

I open my eyes. Nothing, except a long, ashen grey smudge, blurring my vision. I force them shut. The bitter taste of salt stings my mouth, as I suck in a lungful of air. I open my eyes again, and this time the daylight floods in, awakening my thoughts. Squinting, I manage to pick myself up, wincing at the pain, though savouring the moment as well; my muscles stretch for the first time in a while.

But how long is a while? How long have I been here? Where, even, is “here”?

The wave of questions come rushing in and I swallow down the fear that follows after. I look around, taking in my surroundings for the first time. Several buildings scattered across the horizon stick out awkwardly in their surroundings lying on a sheet of white that spreads itself across the land, chilling me to the bone. The houses appear abandoned and wrecked as I peer closer, and seemed to have burned down. A sign of life shows itself, a tree, cowering behind a large cobblestone wall, splintered with ice. I crane my neck to the left and spot a small hut, half eaten away by the snow, yet not masking the glow of a lamp that comes from within. Instinct takes over and I limp to the calling warmth, feeling consciousness slip

away. No, I think *I have to make it there, then I can figure out what's going on here.*

And then it hits me. I fall to my knees and let out an ear – splitting scream. Shards of pain hit me wave after wave, each carrying memories and glimpses of the past; flames crackling, shouts filling the air, and echoes, calling through the mayhem.

I scream and scream and scream, feeling as if my head is splitting open. I clutch my throat, unable to breathe and cough up blood, staining the fresh snow a crimson red. I sob into the dark night praying for it to stop.

And then it does.

Just as suddenly as it had started. It stops. That was the last thing I thought before the world rushed up and closed me into darkness once again.

*

2 hours earlier...

Mary Jo sighed with relief at what she saw lying on the front door step; food, lots of it. It had been at least a month since their last package, and everyone was beginning to feel the hunger. Hands white from the cold, she picked up the

box and carried it inside. The instant blast of warm air sent a shiver up her spine, easing the muscles in her body. She sighed wistfully as no sign of her brother showed itself. The room was well furnished: a ragged sofa slouching in the corner, accompanied by a couple of faded pillows, sat opposite a small wooden table. It was the only room in the house, yet it felt like a mansion to Mary, given what everybody else owned. The walls were a dark grey colour, scarred with cracks and smudges of different shades. The solid oak floor glinted in the sun's last light of the day, carrying Mary's slender shadow as it wandered to the table. She was an adult now, no other way to think of it. She belonged to herself, nothing else. Upon the table was a crumpled photo; it was lit with an amber light. Strange. *An amber light?* Mary's brow furrowed and she stared closer at the picture. The orange glow flickered and suddenly Mary realised what was happening.

The room lit up into a blinding light that pierced the serene dimness of the sunset. Flames licked the walls and engulfed the door through which she had just entered. The wavering light cast ominous shadows on the floor. Mary shrieked in terror and sprinted for the window, the window

that was already half covered in spurting fire. Drawing a shaky breath she managed to scramble out of the window, her skirt blackening behind with the heat. Instantly the clouds of ash filled her lungs and burned her insides, momentarily blinding her with pain and grinding the world around her to a halt; people screaming and running for their lives, homes melting into sombre nothingness, and for some strange reason, echoes coming from somewhere, somewhere she'd never seen before, the future. Regaining control of her breathing again, Mary ran into the closing night, her life burning away behind her.

I wake to the sounds of heavy footsteps, thudding into the ground next to me. Cautiously, I prop myself up, not wanting to draw attention to myself. I needn't have worried though, because a dozen muddy faces, stricken with scrapes and burns, turn to look at me. They all look vaguely familiar to me but one face triggers a thousand echoes of the past. My sister.

And suddenly I know I was here all along, to find her.

Echoes)))

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