

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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**THE LAST
MURDER**

**AT THE
END OF**

A NOVEL

THE

WORLD



PROLOGUE

“Is there no other way?” asks a horrified Niema Mandripilias, speaking out loud in an empty room.

She has olive skin and a smudge of ink on her small nose. Her gray hair is shoulder length, and her eyes are strikingly blue with flecks of green. She looks to be around fifty and has done for the last forty years. She’s hunched over her desk, lit by a solitary candle. There’s a pen in her trembling hand, and a confession beneath it that she’s been trying to finish for the last hour.

“None that I can see,” I reply in her thoughts. “Somebody has to die for this plan to work.”

Suddenly short of air, Niema scrapes her chair back and darts across the room, swiping aside the tattered sheet that serves as a makeshift door before stepping into the muggy night air.

It’s pitch-black outside, the moon mobbed by storm clouds. Rain is pummeling the shrouded village, filling her nostrils with the scent of wet earth and cypress trees. She can just about see the tops of the encircling walls, etched in silver moonlight. Somewhere in the darkness, she can hear the distant squeal of machinery and the synchronized drumbeat of footsteps.

She stands there, letting the warm rain soak her hair and dress. “I knew there’d be a cost,” she says, her voice numb. “I didn’t realize it would be so high.”

“There’s still time to put this plan aside,” I say. “Leave your secrets buried,

and let everybody go about their lives as they've always done. Nobody has to die."

"And nothing will change," she shoots back angrily. "I've spent ninety years trying to rid humanity of its selfishness, greed, and impulse toward violence. Finally, I have a way to do it."

She touches the tarnished cross hanging around her neck for comfort. "If this plan works, we'll create a world without suffering. For the first time in our history, there'll be perfect equality. I can't turn my back on that because I don't have the strength to do what's necessary."

Niema speaks as if her dreams were fish swimming willingly into her net, but these are murky waters, far more dangerous than she can see.

From my vantage in her mind—and the minds of everybody on the island—I can predict the future with a high degree of accuracy. It's a confluence of probability and psychology, which is easy to chart when you have access to everybody's thoughts.

Streaking away from this moment are dozens of possible futures, each waiting to be conjured into existence by a random event, an idle phrase, a miscommunication, or an overheard conversation.

Unless a violin performance goes flawlessly, a knife will be rammed into Niema's stomach. If the wrong person steps through a long-closed door, a huge, scarred man will be emptied of every memory, and a young woman who isn't young at all will run willingly to her own death. If these things don't happen, the last island on earth will end up covered in fog, everything dead in the gloom.

"We can avoid those pitfalls if we're cautious," says Niema, watching lightning tear through the sky.

"You don't have time to be cautious," I insist. "Once you commit to this plan, secrets will surface, old grudges will come to light, and people you love will realize the extent of your betrayal. If any of these things disrupts your plan, the human race will be rendered extinct in ninety-one hours."

Niema's heart jolts, her pulse quickening. Her thoughts waver, only to harden again as her arrogance takes the reins.

"The greatest achievements have always brought the greatest risk," she

says stubbornly, watching a line of figures walking stiffly in the darkness. “Start your countdown, Abi. In four days we’re either going to change the world or die trying.”



91 HOURS UNTIL
HUMANITY'S
EXTINCTION

I

Two rowboats float at world's end, a rope pulled taut between them. There are three children in each with exercise books and pencils, listening to Niema deliver her lesson.

She's at the bow of the boat on the right, gesticulating toward a wall of black fog that rises a mile into the air from the ocean's surface. The setting sun is diffused through the sooty darkness, creating the illusion of flames burning on the water.

Thousands of insects are swirling inside, glowing gently.

"They're held back by a barrier produced by twenty-three emitters located around the island's perimeter..."

Niema's lesson wafts past Seth, who's the only person in either of the boats not paying attention. Unlike the children, who range in age from eight to twelve, Seth's forty-nine, with a creased face and sunken eyes. It's his job to row Niema and her students out here and back again when they're done.

He's peering over the edge, his fingers in the water. The ocean's warm and clear, but it won't stay that way. It's October, a month of uncertain temper. Glorious sunshine gives way to sudden storms, which burn themselves out quickly, then apologize as they hurry away, leaving bright-blue skies in their wake.

"The emitters were designed to run for hundreds of years unless..." Niema falters, losing her thread.

Seth looks toward the bow to find her staring into space. She's given this

same lesson every year since he was a boy, and he's never once heard her trip over the wording.

Something has to be wrong. She's been like this all day: seeing through people, only half listening. It's not like her.

A swell brings a dead fish floating by Seth's hand, its body torn to shreds, its eyes white. More follow, thudding into the hull one after another. There are dozens of them, equally torn apart, drifting out of the black fog. Their cold scales brush against his skin and he snatches his hand back inside the boat.

"As you can see, the fog kills anything it touches," Niema tells her students, gesturing to the fish. "Unfortunately, it covers the entire earth, except for our island and half a mile of ocean surrounding it."

Magdalene's sitting cross-legged at the end of a long concrete pier that extends into the glittering bay. Her hair is a tangled red pile, clumsily tied up with a torn piece of yellow linen. She looks like some ancient figurehead fallen off her galleon.

It's early evening, and the bay is filled with swimmers doing laps, or else hurling themselves off the rocks to her left, their laughter chasing them into the water.

Magdalene's staring at the distant rowboats with the children in them, a few flicks of charcoal adding them to the sketchbook in her lap. They seem so small against the wall of black.

She shudders.

Her eleven-year-old son, Sherko, is in one of those boats. She's never understood why Niema insists on taking them all the way to world's end for this lesson. Surely, they could learn about their history without being in touching distance of it.

