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Dust

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Dust

Chapter One: Lion

Storm winds bang a rhythm on the door of the shelter. The *bang-bump-bang* of the door should bother me, but after living with it for so long, it doesn't. The door is the only part of our shelter that is still in shambles – as strange as a flat screen TV run on cassette tapes – and it is only a matter of time before the wind tears this last memory from its hinges. The storm is enormous this time. Sand collects on the outside of the window and a few grains manage to migrate inside by sliding under the door and through the hairline cracks in the walls. Lightning arcs in the sky outside of the shelter, but the beauty of it is lost to the dust that coats the air. Outside the world is dark. I can only briefly distinguish the houses across the street for a few seconds at a time before the swirling dust covers them again in darkness. But the houses aren't worth seeing anyway. They are as dark and dusty as the storm. Most houses are, nowadays. Though I have seen the same sight a hundred times before, I stare out of the window.

I suppose that the dust storm *is* beautiful in a way. Clouds of dust on ever moving clouds of dust. Black on black. I picture the world as it will be tomorrow. Hills of sand gathered at every corner. The door glued shut by the earth that will be piled against it. I think, though I have never seen it before, that it must be like snow. I sigh, knowing that I will never know. Snow doesn't exist in my world. I wonder if there is anywhere where it still does. Earth's too hot, too dusty, too overused. Lightning arcs again, allowing me to faintly see the building outside my window. In the half-light, it is bathed in shadows. Shadows on shadows on shadows. For a moment the eeriness of the empty landscape outside gets to me, but I push this feeling down. Tomorrow will be my eighteenth birthday – I am much too old to be haunted by dusty apparitions. I wish I could have the day off tomorrow. But there has never been such a thing as a day off in my life. Harper had said that the storm will be over by early morning. I will have to be there to help her scavenge for supplies when that happens. We are running low on everything. We are always running low on everything. Yes, I will have to be awake to go on a run.

BANG. The door hits the wall behind it with a particularly strong gust of wind, the rock that had been holding it in place dislodged and rolling across the floor. A second later I hear an answering crash from the roof and the lights shut off. Dust floods into the now dark shelter, aided by the howling storm. It flies across the room, sticking to the walls, the ceiling, the floor, and combing itself through my thick dark hair. Shielding my eyes against the sharp rocks being propelled toward my face I curse and clamber up from my seat against the wall, feeling my way forward to shut the door. I battle with it for a few moments against the wind before the latch finally clicks into place. *Really, what is the point of a latch if it can succumb to wind?* I think. Grabbing the edge of a bookcase that hasn't seen a book in years, I slide it in front of the door and drop onto a dilapidated couch gasping for breath. Dust rises from the pillows in the faint light from the window as I fall onto it. I look up at the lights and inwardly groan. Yet another task for tomorrow. The storm must have taken out the shelter's energy grid. I hope it is something minor and easily fixable, but, from the sound, I am prepared for the worst. Really it is a miracle that Harper can sleep through all this. She sleeps like she was knocked out. I envy her. I have been woken up more times than I can count by storms such as this.

It is just as well. I need to hold everything together around our shelter. Though strong-willed and insanely smart, Harper is just thirteen and I feel an obligation to care for her. Harper would say she can manage on her own, but we both know she can't. This is not a remark on Harper's abilities. She has helped me as much as I have helped her. Maybe even more so.

I think again of my day tomorrow and decide I should try to get some sleep. It will be a long, hot day. I get up from the couch and turn away from the front window, walking instead toward the back of the shelter. Passing Harper's room, I pause and double back, quietly opening her door to check on her. She lays sound asleep on her bed, her light brown hair spread across the pillow beside her. She looks peaceful in the darkness and I glance at the computer screens around her room – the lost power leaving them without their usual blue glow. I step out of her room, shutting the door behind me and feel my way along the corridor to my own room. In the faint light fighting its way past the dust, I see my name – *Merrick* – on the door where I had etched it into the wood years ago with a hunting knife. Stumbling over something in the middle of my floor that turns out to be a half empty can of Coke, I find my bed and collapse onto it. I shake dust from the sheets and drift off to the sound of the howling wind. I hope tomorrow won't be too bad. I really, really do.

* * *

I am awoken the next day by 90 pounds of Harper hitting me right in the stomach. "Mmmff-GAH," I gasp, my eyes darting open. I am in bed and Harper has decided to jump on me to wake me up. Of course she has.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" yells Harper, laughing hysterically. Her eyes flash maliciously two inches away from my own. The roaring of the wind is gone and the sun – the hot, blazing sun – is streaming through the window into the room. The lights remain determinedly off, but the morning glow is perfectly sufficient to light everything up. I struggle to focus on Harper's face.

