

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a character's face. The skin is dark and heavily cracked, resembling dried mud or stone. The character has a single, glowing blue eye visible, with a red, fleshy, and textured inner lining. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of the skin and the intensity of the eye. The background is dark and out of focus.

THE DUCT TAPED DEAD

NOT ALL WHO DIE ARE LOST

CELESTE YATES
Book one

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The Duct Tape Dead

Not All Who Die are Lost



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*To my children, who inspired this tale,
And Lari, as always*

Foreword

*The Drift calls softly, cold and wide,
A shadow's tide where lost ones glide.
We groan as one, for one who's gone,
We are bound together; we carry on.*

I

Just Because We're Dead, Doesn't
Mean We Can't Die Again

Nee

I guess I'm a zombie. I'm not entirely sure. It's not like I was seated by close family and friends and told in a gentle fashion. It's something we've kind of worked out. I mean, we have no pulse. We don't breathe. We barely operate. And yet we are alive. In a sense.

There are, of course, other options that we thought of, like maybe we were vampires. But the lack of fangs and bloodthirst made us scratch that off the list. We could be some type of monster that a doctor conjured up in their lab. But then... where's the doctor? There also wouldn't be so many of us.

You see, there was this war. Chemicals were used. So were nukes. There are now sections of the world where no one goes. And we died. A lot of people died. But then. Then we woke up. Not all of us. Just some of us. And the people that never died didn't know. They were still fighting the war, dealing with economic declines, tending the wounded, and helping those who were traumatised, people who had lost their families.

Looking back, it had to be chemical. A compound. Maybe a mix of them, coming in from different sides of the fight. I remember gas was everywhere. We had gas, and so did the others we were fighting. After that, we dropped dead. Then, when everything was quiet, we started to move again. Walking past others that

still remained dead.

A few of the humans on the battlefield saw us. They screamed. We panicked and killed them. I guess killing the living is something that is inherent in being a zombie. But we didn't mean to. We didn't eat their brains—that would be gross.

After a while, the world went quiet. The bombs stopped. The buildings were rebuilt. Some zones that got blasted with nukes were quarantined off. But most places were slowly put back together. People hiding in bunkers came out. People in the army quit and returned to their jobs on Wall Street. It took a few decades.

And us? Well. The good thing about any War is that a lot of people end up on the streets afterwards. They've lost their homes and their savings. Some people can't go back to 'regular life.' The images of pain and death have been etched on the back of their eyelids, waiting for them to close their eyes. The only way to stop the anxiety is to become dull. Or to escape. Books and movies provide escape for most people, but not for those who have truly known terror. They need something more substantial.

Society can't deal with those who are barely surviving. They ignore them and pretend not to see them, even though they are right there, slumped against the wall, begging for help. In fact, begging increases the camouflage.

It is there that we hid. In plain sight. With dirty clothes and unwashed skin. Our groans are assumed to be drug-induced when really it is our slow decomposition.

I'm Nee. Hi. I think Nee used to be Neil. Or Nick. Maybe Nelson? It's long gone now. When I first woke up, I remembered a lot more. But over time, it faded. The only thing I do have is a pocket watch. I had it with me when I woke up. The armour

uniform has long since worn through and been replaced by various clothes I pick up at the homeless shelter now and then, but the watch I kept. We all kept something from then.

The pocket watch is stuck at 10 am. I often wonder about the significance of that. Was that the time I died? Or was it just the time the pocket watch died? Perhaps we died together. I like to think it's the latter. No one really wants to die alone, and if the only thing that was with me was the pocket watch, it is comforting. I didn't die alone; I died with a pocket watch. It's more than a lot of other people can say.

I wish there was some sort of engraving or indication as to who gave me the watch. Maybe I bought it for myself for an achievement I did. Or perhaps it was handed down to me by a family member. A loving dad? A grandpa who told wonderful stories and smoked a pipe on Sundays. Family must be a nice thing.

The watch has some scratches and other nicks, but otherwise, it's in pretty good condition. I could probably pawn it if I needed money. But when you don't sleep and never eat, you don't need money. I also have very little concern about my looks. I mean, I'm dead. Ageing isn't such a problem any more.

But decaying is.

Yea, you didn't think about that, did you? It's OK. Few people do. The truth is that zombies are not immortal. We are slowly decaying. Our bodies can't last forever. Every time we break a bone or get a scratch, that's another area of our body that won't heal. We can't heal. The gash is basically a tear in our skin that will forever be there. There are no living cells to fix it.