She remembers being out there when she was a girl, hearing this same lesson from the same teacher. She cried the entire way and nearly jumped out to swim for home when they dropped anchor.

"The children are safe with Niema," I say reassuringly.

Magdalene shivers. She thought sketching this moment would alleviate her worry, but she can't watch any longer. She was only given her son three years ago, and she still mistakes him for fragile.

“What’s the time, Abi?”

“5:43 p.m.”

She notes it in the corner, alongside the date, jabbing a pin in history, which flutters and rustles on the page.

After blowing away the charcoal dust, she stands and turns for the village. It was formerly a naval base, and from this vantage it appears much more inhospitable than it actually is. The buildings inside are protected by a high wall, which is covered in ancient graffiti, weeds sprouting from long cracks. Vaulted roofs peek over the top, their gutters hanging loose, the solar panels made into glinting mirrors by the bright sunlight.

Magdalene follows a paved road through a rusted iron gate, the sentry towers so overrun by vegetation they look like hedges.

The barracks looms up in front of her. It’s n-shaped and four stories high, made of crumbling concrete blocks, every inch painted with jungle, flowers, and birds, animals stalking through the undergrowth. It’s a fantasy land, the paradise of people who’ve grown up surrounded by dry earth and barren rock.

Rickety staircases and rusted balconies grant access to the dormitories inside, none of which have doors or windows in the frames. A few villagers are hanging their washing over the railings or sitting on the steps, trying to catch whatever scraps of breeze dare to clamber over the wall. Friends call to her cheerfully, but she’s too anxious to respond.

“Where’s Emory?” she asks, her eyes moving fretfully across the faces in front of her.

“Near the kitchen, with her grandfather.”

Magdalene heads into the space between the two wings of the barracks, searching for her best friend. This used to be an exercise yard for the troops, but it’s slowly been transformed into a park by three generations of villagers.

Flowers have been planted in long beds along the walls, and the old collapsed radar dish has been patched up and turned into a huge bird bath. Four rusted jeeps serve as planters for herbs, while lemon and orange trees grow out of shell casings. There’s a covered stage for musical performances

and an outdoor kitchen with six long tables for communal meals. Everybody eats together every night.

One hundred and twenty-two people live in the village, and most of them are in this yard. Games are being played, instruments practiced, and poems written. Performances are being rehearsed on the stage. Food is being cooked, and new dishes attempted.

There's a lot of laughter.

For a second, this joy loosens Magdalene's worry. She scans the area, searching for Emory, who isn't hard to find. Most of the villagers are squat and broad-shouldered, but Emory's slighter and shorter than most, with oval eyes and a huge head of curly brown hair. She once described herself as looking like some strange species of dandelion.

"Stay still," demands Matis, peering around the statue. "I'm almost finished."

Matis is nearly sixty, which makes him the oldest man in the village. He's thick-armed, with gray whiskers and bushy eyebrows.

"I'm itchy," complains Emory, struggling to reach a spot on her upper back.

"I gave you a break half an hour ago."

"For fifteen minutes!" she exclaims. "I've been standing here with this stupid apple for six hours."

"Art always has a price," he says loftily.

Emory sticks her tongue out at him, then resumes her pose, lifting the gleaming apple into the air.

Muttering, Matis returns to his work, shaving a sliver from the sculpture's chin. He's so close to it, his nose is almost touching the stone. His eyesight has been fading for the last decade, but there's nothing we can do. Even if we could, there'd be little point. He'll be dead tomorrow.

Emory sees Magdalene striding toward her, one of her sketchbooks under her arm. She's moving stiffly, knotted by worry.

Emory doesn't need to ask what's wrong. Magdalene's fear for her son is obsessive. She sees snakes in every patch of grass and strong currents under every stretch of calm water. Every splinter brings sepsis, and every illness is fatal. By Magdalene's reckoning, this island has a thousand clawed hands and they're all reaching for her child.

Abandoning her pose, Emory gives her friend a hug.

"Don't worry, Mags, Sherko will be fine," says Emory comfortingly.

Magdalene's face is buried against Emory's shoulder, her voice muffled.

"One swell and—"

"They're at anchor," says Emory. "Niema's been taking kids out to world's end since before we were born. Nobody ever gets hurt."

"That doesn't mean it couldn't happen today."

Emory's eyes scour the blue sky. The sun is behind the volcano, which looms up behind the village, and the moon is already taking shape. In an hour, they'll be painted in shade.

"They'll be home soon," says Emory kindly. "Come on, we can help set the tables for the funeral; it'll take your mind off it."

Her eyes flash toward Matis, guiltily. She should be spending these last hours with her grandfather, but he silently shoos her away.

Forty minutes later, the six schoolchildren come running through the

gate, to the jubilation of the village. Magdalene engulfs Sherko, earning a squirming giggle, as the rest of them are hugged and kissed, bounced from adult to adult until finally they reach their parents, mussed and laughing.

The crowd murmurs warmly, parting to let Niema through. There are three elders in the village and they're all revered, but only Niema is loved. The villagers stroke her arms as she passes, their faces bright with adoration.

Niema bestows smiles on each of them in turn, squeezing their hands. The other two elders, Hephaestus and Thea, keep to themselves, but Niema eats with the villagers every night. She dances along to the band and sings at the top of her voice during the chorus.

Niema lays a comforting hand on Magdalene's shoulder, then lifts her chin with a fingertip. Niema's a head taller than most villagers, forcing Magdalene to crane her neck to meet her gaze.

"I know what you're worried about, but I'll never put any of these children in harm's way," she says, her voice a low rasp. "There's so few of us left. We need every one of them kept safe."

Tears brim in Magdalene's eyes, her expression awestruck and grateful. Unlike Emory, she didn't catch the hitch in Niema's voice, the faint drag of doubt.

