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PROLOGUE

It has been about a year since The Fall; since the world was thrown into a "dark age" as technology, political order and even basic needs have been decimated, overthrown and destroyed. Life continues, but it is a life very different from before The Fall. Less than 11% of the World's former population still lives; riots, war, disease and chaos, having claimed so many. Those left have begun to realize the World did not just stumble or trip to be picked up and dusted off, sent on its way; no, the World fell and shattered. Slowly people are adjusting, changing, trying to live. Instinctual survival, an autonomic function coded into most species' DNA, is a key motivator for trying to continue in this fractured nightmare, but there are other reasons to live too. Some selfish, some altruistic, some dark and all archaic as the way of life that forged those motives, that birthed those now orphaned souls is dead and gone.

Business as usual takes on a whole new meaning in this razed world as the 'usual' was crucified when the World was Depleted.



"Black false hellebore is known for its emetic properties. It was often thought to be useful in inducing labor. Hmm, I should use this to make some tea for Josephine," Minako murmured as she turned the page to reveal another series of columns filled with herbs and their medical properties. "I know, I know, Minako play nice."

She rubbed at the bridge of her nose, the book flopping to her chest as she pushed up a bit more on her makeshift bed, the flame from her candle wafting in the faint breeze her book had made. A thunk and then a moan came through the wall behind her head. She closed her eyes, an exasperated look growing on her face.

"Oh god baby that's..." the words degraded into another moan. After a moment the feminine voice once again picked up, filtering through the thin wall. "Lower..."

Minako was tempted to bang on the wall, but she knew better. She knew there was more than a quick lay going on in the next room. With a heavy sigh, the released breath ruffling her dark bangs, she picked her book up and tried to ignore the sounds from the next room as she let her eyes readjust to the low light level once more so she could continue her reading.



A faint knocking sound on the door startled Minako out of her light sleep; a faint whisper pushing through the door, "Minako? You awake?"

"Barely," she grunted as she began pulling herself up, her hand already clutching the metal expandable baton she kept with her at all times; Josephine had dubbed it 'The Teddy Bear' as Minako cuddled with it each night. A habit the doctor had picked up after the incident at New Haven.

"You know you have this really sexy husky voice when you wake up all frumpy and grumpy."

"Did you not get enough with your little student earlier that you have to make a sexual innuendo?"

Josephine Baynham did not answer, rather shuffled across the dark room, feeling her way to the edge of the bedding where Minako was resting. She sank into a cross-legged lotus position near the side of the bedding. "I got what we needed, she'll get us the codes and you will get your books," her answer delivered in a neutral tone. "You really are a bitch when you wake up. Dreaming again?"

"No, nothing tonight, it was too noisy to sleep properly."

"Well you know how those young studs are, all noise and flash, I use to be one myself."

Minako made a grunting noise as she sat up fully, pushing back to lean against the wall. She could not really see her traveling companion in the dark, but she'd been with the woman long enough to know while that was delivered as a joke, the other woman's right eye would twitch a little, a small tic Josephine displayed when upset; Minako knew references to age were always touchy for the computer professor. It was amazing how much she had picked up in the last year about Josephine. A woman she had worked with at the college, in a sense, for three years; barely noticing more than the sandy color of the woman's hair. Yet now, in the Fallen world, one had to be mindful of details, details often made the difference between survival and extinction.

"She'll take us tomorrow, then we can swing back by the little settlement and give them your gift and then..." Jo left the sentence open as their plans were probably open as well. She'd never been one to plan or worry much about where she was going before The Fall, so this particular piece in her current lifestyle was not too much of a stretch. However, she would like a little more direction now and then.

"And then we head west as we discussed," Minako finished not sure what Jo might be prodding to reveal. "Thank you for modifying that e-reader device. They'll be able to use the books for teaching many subjects; not just the medical volumes as there are other works on there as well."

"God bless Google for being grubby and sticking its grimy hands into other fields to convert all those books to digital. Although it would be funny to see you carting around some of those volumes," Jo shook her head, chuckling. "You know students always accused professors of picking the thickest books as torture."

