keep that fucking camera off."

They waded through tall grasses, stopping to dislodge ticks and burrs from their clothing. Crumbling farmhouses leered, staking claims they could no longer enforce, their silos flaccid and rotten, leaning loose with the jagged wind. Between stringy clumps of sickly grass, a newborn bison pawed against its mother's dry teats, unable to walk on unnaturally segmented legs, six pairs of grotesque kneecaps twisted painfully beneath its bloated weight. Shahr's jaw dropped as they walked by it. He looked nauseated.

The sun hit its zenith and Hatchet stopped to tie up the trailing edges of her pale blond hair, sweating. Zeke saw the back of her neck and whistled. “Nice ink!” She smiled at him, and he fell into step beside her. “What’s it mean?”

“A secret door, I guess.” The tattoo was an ornate black-and-gray design of a door, slightly ajar, darkness beyond. A metal-bolted frame inscribed with a symbol sometimes associated with stalkers and squatters. “I got it when I was about your age. My thought process was, there’s secret doors into everything if you look hard enough.”

He nodded gravely. “Like, free movement. Fuck boundaries and borders.” He stumbled on a rock.

She turned it around on him. “So, Zeke. Why’d you hire me for? Bancroft thinks he’ll expose some conspiracy. You and Shahar, I’m still not sure about.”

The lowing of the bison herd was still audible on the breeze.

“Sometimes, I dunno. I feel like I drank too much water.”

Hatchet snorted. “What?”

“Like, my parents’ house in the city, not far from here. We drank tap water. Sometimes we filtered it. Downriver, downwind of the plant. We had a garden, we ate stuff from the dirt.”

She could see what he was winding at. “And you think it got into you.”

“Maybe. So, what the hell, why not come see for myself?” Zeke kicked at a rock. “Besides, you know, jail.”

“Besides jail.”

His young eyes, sidelong. “What Bancroft said, earlier. Why do this? Smuggle people illegally into the Zone, risking prison, cancer and possibly being trampled by a mutant buffalo...”

“Hey, now. I’m good friends with the mutant buffalo. We’re buddies.”

Zeke laughed and didn’t press her further.

The uncanny silence of the Zone returned, broken only by birdcalls. A dim shadow squatted on the edge of the world, something huge rising above the fields and forests and dead corporate complexes.

Hatchet stood still and waited for everybody to catch up. “That’s the sarcophagus, right there,” she pointed out. “That’s what they built over the reactor when it blew, trapping in the worst of the fallout.”

Shahar let out a low whistle. “It looks like a landfill come alive.”

“Eight thousand tons of metal framework and more than one million cubic feet of concrete,” said Zeke. Hatchet knew he was quoting from that damn zine of Pigeon’s.

Bancroft turned to her, surprised. “Wait, we’re really that close?”

“Yep. This is the epicenter of it all.” She knew this area well by now, had made many trips to and from since her first, unable to stay away.



“Oh, shit. That’s Alicia’s house.”

Pigeon glanced back. “What?”

The trees were all dead, and their corpses twisted up and down the street, pale arms grasping.

“This house. My friend lived here. Shit, I think this is my old neighborhood.”

Her boyfriend turned around, annoyed. “C’mon, I wanna get to the reactor before sundown.”

Emily sat down on the curb in the deserted suburb, all half-remembered things, warped and bent. Bicycles lay on dead lawns where they’d been dropped. No one left to steal them, she thought. God came down and took everyone up to Heaven.

Pigeon sighed. “Look, if you need to have a moment-”

Emily interrupted. “Just go. I’ll catch up. I remember where the stupid plant is.”

She watched him disappear around a corner, and felt nothing. Her mind was lanced and it flooded out. The library. The rocking chair in her backyard. The sprinklers, hissing out froth every summer. The red grasses and marshes and creeks thick with tadpoles. Each house in its right place, divisions within divisions.

She had lied, she realized dimly. The power plant hadn't factored into little Emily's suburban universe. She could faintly picture a coolant tower surrounded by cornfields, but had no idea how to get there. She began to laugh until the laugh became hacking sobs.

Maybe she could wait here for Pigeon. He'd come back for her, once he realized she was lost.

Night fell. It was too cold to sleep.

Behind the house, she found the woodshed she'd been hiding in when the ashy snow fell, their childish game interrupted by firefighters and bullhorns and busloads of scared families. A police officer had cut his hand on a wood axe, trying to wrest it away from five-year-old Emily, who had fearfully grabbed the first thing in arms reach as his boot broke down the door.

Thirteen years later, she chopped Alicia's porch into splintery planks. It felt good to split open the quiet. The fire she built was warm and she

slept on the overgrown lawn, beneath stars no longer made modest by light pollution.

Morning came. She was hungry. Pigeon had the food.

She broke into Alicia's house. The food in the cupboard had rotted away, the cans long expired. Her stomach churned and complained.

Night fell again.

She crept up behind a wild rabbit, holding the axe. When she lunged for it, its ears twitched and it bounded away easily. She fell on herself painfully, bruising her elbow on the axe haft.