After laying on a little more sentiment, Niema works her way back out of the crowd, gracefully linking arms with Emory on her way to the barracks.

"That should hold her for a few days," she says when they're out of earshot. "Come fetch me next time she starts fretting. I was worried she was going to swim out to the boat."

"I've been trying to calm her down for an hour," says Emory, glancing at Magdalene's beatific expression. "How did you do that?"

"I'm just old," replies Niema brightly. "Wrinkles look like wisdom to the young." She lowers her voice conspiratorially, tapping Emory's hand. "Come on, I have another book for you."

Emory's heart leaps in excitement.

Arm in arm, they walk in companionable silence through the humid air, which is filling with fireflies as twilight descends. This is Emory's favorite

time of day. The sky is pink and purple, the stone walls blushing. The fierce heat has receded to a pleasant warmth, and everybody's back inside the village, their joy pouring into the empty spaces.

"How's the carpentry coming?" asks Niema.

The villagers leave school at fifteen, and they're free to choose any occupation that's of benefit to the community, but Emory's been cycling through jobs for a decade, struggling to make headway in any of them.

"I gave it up," she admits.

"Oh, why?"

"Johannes begged me to," replies Emory sheepishly. "It turns out I'm not very good at sawing wood, planing beams or making joints, and he didn't think a wonky cabinet was worth losing a finger over."

Niema laughs. "What about the cooking? What happened to that?"

"Katia told me that dicing an onion should be the start of my kitchen skills, not the end of them," says Emory dejectedly. "Before that, Daniel told me that it didn't matter which way I held a guitar, because it would all sound the same. Mags lent me her paint for half a day, then didn't stop laughing for a week. It turns out I'm hopeless at everything."

"You're very observant," remarks Niema gently.

"What use is that when Abi sees everything we do anyway," replies Emory disconsolately. "I want to be of service to the village, but I have no idea how."

"Actually, I've been wondering if you might like to come and work in the school with me," says Niema tentatively. "I'm going to need somebody to take over, and I think you'd make an excellent replacement."

For a second, Emory can only frown at this suggestion. Niema's been the village's only teacher for as long as anybody can remember.

"You're giving it up?" asks Emory in surprise. "Why?"

"Age," replies Niema, climbing the rattling steps toward her dormitory. "Teaching is wonderful for the soul, but it's a torment for my poor back. I've lived a long life, Emory, but my happiest memories took place in the classroom. Seeing the elation on a child's face when they finally understand

a difficult concept is an astonishing feeling.” She pauses her ascent, glancing over her shoulder. “I truly think you’d be good at it.”

Emory’s excellent at spotting lies, and Niema’s altered pitch makes this one particularly easy to pick out.

The young woman’s eyes narrow suspiciously. “And which particular qualities of mine make you think that?”

Niema’s response is immediate, delivered with the brisk air of rehearsal. “You’re clever and curious and you’ve got a way with people.”

“Yes, they find me mildly annoying,” supplies Emory. “Have you been talking to my dad?”

Niema falters, hesitation coming into her tone.

“He may have mentioned that you’re between occupations again,” she replies. “But I wouldn’t have made the offer if—”

“Tell Dad I’m writing a play!”

Niema offers her a sidelong glance. “You’ve been writing a play for a year.”

“I don’t want to rush it.”

“There doesn’t seem to be any danger of that,” murmurs Niema, pushing aside the tatty sheet that serves as the door to her dorm room.

This sheet has always been a quirk of hers. None of the villagers have a problem with empty doors, privacy being a concept that has remarkably little value when you’re born with a voice in your head that can hear your thoughts.

Over the years, the villagers have done their best to repair the dorms, but there’s only so much that can be done with a building this old. The concrete walls are riddled with cracks and holes; the gray floor tiles are shattered, and the beams supporting the roof are rotted. Mildew permeates the air.

Such decay is dreary, so the villagers beat it back with color and life. Niema has put down a large rug and placed a vase of freshly cut flowers on the windowsill. The walls are covered in paintings, spanning every artist who’s ever worked in the village. Most of them aren’t very good, leading Emory to wonder why Niema chose to preserve them. In many cases, the bare concrete would be an improvement.

Her shutters are closed to keep the insects out, so Niema lights a small

candle on a rickety writing desk, its flickering glow falling across a half-written letter, which she hastily sweeps into a drawer.

“How much of this play have you actually finished?” she wonders, shielding the candle flame as she carries it to an overstuffed bookshelf beside an iron bed.

“Four pages,” admits Emory.

“Are they good?”

“No,” says Emory, dismayed. “Turns out, I’m no better at writing plays than I was at making shoes, doing woodwork, or building kites. My only skills seem to be noticing things people don’t want noticed and asking questions people don’t want answered.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry,” replies Niema, running her finger along the spines of the books, searching for the one she wants. “Some people are born knowing what they’re for, and others take a little longer to work it out. I’m one hundred and seventy-three but I didn’t start teaching until I was past eighty, and after that, I never wanted to do anything else. It could be the same for you, if you give it a chance.”

Emory adores Niema, but the older woman talks about her age with so little regard that it’s frequently insulting. None of the villagers will ever live half as long, and Niema’s frequent allusions to her longevity can feel cruel. It’s especially painful today, when her grandfather’s so close to death.

“Aha,” exclaims Niema, pulling a tattered old paperback off the middle shelf. “This one is called *Samuel Pipp’s and the Shrieking Spire*. Hephaestus found it in an abandoned train carriage a few weeks back.”

She pushes it into Emory’s hand, catching the dismay on her face.

“I know you prefer Holmes,” she says, tapping the lurid cover. “But give this a chance. You’ll like it. It has three murders in it!”

Her voice has lowered to a hush. She knows I don’t like people talking about murder in the village, or even using the word openly.