"Students always look for the easiest path and complain when it looks like they might need to work," Minako replied.

"I can just see you dragging this sack of huge Gray's Anatomy books behind you. Minako Yoshimoto the medical equivalent of Johnny Appleseed crossing the country, planting her seeds of wisdom and trying to single-handedly rebuild something that is dead and gone"

"You do not have to mock me."

"Yes I do and you know you love it, that's why you keep me around."

"No I keep you around so you can bang former students. Old habits die hard it seems," Minako sighed and rubbed at her face. "Sorry, I should not have said that; I am sure you got your fill of vicious rumors as they circulated through the campus mill."

"Who said they were rumors?"

Minako looked up sharply, leaning forward to try and pierce the dark to see Jo's face; sometimes she really hated the dark, it hid so much. "Still enjoying the playgirl facade? Every time I turned around there was another piece of gossip about that young professor in the IT department. Let's see, there were the student affairs, the fact you forged some of your credentials and were not really that versed in your field, you slept your way into your position, and you were doing questionable research."

Jo said nothing.

As the silence stretched, Minako gave a forced laugh, "Come on, deny them, say they were a bit of rubbish or some other British phrase you enjoy throwing at me."

"There were only three students." Jo's statement was followed by a long pause. "And I did use the campus resources for a number of side projects. I mean it was a perfect cover, if any of my activity was ever discovered I could just say it was a student activity or academia project."

"You," Minako trailed off.

"It was a bit of fun and diversion. Remember that whole Wikileaks thing? The assorted hack attacks? I had bots on almost every computer on campus and many of the student computers. The tumblr vs 4chan war was a hoot too, just to mention a few."

"Are you the reason my school Internet connection periodically slowed?"

"Guilty as charged. Hey, graduate students are always eager for "projects". One semester we did a study to see how far we could spread certain backdoor programs. Each student took a different delivery form so we could compare. You know traditional delivery versus flash drives, vs. direct delivery forms."

"Stop, I really don't want to know this."

"No, you don't, neither did most of the others, which is why I never had any problems sailing

through the ethics hearings that came up on occasion."

More silence passed before Minako dared to ask a question. "Did you really get your job as they intimidated?"

"Because I was the College President's mistress?"

Minako nodded even though she knew Jo could not see her.

"Yeah, that's about it. She was sick of her husband who was flinging every time she turned around. I heard about the teaching position opening from one of my friends at IBM; he said I should apply. I was drunk and said sure. Couple days later, my IBM friend drags me along to one of the college's bugger alumni functions. He introduced me to the president before wandering off to talk to some other snobs. We hit it off, talking all evening. This led to that and there I was in her bed. I happened to mention the job, she happened to mention she liked having a little side thing and so we used each other."

"You had no problem being used?" Minako scoffed.

"Minako, we all are users, and many are abusers, don't ever believe otherwise."

"So I am just a user than? Why do you stay with me?" Minako demanded

"What the hell else am I going to do?" Jo slapped the floor in frustration. "There's nothing else really, and who better to hook up with than a doctor, self-preservation and all that. Besides, you saved my life," her voice lowered, becoming distant as she turned away from Minako. "I owe you."

Minako was silent, not caring to relive the incident Jo referenced, although her quick mind provided the events and memories regardless.

"Why do you stay with me?"

"Would it fit if I said I am a user," Minako said sarcastically, sighing as she rubbed her face. "This will sound stupid."

"And you sounding daft is new, how?" Jo said, trying to relieve the tension as she sensed a shift in Minako's manner.

"Well, as you said, it is mostly self-preservation. Even though there are some that say it is the work of the devil, I believe in technology, and you've been essential as I work on my goal."

"Obsessed crusade."

"Fine Jo, my obsessed crusade. But, well, the reason I found you, was able to save your life, well, you know those dreams I have."

"Nightmares, and you only vaguely mention them and then leave off, which is very frustrating by the way."