The next rabbit, though, her blade drank deep and red. With her fingernails she peeled its skin from head to foot, and the blood wormed deep under her nails. She speared and cooked its little body over the fire.

Radioactive caesium isotopes have a half-life of thirty years or more. The incident had sprayed an incalculable amount of radioactive material into her neighborhood, and more leaked out every day. None of it was even close to decaying away. It was all around her, invisible, but she felt

it in everything, in the blades of grass beneath her feet that the rabbit had eaten before she killed it.

She pulled a legbone off the rabbit and sunk her teeth in. It was delicious.



Hatchet woke in the night, like usual; sleep never came easy. She lay still and stared up at distant stars, the fire they'd built earlier still smoldering and coughing ribbons of smoke. A dirty cooking pot sat nearby, half-full of canned beans and sausage.

Quietly she climbed out of her sleeping bag to watch the sunrise over the plains. She looked over at her sleeping companions. Zeke was passed out, his face in a puddle of drool, snoring lightly. Shahar slept hard, face drawn, brow furrowed.

Bancroft's sleeping bag was missing. So was his pack.

Hatchet banged her bush knife on the pot. “Everybody wake up, right now!”

Zeke and Shahar jolted awake and looked at her. “What’s going on?” Shahar mumbled.

“Bancroft’s gone. He’s taken his stuff.”

“What?” Shahar blinked, and a horrible look came over his face. “Wait. He was rattling on yesterday about conspiracy theories, the radiation’s not real...”

Hatchet met his eyes. “You don’t mean—”

“—He’s going into the reactor?” Shahar bolted out of his bedroll. “We have to stop him. He’s a big whiny prick, but no one deserves that.” Hatchet stamped out the campfire while Zeke looked on, fear in his eyes.

As they hustled up an old dirt road, the sky became midnight blue and dawn crept up on them. Hatchet ran ahead of the other two; Shahar struggled to keep up the rear, panting and wheezing more than she’d

expect from a man of his age. The reactor was built just outside a maze of office complexes near the outer suburbs of the city. Empty high-rises and hotels loomed, some missing gap-toothed windows, others looking for all the world like people might still work there.

“What’ll happen to him?” Zeke asked.

“If he’s lucky,” Shahar replied in between labored breaths, “it’ll be quick.”

Hatchet sighed through her teeth. “I don’t know what the idiot’s trying to prove.”

They were close now. The explosion from the plant had knocked out all of the windows in the corporate office park. Faded signs advertising HVAC supply businesses and cheap takeout food surrounded them. Not two blocks away, the crumbling hulk of the sarcophagus stood tall and hunched above the complexes and divisions, casting rippling reflections in artificial lakes dotted throughout, the waters brilliant green or baked-in enamel red.

In one of these lakes, something was lying face up, moving jerkily in the shallows.

Hatchet rushed over. Bancroft was missing his glasses and open burns on his face wept pus and blood down his cheeks. His skin was an angry red, chin and chest covered in bloody vomit, a viscous film floating on the surface of the serene square pool. He'd ripped and clawed at his shirt and it trailed off him in rags. Beneath his mangled clothes and skin, his muscles twitched uncontrollably and he breathed in gasps, not at all lucid, eyelids fluttering.

Zeke and Shahar caught up but Hatchet held them back from running to the man. Zeke turned and retched at the sight and smell. Shahar's face drew sharp like he'd seen a ghost. He covered his mouth but did not look away.

They pulled him out of the water and watched him die, on an artificial pebble beach, surrounded by sickles of red grass. Zeke pleaded with Hatchet to take the man to safety, to a hospital, anything, tears flowing

down his face. When the man's heart finally beat its last, the boy sat down next to the corpse and began to hyperventilate, placing his head between his knees, until Shahar went to him and held him.

"There was nothing we could've done," Shahar said when he let go. "The man had something to prove. Going inside must've exposed him to many times the limit of what he could survive. He must've felt like his skin caught fire and crawled to the water. I'm sorry you saw that." He looked deep into Zeke's teary face, sorrowful and gentle, sunrise casting a glow about his dark features.

"At least he died quick," Hatchet said. She very nearly cursed the man out loud for his stupidity, then realized the others would never forgive her.

Zeke sniffed and wiped roughly at his face. "Does he have a family? Should we bring him to them?"

"Even if I did know his family situation, it wouldn't be best to." Hatchet looked down at the body and searched around inside herself for sor-

row or sympathy and came up empty. She continued. “Best to leave him. He’ll be found eventually, alone, by National Guard. We were never here.”

The boy’s voice broke again. “How can you just leave him?”

Shahar looked sick and resigned. “We’re breaking the law just being here, remember?” He stooped to put his hand on Zeke’s shoulder but the boy recoiled. Diseased things floated to the surface of the artificial pool, stirred to the surface by Bancroft’s thrashing. Birds missing eyes, bleached avian skin pockmarked where feathers had sloughed off in the toxic sludge.