The last one took place over ninety years ago, just before the world ended. Two friends argued on a stairwell in Nairobi about a promotion. In a jealous

rage, one shoved the other, who fell down the steps and broke her neck. The killer had just enough time to wonder if he could get away with it before the fog came pouring out of the ground. He died a second later, along with everybody he'd ever known, and most of the people he hadn't. There hasn't been another murder since. I've made sure of it.

Nobody else in the village is allowed to read these books, but I've made an exception for Emory, because their puzzles are the only things that can sate her devouring curiosity for any length of time.

"Remember, don't show it to anybody else," says Niema, as they depart the room for the balcony. "It'll only frighten them."

Emory clutches the illicit book tight against her stomach. "Thank you, Niema."

"Pay me back by coming to the school tomorrow."

Seeing the objection forming on Emory's lips, she hastily adds, "Not because your father wants it. It's a favor for me. If you don't like it, you can go back to not writing your play."

Niema's gaze flicks past Emory, causing the younger woman to follow it over her shoulder. Niema's son, Hephaestus, is stomping through the gate. His shaved head is bent low and his huge shoulders are rolled forward, as if the sky were pressing down on them.

Hephaestus is another elder, but he only appears when things need fixing or building. Most of the time, he lives alone in the wilderness, which is a thought so alien to Emory that even mentioning it fills her with unease.

"What's he doing here?" she wonders out loud.

"He's looking for me," replies Niema distantly.

Emory's gaze returns to Niema's face. She thought she recognized all of her teacher's moods, but there's something playing on her features that's never been there before. It could be uncertainty, or it could be fear.

"Are you okay?" asks Emory.

Niema's eyes find her, but it's clear her thoughts are still with her son.

"Tomorrow night, I'm going to conduct an experiment that's failed every time I've tried it previously," she says, feeling her way toward every word. "But

if it fails this time..." Her voice trails off, her hands touching her stomach nervously.

"If it fails..." prods Emory.

"I'll have to do something unforgivable," she says, watching Hephaestus disappear behind the back of the kitchen. "And I'm still not certain I have the strength."

4

Peering through his binoculars, Adil watches Emory and Niema talking on the balcony outside the barracks, his heart thudding.

He's halfway up the east face of the volcano, having found his way through the lava tubes that riddle this section. The ground is ash, the rocks black with razor-sharp edges. It's as if his thoughts are radiating out of him, scorching the land.

He's thirty miles away from the village, but he's chosen this vantage point because it has a clean line of sight over the walls.

He can see Emory comforting Niema, placing an affectionate hand on the older woman's arm. Every second of it burns, dripping poison in his veins.

I don't counsel him toward kindness. There's no point. For the last five years he's thought of nothing except revenge. I have to nudge him to eat, and he does so impatiently, wrenching vegetables out of the earth or plucking armfuls of fruit from the trees.

He's fifty-eight, but he looks ten years older. His flesh is pulled taut over cartilage and bone, his face gaunt, his black hair turned gray and his brown eyes gone dim. His skin is blotchy and sickly looking, and his chest rattles when he coughs, hinting at the sickness within. Under normal circumstances, I'd order him back to the village to be cared for, or at least have company in his final days.

Unfortunately, that's not possible. He's the island's only criminal, and his punishment is exile.

“She thinks Niema’s her friend,” he murmurs aloud, a habit of his since he was banished. “She has no idea what Niema’s taken from her.”

As Emory hurries away, clutching her book, Niema glances up at the volcano. She can’t see Adil at this distance, but she knows he’s there. I report his movements to her on an hourly basis. He’s one of the few dangerous people on the island so she likes to know where he is at all times.

He sucks in a trembling breath and stares at his knife, imagining plunging it into her belly. He wants to see her eyes roll up in their sockets as the life goes out of them. He wants it more than he’s ever wanted anything.

“And what good will revenge do you?” I ask. “Have you thought about that? Have you considered what your life will be after you’ve killed somebody. How you’ll feel?”

“I’ll feel like the job’s half-done,” he replies. “Niema’s the worst of them, but I won’t stop until Thea and Hephaestus are in the furnace. So long as they’re alive, we’ll never be free.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” I say. “Whatever you plot, I’ll warn them about. You’ll never get anywhere near them.”

“You can’t watch me forever,” he thinks.

He’s wrong about that. I was in his thoughts when he was born, and I’ll be in his thoughts when he dies. I watched over his ancestors, and I’ll watch over his descendants. There are so few humans left; they must be protected, and the village is the key to that. It must be safeguarded at any cost.

It's twilight, a crescent moon cutting a hole in the dark-blue sky.

The village glows with candlelight and reverberates with laughter and music. The band is playing, and most people—including Niema—are dancing in front of the stage. Matis's funeral is over. There's no need for grief. Not anymore.

The remnants of the evening meal cover the long tables, which are lit by flickering candles and the mourning lanterns hanging overhead. They're made of colored rice paper and strung on ropes between the two wings of the barracks. There's a lantern for every person in the village, and each one contains a scrap of paper on which they've written a kindness Matis did for them.

This is the way they revere the dead. They remember what they offered the world, and what everybody else has to do to fill the gap. There are no prayers here, no thoughts of an afterlife. The reward for a good life is the living of it.

Matis is at the center of the long table, surrounded by his oldest friends. They're laughing and reminiscing, knowing their own days are nearly at an end, too. Everybody dies on their sixtieth birthday, whether they're healthy or not. They enjoy their funeral, then go to sleep as normal. At some point in the night, their hearts simply stop beating. After a lifetime of service, dying painlessly in their beds is the least I can give them.

Emory walks out through the iron gate in the high wall surrounding the village, onto the concrete pier, leaving the sounds of celebration behind.