Bet you didn't think about that, did you? Don't worry—neither did we at first.

You'll be surprised at the amount of care a zombie has to have

with our own personal being. We even have an underground care centre in the shadows of the bridge near the docks on Hertzog Blvd. It's run by two women called Taa and Eve and one guy called Daa. I think Taa was actually a practitioner in medical care before. Her personal item is a small caduceus pin that she has on her collar.

The medical zombies keep useful things for zombie healthcare, like duct tape, steel rods, staple guns, and super glue. They call themselves the 'Rot and Repair Shop.' We have odd humour like that. It keeps us smiling.

The Rot and Repair Shop isn't much to look at, tucked under the bridge where the air smells faintly of rust, damp concrete, and something sour. A single flickering bulb sways above, casting jittery, skeletal shadows. It feels like a cross between an abandoned garage and a junk yard. Shelves line the walls, packed with everything from duct tape to bolts, splints, and oddities that might have been scavenged from an old hospital or hardware shop. In the corner, there's a rusted-out chair—'the surgery station,' Daa calls it, though no one would sit there voluntarily.

Taa, with her caduceus pin glinting faintly, stands behind a table cluttered with glue and gauze. Her hands move fast and sure, even when her own fingers look like they might fall off. Eve's the quiet one, organising supplies with a precision that suggested she once ran a tight ship. She often disappears for a few days on a supply run, fetching and finding items that could be useful. She used to just find items on the floor, next to the shop, but now she has to travel far to get anything decent.

Daa, on the other hand, is always tinkering with something in the back, muttering about how a spring-loaded splint will be 'the next big thing.' The place is a mess, but it's ours. And

somehow, it works. All of us try to help out, and we often bring in things that might be useful if we find anything.

It's a balancing act to be a Zombie. If we move too much, we risk injury. If we move too little, we look suspicious to humans. We also start to seize up a bit like something cruel. You think you get stiff sleeping with your neck funny? Try rigor mortis—that's absolute stiffness.

Every now and then, it gets too much, and we can't repair it, even with the best patch kits or Velcro straps. Our time is done. We call it the *Drift*. A lot of us are petrified of it. You live so long that death becomes even more daunting. There is also so much uncertainty about it because what if there isn't anything for us. I mean, do Zombies have a soul?

Some of us have thought that maybe that's all we do have. Our souls keep us animated after our body has died. But then, does our soul know how to 'move on' after we Drift? Or does it 'Drift' with us into oblivion? "What if there isn't anything waiting for us on the other side? What if the Drift is all there is, and we fade into nothingness?"

We have a little ceremony for those who are about to 'Drift.' We hope we still have a soul and that perhaps doing a ceremony will guide it to where it needs to go. We place their object in their hand. We share words. Sometimes even a line or two of a story. We put them on soft ground. Often by a construction site where the ground has been tossed and turned. We kind of sit in a circle around the Drifting zombie and hum. It's a groaning, haunting, mournful song we make. There is no melody, just a vibe.

There is a soft, gentle sound that usually comes from the Drifting Zombie. It's a distinct noise that we know so well. It sounds like the scratch of a mouse against wood. A few leaves being trodden on. A scrunch of newspaper squeezed into a ball.

Then a little movement ripples through. The body jerks a little once or twice and turns into dust. The personal object is all that is left. We push it further into the dust so that it is hidden. And then we leave.

We might not know what is beyond our state of being. But it is nice to not be alone when it happens. Kaa thinks I'm a bit silly for being an idealist. I mean, look, we are zombies, so we don't say things in so many words when we converse.

In fact, our communication is actually a fascinating thing. We've managed to strip away whole syllables and really grind words down to their most straightforward sound, and yet we know what the other is saying. The adjectives and adverbs are lost, pushed into the word itself through the volume or the tone. Our intensity levels have become part of our dialogue. It's about the feeling of the sounds we make. Peeling back sentences to the minimal spine required for understanding and yet, it is somehow more emotional and expressive than the original articulation.

A language expert, like a linguist, would have a field day watching Kaa and me. We would let them too, but then he would, at some point, probably want to smash our heads in with a bat and shout "Zombie!! Zombie!!" Humans are so uncivilised sometimes.