"I know; it's frustrating to me too. But well, you've been in a few of them. There have been others, like this odd man who acts like a hunter, well I've seen him killing boar. I've also dreamt about horrific events, like the plague of mass graves we found," she jerked a little as she felt a pressure, only to realize it was Jo's hand, the woman having laid it gently on Minako's knee. Taking assurance from the contact, the doctor continued. "Some of the dreams had you in them; I knew I needed to find you," she ceased her explanation, feeling too embarrassed to continue.

"You realize what you just told me is way beyond daft, you're rounding the bend to full fledged nutter."

A humorless laugh floated across the darkness. "Why do you think it took me this long to tell you? You're the first I've ever really told this much; well the first sober person."

"Awww, I got to pop your insane nightmare virgin cherry."

"Must you always do that?"

"Yes; it' my defensive mechanism against the madness, just like sinking yourself into this Don Quixote quest is yours."

"I'm impressed you know enough literature to use that reference."

"Eh, it was a clue in one of these ARGs I use to play."

This time Minako's laugh was mirthful. She blinked a bit as it seemed lighter. "Sun's coming up, guess I should try for another hour or two of rest. And you should get back to what's her name."

"Cheryl," Jo shrugged, "she passed out; she's not missing anything."

"You realize I am not going to feed your ego by commenting on that."

Jo leaned closer, smirking, "Come on, make a joke about my stamina, or even a medical reference if you like. I've gotten used to you always being stuck in teacher mode."

"Someone has to be mature and responsible, besides,"

"It's all you've ever had," Jo finished, no tease or maliciousness evident.

"Yes, it is."

They were both quiet a bit more, the morning light turning the room a dusky blue. Minako looked at Jo now that she could better see the contents of the room, her eyes first narrowing and then going wide as she scrambled a little and turned away, Jo's laughter chasing her. "What's the matter doctor? I just didn't feel like putting my shirt back on."

"Not funny."

"Oh I am laughing my ass off."

"So glad you are enjoying a large dose of schadenfreude."

"Loving every minute I can torture you doc. It's just a little skin."

Minako grimaced, looking back a little, but keeping her eyes averted. "I think you need to go put your shirt back on."

"Only if you'll read to me."

Minako swiveled to look fully at Jo, her eyes trained on the woman's face, brown eyes meeting green. "I do not like being made fun of."

"Oh I know that is one of your high and almighty pet peeves, so trust me, not making fun. I just don't feel like sleeping or going back to the other room. I noticed you were reading some of your new books, the ones you got so chuffed over."

Minako looked down at the slim paperback books beside her. "Thank you for getting them for me. I,"

Jo waved a hand to dismiss the thanks, knowing it was hard for Minako to offer the grateful words. "Hey no sweat, it was easy peasy stuff doing some work for that couple and they let me pick a couple books as payment. I thought you'd like the medicine books. I did listen as you went on and on about field medicine when we were walking through Georgia. Well, mostly, I was also kinda thinking about other things."

"I will be glad you listened at least a little," Minako paused before adding, "What were you thinking about?"

"Well, I was just thinking wouldn't it be cool to find a projector and set up a sheet or something outside and have like a drive in movie one night."

Minako puckered her lips, not used to this side of Jo. "It could be."

"Yeah, just one night at the movies. Something I use to never do really. It was so expensive and those seats were never comfortable, the food blah and I always ended up sitting next to someone who talked the whole time. But, well, I kinda miss it."

Minako nodded as she leaned across the bed, just grabbing hold of her pack, dragging it toward her. She rummaged through it, finding a T-shirt and throwing it at Jo. "Put this on while I get set."

"Aww now you are giving me gifts. Be careful or they might talk about us being an item."

Minako stuck out her tongue before scooting back to lean against the wall, angling her body so she could use the growing light to read. "I was thinking of using what I found in this manual to make you some of the tea you love."

"Always so thoughtful, I'll have to try to think of something nice I can do for you."

"Maybe try going a whole 24 hours without one joke."

"I'm not sure I can quit cold turkey, maybe I get three?"

"You are always one to bargain, fine, three," Minako smiled and once Jo was situated, she moistened her lips and began reading.

Fini

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