Tears are rolling down her cheeks, but she doesn't want anybody to see her being selfish. Unlike many of his generation, her grandfather actually made it to sixty. He's spent every day in service to the village and will pass away without regret.

Knowing when he's going to die has afforded him the luxury of long goodbyes. For the last week, he's seen everybody he wants to see. Everybody he cares for knows how he feels about them, and he—in turn—is full of their love. There is nothing left unsaid.

Emory can only hope to die as fulfilled, but grief presses against her chest, tearing at her heart.

Her mother died from a fever when Emory was twelve, and her father seemed to drift away with her. Her grandmother was long dead, so it was Matis who read Emory stories at night and gave her jobs to do during the day; mindless, thankless things to keep her from dwelling on the pain of her lost family.

Even now the clink of his chisel hitting stone brings her comfort, and the idea that she won't hear that sound again is unbearable.

From the pebbled bay to her left, she catches a rhythmic hammering. It's much too dark to see what's causing it, but she has a fairly good idea.

Moving carefully, she follows the tapping around four moored boats, where she finds Seth repairing the hull of the Broad Bottom Packet by the light of a small lantern. The tide is in, and the waves are nipping playfully at his heels. Alerted by the crunching pebbles, he casts her a quick annoyed glance.

He has a heavy brow above a crooked nose and a square jaw that clicks when he eats. Beneath his broad shoulders are two thick arms covered in whorls of dark hair and patches of grease. They were powerful once, but the muscles have softened and the empty flesh is starting to sag.

Compared to everybody else in the village, there's the air of a first attempt about Seth, like nature thumbed a couple of eyes into the clay, then tossed him aside as a bad job.

"You're working?" she says, surprised.

She came here expecting to find him hobbled by the same grief as herself, but she now realizes that was idiotic. Every villager's life is an act of service. They care for each other before themselves, and her father is devout to that ideal. He won't cry until he's filled every pothole, patched every roof, harvested every vegetable and loaded the furnace that will cremate his father. By his estimation, sadness is just selfishness that people pity rather than scorn.

"She's got a hole in her," he says, resuming his hammering.

"You don't want to see Matis?"

"We talked this morning," he says gruffly.

"He's your dad."

"That's why we talked this morning," he repeats, lining up another nail.

Emory bites her lip, overcome by the usual exhaustion. Every conversation with her father is like this. He's a boulder you have to keep rolling uphill.

"Niema offered me a job today."

"She told me," he replies, pounding the nail into the wood. "You should accept it. It's a huge honor, and you've tried everything else. It's about time you found a way to properly serve the village."

She accepts the reprimand silently, watching the foamy water lap against the pebbles. The sea's pitch-black at this hour, the bay lost to the darkness. She's half-tempted to go for a swim, but it's too close to curfew. She settles for walking a few steps into the surf, letting it wash her sandaled feet. They're always filthy by the end of the day.

"Something's upsetting Niema," she says, trying to change the subject. "Do you know what it is? She told me she has an experiment to run, but I couldn't get anything else out of her. It sounds important."

"No idea," he replies, lining up another nail. "I noticed she was preoccupied, but she didn't mention anything."

"Did you ask her about it?"

"That's not my place."

"I wish she'd let us help her."

"That's like wishing you could take the sun's weight for a day." Another nail is driven into the wood. "Niema's concerns dwarf us. If she has need of

help, she'll ask one of the elders. We need to keep our focus on the things we can control."

He pauses meaningfully, coming onto the subject that's been bothering him. "How's Clara?"

Emory's daughter was recently chosen to become one of Thea's apprentices, and she's been exploring the island for the last three weeks as part of her training. It's a huge honor, as she was one of only two people who made it through the trials. She's now receiving an advanced education in mathematics, engineering, biology and chemistry, learning things far beyond the understanding of most villagers.

"I've sent some messages through Abi, but she's not replied to any of them," says Emory, mesmerized by the dark ocean. "I think she's still angry."

Seth's hammer wavers in the air, then thuds into a nail. He's tense, the cords in his neck flaring.

"You might as well get it off your chest," says Emory tersely, recognizing this mood.

"I'm fine," he grunts.

"Just say it, Dad," she insists. "You'll feel better after you've shouted a bit."

"It's every child's dream to become one of Thea's apprentices," he says through gritted teeth. "Can't you be happy for Clara? Can't you pretend? You didn't even go to her leaving dinner."

"I couldn't celebrate something I never wanted for her," says Emory, wiping droplets of seawater off her forearm.

Once her new apprentices are fully trained, Thea will put them to work running experiments in her lab and searching the island for promising technology to salvage. It's a lifetime position, but most of her apprentices don't survive a decade. It's dangerous work and Emory's already lost a husband and her mother to the apprentices. She tried everything to keep her daughter from applying, much to Seth's disgust.

"That dinner was the happiest day of Clara's life," he says, the furnace starting to grow hot. "I haven't seen her smile so much since her father died. She wanted her mother there to celebrate with her, and you were off sulking."

“I wasn’t sulking.”

“Then what was it? You’re the only person who’s ever turned down the chance to become an apprentice. You couldn’t expect Clara to do the same.”

“I didn’t turn it down,” says Emory, sliding into the well-worn groove of an old argument. “I tried it and didn’t like it. You know what that life is: traipsing across the island, poking around ruins, messing with old machines we barely understand. How many of Thea’s apprentices get injured? How many are still alive?”

“So it was cowardice?” he spits out bitterly.

“It was good sense,” she shoots back. “I noticed that Thea is never the one standing by the machines when they explode.”

“That’s an elder you’re talking about,” he yells, tossing his hammer onto the pebbles angrily. “Show some respect.”

Emory glares at him, too furious to speak.