Kaa is the closest thing I have to a best friend since we woke up. We think we may have been friends before. We woke up not too far from one another, and we looked a bit familiar to each other. Or perhaps we killed each other. Maybe we were from different countries, at war with one another with decades of hatred for each other. Then, we were flung together at one crucial point in time, only to be frozen in that one unlikely moment when we were together. The chemical wash or nuclear blast altering our DNA so that for the rest of our decay, we would be friends.

Isn't life weird?

Of course, this is all speculation. I could have been running to give Kaa water, for all we know, at our death. Or a letter maybe. I could have been bringing him a letter from his wife telling him she had found another and would not be home when he returned. The scenarios are endless.

Kaa doesn't move like the rest of us. Most zombies shuffle or limp, their joints grinding with every step, but Kaa is different. He's deliberate. His steps are slow but steady, his back always straight, like he's daring the world to notice him. His military training obviously runs deep into his psyche, and followed him when he crossed over.

He's taller than me, with dark, stringy hair that clings to his scalp like seaweed. One of his eyes has gone cloudy, but the other burns bright, scanning the world with sharp, restless focus.

Kaa isn't interested in my stories or possible truths. He is constantly worried about humans. With each year, there are more of them about. They are repopulating and expanding into the city's darkest corners to bring light into them the again as they reclaim their concrete jungle.

They see us, but they ignore us. They don't know what we are, assuming we are the dregs of society. Leftover bits and pieces from the war or family members who have been disgraced. That's not to say those humans aren't around us. They are. But they even assume we are the same as them. Well, most of them anyway.

Crazy Mike knows what we are. He's been around us long enough to notice that we haven't changed. We just get more duct tape plastered on us. He keeps trying to tell the other humans that we are zombies. That we are all planning on eating him so he refuses to sleep. The social care workers and volunteers who

check on us talk gently to him to try to calm him down.

Sometimes, they glance at one of us quickly because some part of their brain wants to check that Crazy Mike isn't telling the truth. Their instinct knows that there is something a little odd about us. But, we just slowly move on. Zombies aren't supposed to do that. They are supposed to eat your brains. And so we disappear into the grey zone of the non-threatening, but embarrassing category of humans.

But Kaa doesn't think we will be able to stay here for long. We need to come up with a plan before a different war happens between us and them.

The flap of the Rot and Repair shop opened and Rune came out.

"Facelift?" I groaned.

She made a sort of shuffling noise that was close to a laugh that any zombie was going to get.

"Don't think I need one of those," she moaned. "My looks seem pretty well preserved. It's actually just my foot. Taa has re-duct taped it. Think I crushed some of the bones at some point. But who knows when."

I nodded knowingly. Time has a weird feel to it when you've been around the place for long. Taa then came out.

"We need some more supplies," she muttered, looking at me. "Are you and Kaa going out to the humans any time soon?"

I nodded.

"What are you all plotting?!" a shout back from a tent nearby. Crazy Mike. "I know what you are!" he shouted.

We looked at each other and then him.

"You can't get me. I got my protection on!" he said, waving about a garland of garlic. I was pretty sure garlic was for vampires, not for zombies, but I wasn't going to correct him. I

looked at Taa and Rune and snorted a dry laugh. They looked at me, confused. I let out a long moan and lifted my arms up. Then I stiffly walked towards Crazy Mike.

He shrieked like a pork belly pig, then disappeared inside his tent. The garland was casually thrown out of the tent before the zip shot up. Taa and Rune started to giggle as best they could with their dry, hoarse bodies.

Kaa thinks we won't be able to stay here much longer. That soon, the humans will notice us. That something will snap, and we'll be hunted. He might be right. But tonight, we patch ourselves up. We laugh, if we still can. And we wait.

Kaa

I don't sleep. None of us do. But sometimes, when it gets dark, we just stop. Lean against walls and freeze in place. It's not rest—it's a habit. I used to do it, too, back when we had the city to ourselves. But now, there's too much to watch for.

There are various reasons why we have to move. The first round of issues is that the margins of society move in. The real homeless and the real people with problems. Most of them are so focused on escaping with alcohol and cooked up chemicals that they don't worry about us. But the ones that are just down and out, do.

They watch us when we don't know it. Realise that a lot of us just walk in circles. That we groan to each other for days without eating or really moving. Unknown to them, we are having a deep conversation about who would win in a fight: Bear-man or Shark-man. But all they hear are just the moans of debate, not the actual debate itself. Perhaps if they heard what we were talking about, they probably wouldn't be scared. They wouldn't be worried.