"My wha...? Oh. Yeah. Thanks." I respond, pushing her off of me. She hops from my bed down to the floor. Little clouds of dust rise from the carpet where her feet settle.

"I got you something," Harper says, ignoring my bleariness, "Come on!" She dances across the room, careful to avoid a spot in the middle. "Oh, and you might want to clean that up," she says, indicating the location. The last vestiges of Coke are seeping into the carpet. She tosses me a rag which I miss.

"It's my birthday," I say, yawning, "Shouldn't you, I don't know, clean it up for me?"

"I don't think so," she laughs, "Anyway, come *on*. I've got something to show you." She darts out of the room. I can hear her crashing down the hallway on her way to the living room. I act annoyed, but in reality, I am quite pleased. If she *hadn't* remembered my birthday after basically growing up together there would be a problem. I grab the rag off the floor.

After trying (and failing) to clean the carpet, I give up and walk to the living room. I pass by Harper's room – the computer screens are still unlit – and the four other rooms off the corridor. The shelter is large. Larger than necessary for just Harper and me. But it hadn't always been just us.

The living room and kitchen are combined with only a small bar-and-counter setup in between. I enter the room to find Harper wearing a revolting orange cooking apron with curly writing spelling out the words "Kiss the Cook." A cartoon image of a man puckering his lips is displayed across her chest.

"Nice apron," I say, grinning.

"Thanks," responds Harper, wearing an expression that all too clearly says *if you even try to kiss me, I will kill you*. Perhaps a remnant of her less-than-pleasant past, Harper is uncomfortable with physical touch, even with me. "It was the only one I could find. Not a lot of choice in attire."

“I guess not,” I agree, “are you actually cooking?” I look at the stove where Harper is attempting to flip a pancake that is the shade and presumably texture of a lump of coal. The color of the electric stovetop is perhaps a bit *too* red.

Harper sighs. “Not really. Can you do this?” She hands me the spatula. I take it, smiling.

“Yeah. Thanks for trying. Go sit down, we’ve got to talk about what we’re going to do today.”

We finish breakfast by eleven o’clock. After applying my culinary expertise to the *Just Add Water!* pancakes, we wolfed them down as fast as we could do without the addition of maple syrup (of which we have none). I know that Harper is anxious to get the power back on. Her dad had been some sort of engineer. I don’t know the details (she never liked to talk about him), but his fascination with electronics rubbed off on Harper. As a result, she has strung the shelter from top to bottom with wires and cabling and so many mechanical bits that I am sure I don’t know about even half the features our base has. There is a long-range weather detector, a radio, two Hotchkiss machine guns that I both hope do and do not work, and more security cameras than I can count. We don’t know for sure if there is anyone out trying to find us, but we don’t want to take any chances in case there is. In her room, Harper can do anything from predict what the weather will be like 200 miles away to pull up 50-year-old TV shows from the 2000s (we have watched *The Walking Dead* more times than either of us care to admit). I have no idea what half of the stuff she uses is, but I am grateful for her knowledge.

“What I think happened,” says Harper thoughtfully, “is that the sand may have broken some part of the battery bank. The photovoltaic cells should be fine because I can’t think of what part of them would break. Unfortunately, the bank is wired in series with the rest of the shelter, so if that broke it would probably shut down the lights like it has now.”

As with most times she speaks about technology, I have no idea what she’s talking about. “Can you fix it?” I ask. Best to just cut to the important stuff.

“Yeah of course I can fix it, but I might not have the parts. We’ll need to do another run into Salem whether you like it or not.”

I groan. Salem really isn’t too bad, but I hate going there. It is one of the only large communities I know of that is left. Housing a little over three hundred people, it is a huge asset in terms of trade, but it brings back bad memories. Memories of when Harper and I had lived in a community.

“Hey,” says Harper lightly, “I know you usually hate going there, but this time I think I have something that will make it better.”

I glance nervously at Harper who is now wearing a maniacal grin. Don’t get me wrong, I like receiving gifts from her, but she has a habit of giving me items which are large and electrical, with the propensity to shock the user at odd times during their operation. The electric shotgun she had given me for my sixteenth birthday may have malfunctioned on accident, but I have always gotten the sense that the solar hat I received a year ago may never actually have been meant to function.

“I thought the pancakes were my present,” I say with trepidation.

“Oh. No.” Harper responds wearing a look that says she would never dream of delivering such a lame gift. “I found it a couple of weeks ago and I sort of, *er*, drove it back here without your knowledge. Anyway, come *on!*”

I frown, following her out of the living room. She leads me toward the back of our shelter where there is a makeshift garage opening on an alley behind our block. We don’t normally use the garage except for storage, as we have never had a car before. Cars are loud and require

gasoline, which is a rare find. Plus, as Harper informed me once while looking at me like I was an idiot, gasoline goes bad in about a year - something about the hydrocarbons evaporating. There are plenty of cars abandoned in the cities, but none of them have moved for decades. They merely serve as reminders of the world that had existed before the *Falling*.

