

Yvonne Faith Russell

SAFE

“Wait.” Ayon’s voice is calm yet demanding. He knows I won’t leave.

I stop dead in my tracks, my government-issued backpack slapping against my back. I stand there, waiting for Ayon to say something, but instead I’m greeted with silence. I raise my hand to the blue touchpad beside the door, allowing the sensor to read my handprint before it unlocks it. I don’t have time for this.

“I wouldn’t go out there, Imari,” he finally says as soon as the lock audibly clicks open. He catches my eye in the reflection of the metallic door that separates us from the hundreds of other refugee-turned government workers. “One of the officers told me this morning that the rebels are planning another attack on the city tonight.” Ayon makes his way toward me, holding my eye through the reflection. “Just stay here, it’s safer on the base.” I feel his calloused hand slide up my arm and instinctively I jump, turning around to find myself face to face with the red eyes of a bear that covers the right side of his chest. They’re the same eyes I had stared at during many sleepless nights in our tiny refugee fortress during the height of the war.

*“What is this?” I had asked one night when the thick humidity and the loud buzzing of cicadas was making it impossible to fall asleep.*

*“Huh?” Ayon asked sleepily, his brown eyes gazing up at the makeshift T-shirt curtain covering the small window above the bed. The muscles in his arms flexed as he rubbed his eyes.*

*“The animal on your chest,” I touch his dark skin where the tattoo lay, “what is it?”*

*Ayon looked at me curiously, his long eyelashes curling up and touching his thick eyebrows. “It’s a Grizzly Bear. They went extinct during the Carbon Age a long time ago.”*

*I remembered learning about the Carbon Age back in grade school—when carbon dioxide levels were so high that there was a hole in the earth’s ozone. Countless forests were on fire, burning for years, spreading to towns and residences, destroying everything, and leaving a large part of the earth uninhabitable.*

*“Why a Grizzly Bear?” I asked.*

*He looks down at his chest, “It makes me feel like I’m tapping into the old world—when there was something more powerful than humans on the planet.” He looked up at the window, the moonlight seeping in through the T-shirt, casting blue shadows over his face. I scooted closer to him, and he placed his arm around me. I closed my eyes, letting myself sink into him. When I opened them a moment later, Ayon was looking right at me.*

*“What?” I asked, my face growing hot, suddenly aware of how close we were. We had stayed in this fortress many nights together, but only recently started sharing a bed—the shifty floor panels and endless spider bites were taking their toll on Ayon. We used to sleep on opposite ends, but now we just hold each other—we fall asleep faster that way. But tonight, we weren’t sleeping, and I could feel his heart beat underneath the palm of my hand where the Grizzly Bear lay, his chest moving with each rise and fall. Girls always flirted with Ayon and although I always teased him about it, I could suddenly see why. His face was handsome with thick eyebrows and soft brown eyes. He had a sharp jaw line that was pronounced under his deep brown skin. I had never noticed how full his lips were. They would always spread thin whenever he smiled, but right now they were thick and pronounced. They suited him.*

*Ayon broke my gaze and looked up at the ceiling, “Imari...” His voice trailed off. I brought my hand to his cheek, and his eyes met mine again. Then before he could say anything else, I kissed him. His lips were soft and tender, and the heat of his breath sent tingles down my spine. It felt good and natural, and he smiled knowingly at me when we*

*pulled away. His hand found mine and he held it in his, smiling at me. He kissed me again and I relaxed into him, letting out a sigh. I wondered why we had never done this before.*

The bear looks the same as it did on that night, yet somehow everything else has changed.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do anymore.” I say, taking a step back so that he’s no longer towering over me. I try hard to keep my voice steady.

He sighs, shaking his head, “It’s not safe out there, Imari. You know that more than anyone.”

I scoff, “Since when do you care about my safety?” The words come out like daggers.

Ayon frowns but remains silent.

Of course. That was all the answer I needed. I turn on my heels, refusing to waste any more of my time. But his hand is on my wrist before I can take a step and once again, I’m facing him. He reaches to touch my shoulder but instead thinks better of it and lets his arm drop. “Do you remember what I said to you when this all started a few years ago? The promise I made to you?” He asks, his eyes look straight into mine, sad and unblinking.

Of course I remember. It was almost two years ago at the beginning of the war, after our homes had been raided by the rebels, after they murdered thousands of civilians, my mother included. He had promised to protect me. With my mother recently murdered and my father long dead, he was all I had. Soon, I would be all he had, too. Ayon had called his family right after the first attack that day—after the news about my mom—and warned them to stay in Gavat, a town about five hours north of where we lived in Senway. His father was installing new security features for the government high-rises up there, and his mother and sister had gone along with him. But they were already on the train back when they got the call. Two hours later they were dead; the rebels had bombed all trains going in and out of the city. No one made it out alive.

I think back to that day, standing in a pile of rubble that was once our neighborhood. *My face numb. My hands burned. Tightness gripped my chest. Thoughts came in and out in fragments, my brain unable to make sense of what I was witnessing—there was only a knowing that nothing would ever be the same. I couldn't say anything. I just stood there as drones circled the sky, surveying the damage, some releasing water to put out small fires, others helping injured civilians. Ayon stood a short distance away. We made eye contact, and something washed over his face. Before I knew it, I was wrapped up in his embrace, crying tears I thought I was out of. With one hand on my back and the other pressed against my head, holding me close to him, I felt...safe.*

*“I love you,” He said, faint and barely audible. “And I’ll always be here for you.”*

I shake the memory from my head. If he really loved me, he would have told me the truth; that my father had been alive all long and that they had been in contact since his “death” six years ago.

*The counseling sessions, the breakdowns, the cool metal of the barrel pressed against my forehead. The look on Ayon’s face when he caught me.*

I’ll never forgive him for that.

“What about it?” I ask, the sound of my own voice brings me back to reality. I try to shake my hand loose, but his grip is solid.

“I keep my promises.” Ayon holds his gaze steady.

I resist the urge to laugh in his face and tell him that keeping a secret for six years doesn’t exactly qualify him as a trustworthy person. Yet part of me still wants so desperately to believe him, to run into him and bury myself in his embrace. To go back to the way things used to be before I had a reason not to trust him.

His deep brown eyes search my face. The same eyes that smiled at me when we were kids and laughed at me when we were teens. The same eyes that cried with me when I found out my father died. The same eyes that avoided mine when I asked him how long they'd been in contact.

The same eyes that watch me as I remove his hand from my wrist and walk away.

As soon as I step outside the ground underneath my feet shakes as an explosion erupts in the distance, and I know right away that Ayon was right; it's not safe out here.

But it's not safe in there either.

Word Count: 1500