In case you're wondering—it's Bear-man. Shark-man wouldn't be able to breathe out of water. Obviously. Unless it was the bottom half of him that was a shark. Then, OK, sure, he

could breathe, but he couldn't stand because of the tail. Anyway, the bottom end of a shark is so boring. He would look more like a walrus than a shark. All the cool powers of a shark are in his face. That's what you would want.

It's like when you are a kid, and you hear a weird noise. If you knew it was just the tap in the bathroom dripping or the branch scraping against the plastic gutter, you would be fine. Hell, even if there was a monster in the cupboard grumbling, if you knew all he was grumbling about was how disgusting humans are because some of them combine condensed milk and peanut butter together on bread, you wouldn't worry about the monster.

You wouldn't pipe in that you thought it was pretty disgusting as well. That you knew a guy at school who mixed sardines and jam. Then, join the monsters to attack the disgusting humans with horrible taste combinations— the condensed milk and peanut butter ones. Leave the rest alone. Or maybe just cyclists because they are annoying as hell. Why do they never just use the cycle lane? Why do they insist on using the road? I mean, I don't even drive, and I find it annoying. It's such a simple rule. Why do humans struggle with simple rules?

Since we don't sleep or eat, we can sometimes get caught up in these discussions for hours, days and weeks without doing anything else. Most humans wouldn't notice. But if you were sleeping in a tent, under a bridge, on a hard floor, you were not exactly going to be sleeping heavily. Any small noise will wake you up, and while I personally find groans and grunts soothing, it is the kind of thing a person who has nothing to do but sleep in a tent would notice.

Once the real humans moved into our space with their tents and their booze, they light fires in large metal barrels, which

signals the other humans to move in. Then, there are the volunteers and the social workers. For a while, it seemed pleasant because they gave us stuff, which was nice. But then they want something in return—our name, maybe what we did before. Either way, we can't really answer. We merely gurgle and groan, odd sounds. Our mouths were dehydrated by lack of moisture years ago.

They get concerned because our wounds don't heal. They keep handing us antibiotics and looking at each other nervously. We smell funny, and so then they get pushy about being clean. This is the red flag that we must leave.

Many, many years ago, shortly after we woke up, in the very first place we were at, we didn't move. We stayed, and the helpers got really nosy. Then the police came because some of the real humans had drugs. They did a bust. The real humans scattered, but we don't move that fast, if we don't have to. They threw some of us in vans. A few days later, those zombies returned. With fresh blood on their shirt. They didn't want to talk about it, but they said we should move. Urgently. And so we did. But like a rolling stone, once we started moving, we just never really stopped. It became our thing. Hang out here for a year or two, then we go.

We don't often kill, but sometimes we have to. To keep the humans quiet. We can't have witnesses. One year, one of us got shot. A human wanted money or something from us. I wasn't there, so I don't know the full story, but apparently, we stared at him, and he freaked out because why weren't we bleeding. He didn't understand why we were so calm, so he shot bullet after bullet into our bodies. It took us two days to hunt him down. He was trembling by the time we got to him. Petrified. He knew who we were.

My dog tags tinkled under my shirt. I guess at some point, my name had been on the metal. Standard military-stamp style. But over time, the metal has worn down. Years of being washed with rain and dried by the sun. The name doesn't matter, but what it is does. It reminds me that I stand for something. That I can't let myself go. Order must be maintained even through chaos.

I wish I could remember more. More of who I was as a full person, not just a walking corpse. I feel like if we could pull it together and maybe try to be more of what we used to be, that we would be better for it. If we were more organised, we could make a safe place. Organise a life. We could even travel, couriering ourselves across the globe. All we would need would be an address to send ourselves to.

I tell Nee this at the start of the day. He's wrapping duct tape over an old wound he got from many years ago. The old duct tape has peeled, so he's redoing it. The gashes on our skin remind us of what we are. I look away. I don't want to be reminded. I want to be free. To be part of something.

I feel like we should be doing something more than just hanging out. The Rot and Repair Shop is great, but we need to do more things like that. We should have our own community, our own space. Have something to do. Not just stand around discussing Bear-man fights.

Nee just shrugs at me as he gets up.

"Where do you want to go?"

Where. It's a good question. A question I've been trying to work out. It has to be somewhere where humans aren't and where we can survive. I've thought about places dense with snow, but that would quicken our journey to the Drift. I've thought about underwater, but once again, our flesh would

quickly decay. Where?