“The elders are our last link to the old world,” continues Seth, struggling to regain his temper. “They have knowledge it would take us hundreds of years to reclaim. Without them, we’d be starting again from scratch. Do you really believe any of our lives are equal to theirs?”

Emory’s heard this story so often she could recite it with her father’s exact inflections. Ninety years ago, huge sinkholes appeared on every continent, swallowing entire cities. A strange black fog poured out of them, filled with glowing insects that ripped apart whatever they touched. No matter what the nations of the world tried, the fog kept spreading.

It took a year for it to cover the earth, societies crumbling to infighting and barbarism long before they were destroyed. The only beacon of hope was a broadcast from Niema, calling all survivors to a small Greek island.

She was the chief scientist of a huge lab called the Blackheath Institute, which had managed to build a barrier capable of holding the fog back. She promised safety to anybody who could make the journey.

In the end, only a few hundred bedraggled survivors managed it, but reaching the island proved to be only the start of their ordeal. The refugees had grown up in a world where food was found on shelves, medicine was

bought in shops, and an individual's survival was due to finances rather than skill. Any information they needed was borrowed from a screen, leaving them no knowledge to fall back on when those screens vanished. They didn't know how to farm or forage, or how to repair the derelict buildings they were depending on for shelter.

Hard years came and went, dwindling the numbers of refugees. Almost every month, somebody was crushed by falling masonry or burned by accidental fires. They scratched themselves on rusty nails and died screaming in puddles of sweat. They mistook poisonous mushrooms for edible ones and went swimming in the months when the sea teemed with jellyfish and sharks.

Survival was difficult and death was easy, and many abandoned the fight of their own accord. Thankfully for the human race, they left behind children, and it's this gene pool the villagers are descended from.

The three elders are all that's left of the one hundred and seventeen scientists who stayed in Blackheath when the fog first appeared, and their blood still teems with the vaccinations, improvements, and technology that were common before the world ended. They age slowly, never get sick, and everybody treats them with an instinctive reverence that only Niema's earned, according to Emory.

"Why do you have to be..." Seth presses his forehead to the rough wood of the boat's hull, too kind to say what he's thinking, but not kind enough to stop hinting at it.

"Different?" she ventures.

He flings a frustrated arm at the laughter and music pouring through the gate. "Everybody else is happy, Emory. They're just happy. It's not complicated. They know what we have, and they're grateful for it. Why do you have to question everything?"

"And what do we have, Dad?" asks Emory in a quiet voice. "A village in ruins. An island we're not allowed to explore without permission."

"It's dangerous!" he interjects automatically.

"Then why isn't everybody taught survival in school? I love Niema, but can you honestly tell me that you think Thea, or Hephaestus, contributes

enough to the village, that they should be exempt from the rules the rest of us are forced to follow? How is it fair that they don't die at sixty like we do? Why don't they farm for their food or take shifts in the kitchen or help clean the—"

"They contribute knowledge!"

Emory shrinks back from this eruption, like darkness at the edge of a candle flame. This argument is pointless, and she knows it. Her father will never doubt the elders or understand why she does. The more she argues, the more he dislikes her, and that tidemark is high enough already.

"I'm going back to the funeral," she says, defeated. "Do you want me to say anything to Matis?"

"I spoke to him this morning," Seth responds, stooping to pick up his hammer.

6

It's dusk and the curfew bell is ringing across the village, meaning the villagers have fifteen minutes to get to bed. Most of them are already in the barracks, cleaning their teeth and lighting lemongrass to keep the mosquitoes away. Candles burn cheerily in their windows, spilling out into the gloom of evening.

Each dorm room can house up to eight people, and they sleep in the same iron beds as the soldiers who were once stationed here, their mattresses filled with straw and their pillows with feathers. They don't need sheets. Even in winter, it's much too hot.

Only those villagers on cleanup duty are still in the exercise yard. Shilpa is dousing the candles on the tables, while Rebecca, Abbas, Johannes, and Yovel finish putting away the last of the washed dinner plates on the shelves of the outdoor kitchen.

Magdalene and several other parents are calling out for the children, who are hiding under the table. They've been chasing them from shadow to shadow for the last twenty minutes.

The escapees are given away by their giggling.

As Emory enters the gate, the squirming children are being carried to bed by whichever adult is fast enough to grab hold of them. Every child has a parent, but that's an emotional title, not a practical one. They're raised by the village. It's the only way of making the job manageable.

"I'm never sure which one of you is the most ridiculous," says a voice in the darkness.

Emory looks across to find Matis sitting on a bench in the gloom, dunking a piece of focaccia into a bowl of salted olive oil. There's a pretty green gem hanging around his neck on a length of string.

Unless they die suddenly, every villager bequeaths their memories to me before death. In those final few breaths, I catalog every experience they've ever had—even ones they don't remember—and store them indefinitely in one of these gems, allowing others to relive them whenever they wish. Unfortunately, the villagers only wear the memory gems during their funeral, giving them a somewhat grim aspect.

Niema is holding Matis's hand companionably. Her blue eyes are red with recent tears.

"As usual, you've started in the middle of a thought," replies Emory, still irritable after arguing with her father.

"Be nice to me, I'm dying," he says, popping a chunk of bread into his mouth.

Emory searches his face for some hint of the fear he must be feeling, but he's munching away, cheerful as ever. It's not fair, she thinks selfishly. He's healthy and strong. If he was an elder he'd wake up tomorrow, same as normal.

She wants more time.

She wants her grandfather planted solidly at the center of her life where he's always been, where he should always be. She wants to be able to eat breakfast with him and watch him clumsily pick the seeds out of a kiwi fruit with those thick fingers. She wants to hear his laugh from across the exercise yard. She wants to know why a good man such as this, with so much energy and talent, has to die to appease a rule that was created long before he was born.

