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The knives clanked against the metal plates as we prepared to eat. The table was quiet and peaceful. The stew bubbled and out came a gas, twisting and turning into indescribable shapes until disappearing into the air. "Let's eat, Mira." Father spoke in a calculated calm manner, it was unnatural for him to be this calculated. "Here's your favorite food, Mira!" A glob of transparent goo rushed out of the pan, sloshing around in the plate.

"This dish? Just for me?"

"Yes Mira, because you did so well at school today!" Mom smiled, however, Dad continued to stare off into the distance, sweat dripping down his neck. It didn't matter if I asked, he would just say work's been stressing him out and never elaborate like he always does, but something about today felt different.

Next morning, Mother gave me a list and Dad left for work. *Groceries? Not horrible.* I strapped on the clunky metal mask on my face before heading out, I have to make sure that I wear it at all times to prevent that dumb disease going about.

After my quick grocery trip, I started to head back home until I noticed two Infection Control Agents confronting a man, after a closer look I realized it was my father.

"Get off of him!" I screamed till my lungs gave out.

"Ma'am step back, he's Infected." I hesitated as the horror set in and I realized he wasn't wearing his metal mask. Seconds felt like days as they beat the strong man

into a boy, crying for help, wide eyed trying to get my attention. They warned against this, I can't trust his words anymore, he's Infected, he has gone insane, yet he cried to get me to listen to him. I couldn't bear it.

"Get out of here Ma'am, we need to deal with this Infected." The agent looked back with a smile. "Unless you're sympathizing with the Infected?"

They warned against this, I can't trust his words anymore, he's Infected, he has gone insane, yet he cried to get me to listen to him.

I realized that by staying here they were going to do the same thing to me. *What should I do?* I looked up at my father to realize that he was already gone. *Gone...* I left without looking back.

Grief filled the dimly lit streets as I walked back with a stick of butter, gelatin, and a few vegetables. Washed color houses lined the street, tall metal bars surrounding each house. Past the metal fences were thick concrete walls that surrounded everyone. I approached my house with my ID in hand and scanned myself in. Quiet, and loud, nothing moving, yet everything is at the same time. I walked in the semi-empty house with my grocery bag in hand, my mind went blank.

"Hello dearie! Did you get everything I asked for?" My mother's smile, too pure for what happened. *I am so sorry for what happened to Dad.*

...
"Dearie?"

...
Tears started to fall down my cheeks, then onto my mask. Parts of myself started to fall, fall and wither away. My father had gotten the virus and I watched him die and ran away when I could have done something. *This is all my...* suddenly I felt an embrace, a warm familiar feeling, telling me that everything will be okay and that I wouldn't have to worry. My guilt weighed on me heavier.

I opened my eyes to see my mother's hair, her soothing tone calling out to me, "Are you okay?" She looked into my eyes and asked the words I was dreading to hear.

"What happened?"

No words came out of my mouth.

"Come on, tell me, I won't get mad."

"Dad...Dad is dead." My eyes burst with tears and Mom's hands shook. Her smile faded as she stared into the abyss. Dinner was quiet and empty, and this quietness lasted through the night, lingering, and still, until it was shattered.

I was greeted with blaring alarms and ICA agents surrounding the house. They busted through the door and started to secure the area.

"Come with us now!"

"Wait, what's happening?"

"We have reasonable suspicion to believe that you are Infected, and we want to make sure you are safe, so come with us."

"What makes you think that?"

THE INFECTION OF FREEDOM

"Your mother is dead, so come along or follow your mother to the afterlife."

What? She was fine earlier, why is she... I hesitantly followed, and as I walked past the door to her room, a foot was in the air with the empty air rushing to my face. A knocked over chair, a rope tied around her neck with tears down her cheeks. *I have lost everyone.* They pushed me inside their van as I cried and cried until my eyes felt heavy and darkness engulfed my vision.