Nee nods to me. We have to get going. It's going to be light soon. We are going to go and check how close the regular humans are to us now. They keep fixing up old neighbourhoods and making them trendy again. Gentrification is what they call it. Bloody annoying is what we call it. Somehow, I doubt our name for it will ever catch on.

We amble from the highway toward the city. We're a little slow, but it's not too bad. We soon pass the homeless humans. They give us a weary eye. I look at Nee. He's filthy—it hasn't rained in a while. I probably don't look great either. I nod at them as gracefully as I can. We aren't threats, and they are right to be somewhat concerned about us.

I try to make my stiff walk more relaxed, and Nee does the same. The pavement changes as we walk—cracked and stained concrete gives way to smooth concrete slabs. The air smells cleaner, like freshly watered plants instead of burnt trash. Even the shadows feel sharper under the unbroken street lights.

A car pulls up quietly, and a man gets out in clean chinos and a white collared shirt. The electric cars are practically silent compared to the old petrol ones. If we had heard him, we would have already sulked away, but the speed and silence catch us out in the open. He looks at us. We sort of work our way into a corner of a building and attempt to hide in the shadows. Disgust crosses his face.

“You can't stay here!” He shouts at us.

We nodded.

“This is a family neighbourhood,” he continues. He takes one step away from his car and then stops with a look of guilt. We haven't protested or challenged him. It makes him feel bad for being so aggressive. He takes a step back and looks at us again.

“There’s a soup kitchen three blocks over. You can get help there,” he shouts. There. That was his forward kindness of the day. Something he can write about in his gratitude journal. Hopefully, we can continue once he leaves.

He turns and opens the back of his car. There, he pulls out a bunch of flyers from a box and starts to make his way up some nearby stairs into a building. One of the flyers floats out as he walks and lands in the gutter.

I shuffle over to it, pick it up, and turn it over in my hands. “Urban Renewal Initiative” was written in big red letters. The flyer showed a glossy photo of a restored brownstone building with flower boxes and smiling humans. Underneath it, I spotted a crumbling building I knew too well—the one Kaa and I passed every morning. They’re coming for us. We have to warn the others. We have to devise a plan for where we will move to. There could be no more debate. The time has arrived for us to make a decision. We need a long-term strategy.

I heard more humans coming and turned back to the door the man had walked into. He was now coming out, laughing with a woman. They stopped at the top of the stairs and were looking down at us. They both noticed me and the flyer I held in my hands.

“You read that?” the man shouted at me. “You lot best clear out. We will be clearing out the whole area soon. Renovate the buildings, make it look habitable again. So don’t even think of moving from wherever you came from to here.”

“We should spread awareness,” the woman said, and the guy nodded.

“Great idea, Susan,” he said and pulled his phone out. She took it and put the camera on to record himself, then passed it to Susan.

“Heya, boys, girls, and the non-binary baddies! It’s Stevie here from the Home Association from the new and trendy Collective suburb. Can I hear a hey-yaa! Just a quick update around those that are maybe house challenged, like my friend here...”

With that, Stevie looked at Nee and me and then popped his arm around my shoulders, concluding that I was a little cleaner. His arm had no weight and merely hovered above my shoulders. I looked up at his face.

“So, what you are going to want to do is just give our house-less friends a little guidance and gently remind them about the soup kitchen a few blocks over on 5th ave. It’s not far, so don’t worry. There, they will get free food and shower opportunities and even find solutions for areas of growth prospects, like jobs and permanent accommodation.

“On to some other news, I just got news from my friend Susan this morning that we got the clearance and go-ahead to do the next phase of our renovation. Which means my peeps, my queens, my trend-setters—Mindful Meadows is happening, people! We will slowly be transforming and upcycling our way towards the railways, one brick at a time!

“Anyway, keep slaying everyone, and I’ll chat to y-all later!”

I looked at the direction he was pointing when he spoke about building the next suburb. It was right in the direction of where we lived. I turned to Nee. His expression darkened. I wandered off, leaving ‘Stevie’s arm to simply fall. He had grabbed the phone from Susan and was now focusing on editing and adding the latest pop song to his video.

“Hey!” I heard him shout. “I wasn’t kidding, hey. You guys need to move out of here.”

“Vagrants,” the woman said, shaking her head. “I thought

we had removed the lot of them, and then these two show up.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it, Susan. When the police and social workers do their sweep, we’ll make sure they do this area again as well.”