Harper opens the garage door and slides aside, waiting eagerly for my reaction. Inside is a massive vehicle. It looks like a jeep, except that jeeps don't usually have machine guns mounted to the top or look like they can go through hell and back. It's dark green, with huge headlights and a massive grill. The frame sits atop thick off-roading wheels and along the side is the name *M1193 Growler*.

"Holy shit," I say in amazement, "Where did you even find this?"

Harper grins at my reaction. "Remember when we went out to scavenge up north a while back? I just found this in a residential neighborhood."

It makes sense. When resources were really starting to dwindle and the rioting started, the army had sent as many troops as they could into the cities. The people at my old community said it was one last show of force from the government – one last attempt at regaining what they had. It didn't do much. People will do what they have to when they don't have food or water. The government realized their mistake too late. They tried to pull out their troops, but that was after many of them had already succumbed to the whims of the citizens. It isn't uncommon for Harper and me to stumble across military vehicles, but they are usually in a sorry state and, at any rate, they too require fuel. Why, then, did Harper bring this one back?

I turn to her, about to ask. Seeing my confusion, Harper's grin doubles. "See the back? No exhaust pipe," she says.

Looking at the *Growler*, I see that she is right. Where a car's exhaust pipe would normally be, there is nothing but the sleek green surface of the jeep. And no exhaust pipe would mean...

"The *Growler* is electric?" I ask Harper.

"Yup. Which means that we only need to plug this thing in to recharge it!" she says as if she has been bursting to say it. "Now, I couldn't find the charging cord for it, but anything is a wire if you have metal and enough knowledge not to burn your house down. Long story short, it's charged and fully ready to go."

Harper stops talking and looks at me. I can tell she is immensely pleased with herself. She is bouncing on her feet and has assumed a smug expression that suggests she has solved world hunger.

"Harper, this is amazing," I concede. "Can I take it for a drive?"

She tosses me the keys. "Knock yourself out, birthday boy."

I pretend to scowl at her. "Really?" I say.

"Sorry." She replies, smirking. "Yes. You may take it for a drive."

Half an hour later and I am in love with the *Growler*. Not only is it fast, it has excellent traction and, apart from the sound of the wheels scraping the ground, is completely silent. Its electric motor moves with only a slight whirr and the vehicle responds instantly to my every movement. I drive the *Growler* around the neighborhood (if you can even call it that when we have no neighbors) and am back by midday.

When I get back to the shelter, the lights are still off and Harper is standing over a mess of cabling on the roof. I park the *Growler* back into the garage and climb onto the roof with her. The sun is blazing hot. The sun is *always* blazing hot, but after spending time outside in the *Growler* (the entire top of the vehicle is basically a sun roof) I feel particularly feverish. The

landscape looks like how it always looks. I can see dilapidated house after dilapidated house in every direction.

I picture how it must have looked before everything happened. Green grass in front of every home, sprinklers on to uphold the American ideal of perfect lawns and white picket fences. I imagine kids outside playing in the water and fathers yelling at them to stay out of the way of the lawnmower. Mothers would be inside preparing dinners or else gone away shopping – an image painted in every classically sexist 1960s-era novel. I imagine there must have been a lot of shopping. I never was alive when you could just drive to the nearest store and pick up everything you needed. I picture myself living in one of those houses. My mother calling me inside to do the dishes or else wash the clothes, my little sister listening to music like she always did in her room... I grimace to myself, *never mind*. Those memories are too painful, too cold.

Nowadays there isn't any of that. The houses live on like broken skeletons, but the people are gone. Most of the trees are dead for lack of rain, and the grass that remains is dry and yellow. Instead the dust reigns. Layers of it are everywhere turning everything they touch a dull brown. Our town (we aren't sure which one it is, though it must be near Salem) has been killed. We are merely a memory of when it was still alive. Despite the heat, I shiver.

"Definitely the battery bank," Harper says to me, not looking up from her work. She is holding a piece of black plastic in her hand. It looks like it had snapped off something important.

"This piece of casing came off," she continues, "After that, the sand flew into all the mechanical parts and corroded the interior. We definitely need to go to Salem today. Best not to take any chances with our defenses down."

I nod. "Okay. We need to leave now then. Any later than that and we won't be done by dark."