Hatchet turned to Shahar. “How come you know so much about radiation sickness?”

He looked at her, startled, then lifted his shirt so she could see the scars from numerous hopeful surgeries, barely filmed over. “Does that answer your question?”

She’d cracked his mystery. “So you were there, on the day. Did you work at the plant?”

“Almost.” He scratched at the pearly scars. “I was a trucker. Barely old enough to drive a rig even. I was a kid, in the wrong place, at the exact wrong time.” He turned his gaze on her. “You know this area too well. You lived here, huh.”

“Grew up not far from here.”

“Huh.”

Zeke spoke up. “I want to go home, okay?” His legs were shaking and he looked as if he’d aged ten years in three hours. “Can we please go? I’ve had enough.” Practically begging her.

He was so young. “Yes, it’s time,” she said, her heart softening somewhere.

Shahar cleared his throat. “Not me, Hatchet.” Seeing her confusion, he shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. “I showed you my scars. I did chemo, all of it. And it didn’t take. That damn thing—” and he pointed to the sarcophagus— “is gonna get me one way or another, and I want to have a say in it.”

“What are you suggesting?” She could guess.

“My father is buried in a cemetery in Eden, on the west side of the Zone. I think I’m gonna go there, and wait it out. Doctor said I’ve only got a couple months and I’m tired of fighting. I’d like to be buried down there with Pop Pop when it happens, you know?”

In spite of everything, Hatchet chuckled. “I didn’t know you were buying a one-way ticket. I’d have given you a discount.” Shahar laughed too, loud and raspy.

Zeke looked horrified. “You people are...so fucked up. I don’t get it.”

Hatchet didn’t answer him, instead taking Shahar’s hand. “Well, not for nothing, I ain’t bad with a shovel.” Shahar gave a weary smile and their eyes met. The sun rose and drenched the world in exquisite, alchemical color.



The tattoo needle bit into the top of her spine and Emily ground her teeth against the flaring pain. She gripped her knees tightly, uncomfortably perched on a table draped in plastic sheeting in the tattoo parlor. The artist had been surprised she wanted a neck tattoo as her first, had given her the standard warning that it might mark her in ways that would make life hard.

Emily had laughed. A month to the day since she'd stumbled out of the woods and it still felt like she hadn't actually come home. Instead she was locked out of her sleepy small-town fishbowl, knocking fruitlessly on the glass while its inhabitants stared like she was a wild animal.

She had been dirty and starving when the National Guard found her, her clothes torn and stained with blood and smoke, a dull wood axe clutched in her hands like a lifeline. All told she'd spent a week and a half stumbling around the Zone, mostly subsisting on scavenged berries and the occasional wildlife kill, never managing to find Pigeon again despite

calling and screaming for him. Towards the end she'd started to believe she'd been left behind in the evacuation all those years ago, that her memories of the life they'd relocated to were just hazy dreams, that she'd always been a wanderer in this blighted place.

The National Guard had arrested Emily and put her in a bright fluorescent holding cell for several days until she was bailed out by her mother, who had screamed at her on the drive home. She tried to read-just to life at school but found herself unable to focus in class, dreaming of open fields and empty houses in neat rows like headstones. To make matters worse, her classmates avoided her like she had the plague, and whispered behind her back. Her face had landed in a local newspaper, under the blaring headline **TEENAGE GIRL APPREHENDED IN FALLOUT ZONE WITH BLOODSTAINED AXE.**

She saw Pigeon around, tried to talk to him, but he just said "What'd you tell those fucking feds about me, huh?" and pushed her away. She tried to say she hadn't told them anything but he was intent on his cruel-

ty, nursing his scorned ego, which none of her apologies or explanations could soothe. She hadn't meant to lose him too.

She'd booked the appointment a few days ago, telling herself she could always cancel. During the consultation, the artist had told her how much it would cost. There was no way she could afford that under normal circumstances.

But the day before, a quiet girl a year above her had approached. "Hey, are you the axe girl?"

Emily laughed bitterly and turned away. "Whatever you want from me, just don't."

"No, wait, listen," the girl said urgently, grabbing her shoulder. "You went to the Zone. How did you get in?"

She answered after a beat, warily. "It's not that hard. Though I hear they're building a fence around it. Probably because of me."

"Can you get me in too?"

The request startled her and she spun around. "Why?"

“Cause...look, I just want to go. I haven’t been since I was seven. I’m not scared. And I can pay.” The girl pressed six crisp twenty dollar bills into her hand. “Please?”

The artist dipped into a thimble of black ink and continued his work on her neck. “So, what’s with the fancy door?” The machine buzzed as it drilled into her skin and the air smelled of disinfectant.

Emily didn’t feel like explaining herself and let the silence become awkward. Out here, nobody understood. Out here, she had nothing, no one. The Zone, though, that was hers, had been before and still was now, even after it was ripped away. She knew there were other refugees, people like her, who had gotten to move on with their lives. That wasn’t possible for her anymore.



There’s secret doors into everything.



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