“That would be amazing, Stevie. Thank you. You know, since the kids left to crèche, it’s just me on my own. I don’t want to have to worry about safety, you know?”

“Yes, yes. You don’t have to worry about a thing. And you have my number right? You see anything, or even these two, you let me know, yea? You have been such a darling client for me, and I have no trouble going the extra mile for my special clients.”

“You are a real gem, Stevie, looking after me like that. I will definitely keep your number near, if I see this lot again.”

She was gesturing towards me again. A man who once fought in a war to keep her safe, and now here I was before her. She had no idea of what I was. I could have been a human who badly needed a shower and a job opportunity to become part of society again, but instead, she was choosing to talk to me like I was nothing more than a floating plastic bag in the wind—non-degradable and annoying.

“Disgusting,” Susan said.

If I had any breath in me, I would have sighed it out. If I could heal, I would have punched the lot of them in the face. But lucky for them, I have neither.

It’s not only the obvious way they treat us that annoys me. It’s not even that they don’t see us for what we are or assume we are something we aren’t. It’s that they don’t know. They don’t remember. These adults were merely children, or babies, or just chromosomes that hadn’t even been flung together yet, when I was alive. They don’t remember the hatred, the past, the war.

They just know they are fresh adults, and everything around them looks like shit. So they fixed it. It's the fixing generation. And therefore the aesthetic generation. It's all about looks.

But we can't play that game. History hangs over us, suffocating us. We can't breathe new life into anything, yet we are discovered, so we just live in the decay of the city and the decay of our skin.

Humans think fixing up a neighbourhood means planting trees and painting over the cracks. They don't see what's still broken underneath. They can build all the coffee shops they want, but they'll never really know what it's like to be stuck, rotting, with no way out.

I need to get these dark thoughts out. I need space. I shuffle back to Nee and get back to the others. I shove the pamphlet into my back pocket.

"We have to go," I groaned.

"But where?" he asked.

I shrugged. Nee was on the same page as me. We need to find a solution. Far, far away.

Nee

Taa and I were staring at the flyer that Kaa and I had brought back from our little adventure to the suburbs. She and I had been staring at it for a while.

“What are we going to do?” She kept asking me. I looked up at her and shrugged. Her dull green eyes met mine, filled with quiet concern. I knew Taa was one of us that was troubled about moving. They had put so much effort into the Rot and Repair shop. Moving it now would mean stuffing as many supplies as possible into backpacks. Daa would have to move tools and his endless boxes. The alternative would be to leave everything and then start a new collection at the next place.

It was a difficult choice because we weren't sure where we were going. She asked me if Kaa had found anything yet, but I shrugged. So far, we haven't come up with a solution. There was an idea that perhaps we could go to the wilderness. We knew there were forests over the mountain. Freshwater. It wouldn't be far. But we aren't particularly pleasant-smelling, nor are we particularly fast. A bear could simply attack at any point, and that would be that. Taa had the idea that we all wear those pine-tree air fresheners that humans hang in their cars to throw off the wildlife

We would have to make shelters, and if a hiker found us, it

would be awkward. They would probably tell the authorities that there was a clan of weirdo's standing around in the woods, and they would come and investigate. Nowhere was really safe from the prying eyes of humans. We could be in the middle of the desert for a year and then have some annoying, buzzing drone hover over us, and that would be the end of it.

If anything came for us, I guess we could sprint and move with speed if we had to. With no muscle pain to get in the way it is fairly easy. But we can't maintain it for too long, because something could break or fall loose. We also prefer not to. I mean, who does?

Taa looked at me in the eyes again. She looked away again, like she wanted to tell me something but couldn't find the words. I took her arm. She looked up again. There was a slight glimmer in her dull green eyes. If she had a beating heart and even a drop of liquid left inside her, she might have shed a tear. But in this state, all she could muster up was a slight weariness in her eyes.

She opened up her white coat with the pin on it. A large chunk of her side was missing, right between her ribcage and hip. I looked in her eyes again. I didn't want to look at her decay.

"The Drift," she groaned.

I shook my head. I wasn't going to believe it. "You've patched worse. It's just a bad spot, that's all," I mumbled.

She nodded. "No, I can't."

There was no point arguing with her about it. She was the expert on patching, after all. If she said it couldn't be done, then I guess it couldn't be done.

"How did it happen?"