"I'll leave you two to talk," says Niema, getting to her feet and laying an affectionate hand on Matis's shoulder.

She considers him, then leans down, whispering something into his ear, before giving him a kiss on the cheek and leaving.

"What did she say?" asks Emory.

"Five five," he replies, chewing his focaccia.

“What does that mean?”

“No idea,” he says, shrugging. “She’s been saying it to me for years, whenever I was upset or a bit down. I asked her once what it meant and she told me it was a map to the future, but she never got round to explaining it.”

“Don’t you want to know?” asks Emory, exasperated.

“Of course I do, but if she wanted to tell me, she would have done it already.”

Wiping the olive oil and bread crumbs from his hands, he stands up heavily and links his arm through Emory’s.

“How was the fight with your father?” he asks, changing the subject. “Did it distract you from being sad? I’m assuming that’s why you went down there.”

Emory casts a glance back toward the pool of lantern light in the bay, then smiles slightly, knowing there’s no point denying it.

“I do feel a bit better, yeah,” she admits.

“Your dad probably does, as well. You’re just like him. You run to the things that frighten you and away from the things you love.” He sounds baffled. “Come on, I’ve finished my sculpture. I want you to see it.”

They walk toward the spot in the exercise yard where Matis has been working all week. The statue of Emory is standing on its tiptoes, having just plucked a stone apple from the boughs of the real apple tree above.

“Do you like it?” asks Matis, when Emory lays her chin on his shoulder.

“No,” she admits.

“Why not?”

He’s curious, but not insulted. Art isn’t sacred in the village. It’s a bawdy, boisterous communal activity. Poems are interrogated even as they’re recited, and bands will swap musicians in the midst of a song if they’re losing the beat. If an actor’s struggling in a play, it’s common for the crowd to call out lines or improvise better ones. Occasionally, they’ll take over the part completely. Emory’s seen entire first acts rewritten by committee halfway through the performance.

“Because it doesn’t see anything and it doesn’t ask questions, and it’s perfectly happy to be here,” she says. “The only person in the village it doesn’t resemble is me.”

Matis snorts, slapping his leg. "Isn't a single other person who would have given me that answer," he says, delighted.

Emory stares up at the candlelit windows of the barracks, watching the silhouettes moving inside, brushing their hair and preparing for bed.

"I love the village. I really do," she says quietly. "I just don't... There are things that don't make any sense to me, and everybody just acts like they do, or that they don't matter."

Her thoughts drift back to her childhood, recalling the first time she discovered the elders could stay awake past curfew. Even as a child she knew it was unfair, but nobody else seemed to care.

I explained that villagers need more rest than the elders, but that answer didn't sate her, especially after she woke up with a splinter in her heel that hadn't been there when she went to sleep. A few weeks later, she found a fresh scratch on her thigh, then bruises on her arm. She never knew how they got there.

I tried to convince her that she was mistaken, but Emory was much too observant to believe such an obvious lie. She asked her father what happened to them after they went to sleep, but he treated the very question as blasphemy. She asked her mother, who professed herself too busy to answer. She asked Matis, who laughed and ruffled her hair. Finally, she put her hand up in class and asked Niema, who kept her back after school.

"Sometimes we wake you up after curfew," she admitted to the young Emory, after praising her bravery for asking the question.

"Why?"

"To help us with our tasks."

"What tasks?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Why don't we remember?"

"Because it's better if you don't," said Niema a little guiltily.

After leaving the classroom, Emory told everybody in the village what she'd learned, simultaneously awed at the power of questions and dismayed at the limitations of answers. She thought they'd be astonished by what she'd

unearthed, but most of her friends met the news with a shrug, or else were embarrassed that she'd been so impertinent.

It's been the same way ever since.

Their bright sunlit lives are blotted by shadows, and nobody cares what's concealed in that darkness except her. Sometimes, she watches her friends at the evening meal and feels as distant from them as she does from the elders.

"Why doesn't anybody question anything?" she asks her grandfather, focusing on him once again.

"They like being happy," he says simply.

"I'm not trying to change that."

"And, yet, answers nearly always do," he replies, waving away the mosquitoes. Dusk brings them out in thick, unrelenting waves.

"This is my last night on earth," he says matter-of-factly. "So I'm going to say a few things I've always wanted to say, starting with this. Tomorrow morning you'll wake up one friend short, and you weren't exactly burdened with them to start with. Some of that isn't your fault, but some of it is. You're a clever girl, Em, but you've never had any patience for people who don't see the world the way you do. That wasn't a problem, except now Clara's one of those people."

"Clara chose Thea," remarks Emory flatly.

"And you don't like Thea."

"She killed Jack." Her voice cracks on her husband's name.

"Jack's dead because he rowed out in a squall and drowned," points out Matis.

"On Thea's order," she counters. "Jack and every other apprentice who was in that boat with him are dead because they bowed their heads and did what they were told without question. They weren't the first and they won't be the last. People who choose Thea die, and I don't want Clara to be one of them."

Matis envelops her hands in both of his own, smothering her rage.

"What's the use of loving somebody so much they can't stand being in the same room as you? Clara's already lost her father. She can't lose her mother

as well. Carry on like this, and you'll be ten years older, wondering why the two of you don't speak to each other anymore."

Emory holds his gaze for as long as she can before she drops her head. "I'm going to miss you," she says.

"Don't do it for too long," he replies. "The more you look back, the more you miss what's around you. That was your father's mistake."

He wipes away her tears with a rough, crooked thumb.

"Speaking of which, have you seen that hopeless son of mine?"

"He's in the bay, mending a boat."

"He never did learn how to be sad," replies Matis, sighing.

After squeezing her hand, he turns toward the gate. For a moment, Emory thinks she sees a hunched figure out there in the gloom, but she blinks and they're gone.