I woke up in a dark room with nothing but a desk, a chair, and a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. My arms and legs were restrained. The emptiness of the room is somehow relaxing, a break from everything that has happened. A dark figure entered the room, from the light to the dark. The figure walked up slowly and calculated, as if trying to get some response from me, and sat down. Once she stepped into the light, the first thing I noticed was that she wasn't wearing a gas mask.

"Hey, you do know that I might be Infected rig—"

"What did your dad do for work?" Her sharp tone reminded me that I was in no place to talk.

"Huh?"

"What did your dad do for work?" I sat there shocked.

"But I am Infe—"

I felt a slap and a red burning streak across my face. She pulled up a piece of paper with my dad in the photo, he seemed to be passing something to someone else, a book of some sort. As I stared at the photo, my eyes slowly met hers, I knew what was going to happen next. What's even scarier is that she didn't have any fear about the Infection.

"I don't kno—" Another red streak across my face. I didn't know what to do. Tears came instantly.

"Throw her in a cell and maybe she will be able to cooperate with us later. She is the key to this case, finding out what her dad figured out." Darkness then opened its arms again, I was knocked out.

The hard floor greeted me as I gained my senses again. The iron bars were a familiar sight but the people surrounding

me weren't.

"Oh she's awake, quick get her some water." I drank up the water and observed my surroundings, there was a huge group of people all gathered into one prison cell.

"Where am I?"

"Welcome to cell 66, the cell for the Infected." A man spoke while watching me down the water.

"Oh..." My fingers trembled as I stared at them. Only one thing was going through my mind: *Virus, Virus, Virus.*

"Are you okay? I need to ask this question."

"Yes, I'm fine,"

"Are you Jiya Kumar's daughter?" He whispered, covering his mouth from the cameras.

"Yes, how do you know him?"

"Yes, I knew it!" he pumped his fist in the air, and a sense of relief filled the room.

"Do you know what your father has been up to? He found out that the Infection is nothing but a lie! Ahahaha! In fact, Jiya Kumar found out it was a lie, and good thing he hasn't gotten caught!"

"My father?"

"Yes!" A smile so bright it could light up the room slowly disappeared as he realized my being here means something has gone wrong. An eerie darkness overtook the light in their eyes. Everyone started their usual daily activities as I sat there in the middle of the mess. I moved to a corner to stay away from the Infected and watched them. Over the next few days, I saw families supporting each other to stay alive, and helping those who can't support themselves. I saw people living life as I used to, but with something different. What was this Virus that drove people crazy? Was I the only one infected by it? The lady who interrogated me wasn't even afraid of the Infection, so is it even real?

During my fifth day here, they started to stage a revolt.

"You may catch Jiya Kumar, but you will never take our freedom!" They chanted in unison.

On the seventh day, it was finally time for them to try to escape. They dug a hole

in the cell and they all started to pour into the hole. As they disappeared into the hole, the man from the cell begged me to come along. "You're his daughter after all." Even if he didn't beg, I was still coming because I don't think I could have stayed here any longer. We all crawled slowly through the tunnel that was made into the ground then up into the rest of the village. We then ran as fast as we could to the wall that surrounded the city.

When climbing the wall, I heard a shout. "Look out!"

When we climbed up the wall, I stared past the wall, expecting an apocalypse, but instead there was peace, nature flourished and beat its true freedom.

A loud noise rang in my ear as my vision became blurry and my hand slipped. *It's over for me. I am so sorry Mom, Dad.* Someone grabbed my hand and helped me up while the rest dealt with the sniper. The people who were supposed to be crazy, the reason that I let my dad die, are the reason I was still alive today. When we climbed up the wall, I stared past, expecting an apocalypse, but instead there was peace, nature flourished and showed its true freedom, free from fear and walls. It was all lies, about everything. I walked slowly around the top of the wall, breathing in the freedom in and out slowly. *This is what my dad was trying to achieve for our family.* This freedom from being scared of a virus that didn't exist, something that was used to scare us and tear us apart. I took a deep breath, and I knew that more people needed to see this, to not experience what I experienced, I need to free more of them. Now branded as Infected, I try to spread the truth, to fight against this corruption.

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