She turned to the shop, and then looked back at me. This was a difficult subject for her. I wondered if the others knew. If she had told Eve or Daa about it.

“It just fell off yesterday morning,” she murmured. “A whole chunk of me, just... gone. It lay there in the dirt like it had given up. Like it decided I wasn’t worth holding onto anymore. I don’t know Nee. I don’t know how any of this works.”

None of us did. But I didn’t tell her that. I wasn’t sure what to tell her. What do you tell someone who technically is dead that they are on the verge of dying again?

“Why didn’t you seek shelter in the shop?” I asked her, “Can Eve not help? Or Daa? Could they not have sewn it back in place or something?”

She shrugged.

“What’s the point?” She moaned. “Every day, they come to me—injuries, wounds, fractures. I patch them up, but they just break again. What’s the point of all this, Nee?”

I guess I never really thought about it – what it must be like for her, Eve, and Daa to see us slowly decay over time. They were the closest in the end to those who went to the Drift. The constant reminder of how we are all literally falling apart. We have no dreams, no goals, or ambitions. We are just the clump of dry flesh and bones that hang out together and slowly disintegrate.

I mean, the best thing that happened this week was when Kaa proved to me that Bear-man was better than Shark-man. Can’t believe I didn’t think about the shark breathing in the open air. Idiot.

“What happens now?” I gurgled.

She shrugged again.

“Nothing I can do now,” she replied.

I didn’t want to lose Taa. I had known her since the beginning. Her dull green eyes and helping hands had supported me a lot over the years. Being able to talk to her and find some type of companionship in this mess was something I looked forward to

when I watched the sun rise.

A little while ago, we were discussing the stereotypical zombies that come out of graves. I was trying to work out how that would work because surely their bodies would all be in various decomposition stages, and most of them would be too decayed to rise up. It made no sense how everyone could simply burst through the soil, all pretty preserved. But then she smiled and suggested that maybe the grave digger had planted the zombies. He had got a zombie seed packet and sprinkled them around the graves. Those zombies didn't derive from humans but were little seeds.

The zombies all grew from them and then emerged at the same time as plants. That would explain why they were all in similar decay states, as well as why they all shot out at the same time. Plant them in September, and they'll rise and attack by January.

Zombie Seedlings. I had laughed about that idea for days. It was a great concept.

Taa looked up and nodded as a sign of the end of the conversation. She had no answer to my question and we had no solution for her situation. The sun was starting to go down and one or two of the street lamps were flickering on. Most of them had dead bulbs in them.

Slowly, Taa shuffled back toward the Rot and Repair Shop. I stood where I was, with no real reason to go anywhere. There were no clouds in the sky, and so I could be still till the sun appeared again in the morning. I wouldn't have to shuffle out the rain.

I stayed where I was, watching her shuffle away. The weight of the flyer, of her words, sat heavy in my mind. The Drift. It was always there, waiting for all of us, but Taa? I shook the thought away. I couldn't imagine this place without her.

I didn't like change. I know it is necessary, and I also know we are in dire need of some. We need a goal or a point. We have to dream. We can't merely survive. It's been like that for fifty years and we have still not advanced any further. We still have no solution. No understanding of how we became the way we became.

I was just thinking about the zombie seeds again when I heard a noise. It sounded like cars were pulling up on the opposite side of the tracks. It could be trouble. Maybe a deal was going down, or teenagers were bored. Either way, it was best to go to the shadows. I started to shuffle towards the bridge. I moved fairly slowly, as I didn't want to draw attention to myself, but I also didn't want to be standing there if humans appeared.

I saw a few other zombies that had been stagnant, start to move, as well. Kaa was already in the shadow of a building, next to a dumpster skip. Trust Kaa to be prepared. I saw him move a bit for a better view of the railway track. Seems I wasn't the only one that had heard the noise.

I heard the scuff of feet jogging over pebbles. I turned. These weren't teenagers. These were adults. Adult men, by the sound of it. A spotlight shot on, straight at us, from the parked trains. We all stared directly at it like deer looking at a car lamp. It made my dry eyeballs uncomfortable.

"Stay where you are, vagrants," a voice boomed from a megaphone. "We've received complaints about disturbances in this area. All individuals must vacate the premises immediately. Failure to comply will result in removal by force."

A high-pitched squeak crackled from the megaphone.

I looked at Kaa again. Had someone reported us after our morning trip to the suburbs? Who complained about a few random people standing around a railway track? Surely not