We jump down from the roof and begin loading up the *Growler*. As Harper grabs food and water for the journey, I pack our defenses. Though we don't necessarily like it, we have a walk-in closet full of guns and ammo, from long hunting rifles to handheld pistols. Both Harper and I were trained how to shoot from a young age. In our world, it is almost as essential as food, water, and shelter. It is rare to come across other people anymore as most people just stick to themselves, but there have certainly been times when we were glad for our weapons. And if we ever find the men who came to our old community... We want to be prepared.

I pick out a large M4 carbine, a Browning M1920 handgun, and something that looks like a flintlock pistol of the pirate age retrofitted into the modern-day era. I walk back out into the garage. Harper gives me a worried look.

"We only have one more crate of water bottles," she says. Water is always a concern, but it has been more so lately. We are starting to have to travel further and further in search of resources. Rain is a rarity now, it usually only happens three or four times a year. The rivers around our town dried up ages ago, yielding nothing but earth – cracked, dry, barren earth. We traveled to the ocean once, just to see if it still exists. It does, but transporting desalinated water over the 50-mile distance back to our shelter is not a viable option. Anyway, it is so polluted and dirty that we would be lucky to drink it without contracting innumerable diseases from the fouled sea.

"It'll be okay, Harp," I reassure her. "We'll find more. We always have."

It looks like she is going to argue back for a moment, but she just turns away and continues packing the *Growler*. I sigh. I am worried too. There have been times where we have had only small amounts of water before, but it has never been this low. Best not to let Harper

know how concerned I really am, though. She doesn't need to stress about that right now – not when our base is already in a sorry state from the storm.

We finish loading the *Growler* and set off for Salem. Harper is driving. Years ago, it might have been dangerous to let a thirteen-year-old drive a glorified war jeep, but at this point I figure it probably isn't even near the top of the *Most Dangerous Things to Do* list. Besides, I am a better shot so if we *do* run into trouble, it would be best if I operated the machine gun mounted on our vehicle. We don't talk much. Leaving our shelter always causes us to get edgy. Leaving means that more things can go wrong, more dangers can be met. Salem is only about a 35-minute drive from our shelter, but it feels like much longer than that.

Halfway there, we see an old truckers' pit stop. Nothing more than a gas station and a small sub shop in the middle of nowhere. We have passed it at fifty times before, but never when we were running so low on water...

"Let's pull over, Harp," I say into the silence. Harper frowns, then nods, understanding. She slows the *Growler* down and pulls off the road to the shop. She doesn't bother waiting for an exit, just drives straight over the median. Sometimes living in the apocalypse is pretty great – no one around to give you a ticket. I smile sardonically.

We leave the car parked outside and walk up to the dusty sub shop windows to peer through. I have my M4 in hand. I doubt there is anyone here, but I want to make sure. Harper hangs back a bit, warier than she normally is. I guess that she is a bit more scared of the water situation than she has been letting on. I hope we find some here. I will need Harper to be her usual, enthusiastic self when we reach Salem.

Bang, bang, bang. I knock on the glass door.

"Anyone here?" I yell at the store. Silence. Carefully, I open the door, which is unlocked. Inside is a mess of cobwebs and garbage. Bags and cans litter the floor. I spot a rat that is so thin it looks like a skeleton skitter across the ground sluggishly toward the back of the shop. Carefully, I walk inside trying to dodge the piles of Doritos wrappers and other undeterminable objects that are strewn across my path. Harper follows me inside, one hand on the Browning pistol I had given her. I push on toward the back of the shop. It is completely empty. Nodding to Harper, I lower my M4.

"Alright, let's make this fast," I say.

We search the store quickly and efficiently, having done it hundreds of times before. We gather what is still salvageable – half a dozen bags of chips and a couple cans of Diet Pepsi. Though we find a few things here and there, it is obvious the store has been looted before. I walk behind the counter and up to the cash register. The lock is broken and the drawer is sticking out. I open it and find a stack of worn dollar bills. Grimacing, I close the drawer again and move on. There was a time when all anyone cared about was money, but that time is long gone. Now, food and supplies are traded directly with each other. No one has a use for the green paper anymore.

Beside the cash register sits a small stuffed lion. The lion has seen better days; it is missing a few whiskers and is covered in dust. Immediately, I am jolted back to my old community. My sister liked stuffed animals. She had a whole colony of them. They had lined her bed, making it almost impossible for her to fit in it. I would ask her at what point she would have too many, but she would always answer never. *As long as they need a home, I'll keep them*, she had said.

I smile to myself and pocket the lion. Looking up, I catch Harper watching me in a kind of sad, far-off way. I stop smiling and look away.

“Alright, let’s go,” I say, not meeting her gaze. “It’ll be 3:00 soon. Better hurry on to Salem.”