"I'll come with you," says Emory, realizing these are the last moments they'll ever spend together.

"I have words that are just for him," he says grimly. "It's about time one of us said them." He glances at his granddaughter over his shoulder. "Your father was always too hard on you, Emory, but he does love you."

"I wish I believed you."

"I wish you didn't have to."

Emory watches her grandfather leave the village for the last time, before I gently nudge her into motion.

"You've got six minutes until curfew," I say. "Get yourself to your room. Otherwise, you'll be sleeping out here."

Emory springs away, her sandals kicking up the dirt ground, but she's halted by the sight of Niema and Hephaestus arguing in front of the metal staircase leading up to her dorm.

"You promised me these experiments were over," yells Hephaestus, his voice guttural.

The rage in it causes Emory to take a nervous step back into the darkness. Hephaestus is a foot taller than anybody else in the village and twice their width. He's carelessly shorn his hair to scabs and stubble, and there's a gouge

down the right side of his face. His hands are huge. As are his arms. His legs. His chest. Matis once joked that the only way he could sculpt Hephaestus would be to start chipping away at the volcano behind the village.

“Can’t this wait until after curfew?” hisses Niema, peering up at her son. She seems so small in his shadow, a doll made of twigs and twine, with hay for hair.

“We’re supposed to be protecting them,” he says pleadingly.

“From themselves,” replies Niema, realizing that she won’t be able to head the conversation off. “That requires sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice is when they make the choice. What we’re doing is murder.”

Emory gasps, shocked to hear that awful word tossed around so casually without a book present.

“Not if it works,” argues Niema.

“It never has before. At this point, it’s no better than a death sentence.”

“I know what we’ve been doing wrong, Hephaestus,” she says in a wheedling tone. “I’ve adapted the procedure. It’s going to succeed this time.”

Confronted by the immovability of her son’s doubt, Niema lifts his heavy hands, turning them over to inspect the scars and burns that mottle his flesh.

“You’re the reason I started these experiments, you know,” she says sadly. “I’ll never forget the day you washed up on the island. You were half-dead, tortured almost beyond recognition. I thought the fog had got you, but then you told me about the gangs and the camp where they held you.”

She reaches up, touching the scar on his cheek.

“I swore I’d never let that happen to anybody ever again.” Her voice hardens, calcifying around her anger. “Yes, we’re risking an innocent life, but think of the rewards if our experiment works. Every generation that comes after this one will live in peace, without fear of war, crime, or violence. No human being will ever hurt another. We’ll be able to let them roam this island freely without worrying what they’ll do with that freedom. Put it on a scale, my darling. Think about how much good we can do with one single act.”

Hephaestus stares at her uncertainly, his size now appearing to be a trick of the light. He’s hunched over, his shoulders pointing toward her, his shaved

head bowed low to hear her hushed words. It's as though he's collapsing under her gravity.

"You're sure it will work this time?" he asks.

"Yes," she says firmly.

Even with no understanding of what they're talking about, Emory knows that Niema's not as confident as she's making out. She's too aware of herself, too bright and brittle for somebody claiming to be made of steel.

Hephaestus knows it, too, she thinks. She can see it playing across his shifting features. He's choosing to believe a lie. Allowing himself to be reassured by it, making it big enough to hide behind. For Emory, there's no greater act of cowardice.

Hephaestus examines his hands, which are covered in badly healed scars and burns—each one a memento of his flight across a crumbling civilization. "When do you want them in the chair?" he asks at last.

"Tonight."

"I need twenty-four hours, at least," he disagrees. "You know that."

"This is urgent, Hephaestus. If you bypass the scans—"

"No," he interrupts sternly. "If we do that, there's a chance we miss an underlying medical condition that kills them during the procedure. If you want my help, there'll be no shortcuts. I'll need twenty-four hours to choose a subject with the best chance of survival. You'll have to wait until tomorrow night."

Niema puts aside her irritation with puffed cheeks, smiling at her son as though his objections were the prevarications of a child.

Emory's never seen this version of Niema before. Her entire life she's been a jolly old woman, full of laughter and compassion, urging the villagers to be the best versions of themselves. Emory would never have guessed she could be so manipulative, or so callous about a life. She's acting the way Thea would.

"As you wish," says Niema, spreading her hands magnanimously. "I have another errand to perform tonight, anyway."

Hephaestus accepts this small victory with a grunt, then stalks away without another word, nearly colliding with the watching Emory. There's a

long stride between them, but she still nearly gags on his odor. It's sweat and rot and earth, like he's carrying a dead fox in one of his unwashed pockets.

He meets her astonished gaze with crushing disdain, then glances back over his shoulder. "One of the crums was eavesdropping," he calls out.

"I don't like that term," replies Niema sternly, but Hephaestus is already walking away.

Emory watches him go. When she turns back, Niema is in front of her.

"How much did you hear?" she asks.

"You're planning an experiment that could kill somebody," replies Emory, her voice shaking.

"It's the lesser of two evils, believe me," says Niema, waving away the risk. "We're gambling a solitary life for the chance to make a better world in the long run. I'd give up my own life for that. Wouldn't you?"

"It doesn't sound like they're being given that choice."

"They're not," admits Niema. "I prefer to assume nobility rather than be disappointed by lack of it."

"This is wrong," protests Emory. "We don't hurt people, not for any reason."

"Of course you'd say that." Niema smiles faintly, her manner warming. "But it's my job to make sure those wonderful morals of yours are never tested."

The curfew bell stops ringing.

Emory's eyes widen as she realizes what that means, but before she can do anything about it, she drops to the ground, landing heavily on her shoulder.

She doesn't feel anything.

She's sound asleep, along with the rest of the villagers.