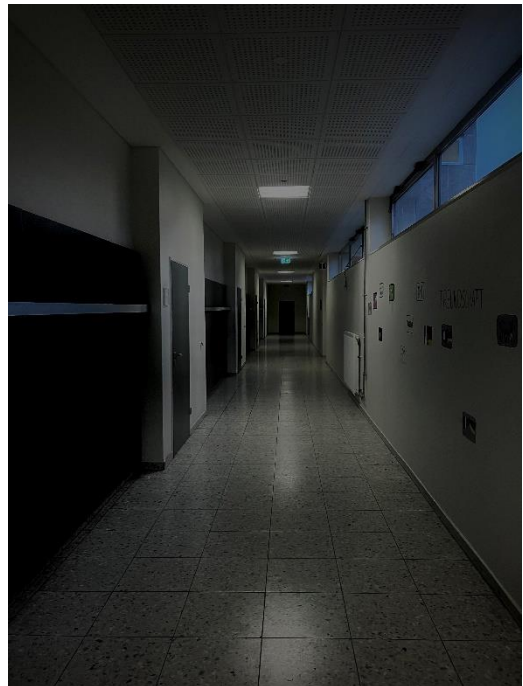


## One Step Forward, No Steps Back *(written by Linda Staeck)*

I walked down the dimly lit hallway leading to the exit of the underground bunker that we called our home. The patrol that was out during the night to obtain food and other supplies was supposed to return any minute and waiting in front of the thick metal door until it opened for them every time was my only chance to catch a glimpse of the world outside. My mum didn't like this but I couldn't help my curiosity and this was the compromise we've come to agree to: I could look outside but I could never pass the threshold. Ever since my brother's patrol team came back without him two years ago she was exceedingly worried to lose her daughter as well. Not to mention my father who apparently died of sickness when I was five years old. At least that's what she told me. Something seemed off about the whole story, but she never wanted to talk about it, so eventually I stopped asking.



I've always wanted to be a part of the patrol teams but I was too young and just as I finally became old enough, my brother disappeared and now my mum wouldn't let me get out of her sight. I was only seven years old when we went underground so I didn't remember much from above. All I knew was the story they told us: When anarchy threw the world into chaos and bloodshed, we fled to an old bunker at the edge of the city. Over time we extended this thing to some kind of huge tunnel system that now accommodated about 500 people. My memory of a life before this one only contained blurred pictures of destroyed buildings, shattered windows, and blood on the concrete of the streets. When I looked through the door now, I didn't think much has changed over the past 11 years because all I saw was darkness. It was even dark when the sun was shining, if that makes sense. I reached the small room at the end of the hallway that functioned as a safety lock so to speak. The timer above the giant metal block of a door read 1 minute and 34 seconds. Then the door would open for exactly 30 seconds and then close again for the next 72 hours. I didn't know the exact circumstances outside but according to the heavy armour the patrol teams always wore when they left it had to be pretty rough out there.

There was always this mixture of excitement, fear and even a little bit of hope when the door was about to open. At least for me. My mum for instance seemed to have lost all hope like many other people. At this point I believed some of them were just waiting for their time to pass by until they died eventually. But for me, it wasn't over yet. Every time my best friend Kade returned from a patrol I bugged him with questions. What's it like outside? Are people still brutally fighting over food? Is there any chance of change in the near future? Have you seen my brother? I knew it was highly unlikely but something just told me he was still out there. Kade was the only one who told me something about above. Although his reports were quite short and lacked a lot of details because he knew that my mum would probably kill him if she found out he told me things that could possibly increase my curiosity for the world above. And she would most likely kill me as well if she knew I was asking questions, especially about my brother. All she wanted was to get over her loss, she wanted to keep believing he was dead. I guess that was just easier for her. But not for me. So, I kept asking.

15 seconds. I watched the red numbers of the countdown until it reached zero. With a vibrant buzz, the five heavy bolts slowly moved to the side until the metal block parted in the middle and revealed the light of the rising sun. It would have been beautiful if it wasn't for the worn-down skyscrapers I could see in the distance. The wind carried the silence from over there to my ears. But it wasn't just silence. It was quiet, yes, but it was that humming sort of quiet, menacing, and gloomy as if the world got more terrible the closer you stepped to the city.

"Morning". Kade's voice snapped me out of my thoughts as he walked in along with five other people. They always went out in groups of six. "Morning", I answered, still looking at the skyscrapers. "Any news?", I asked. "Nothing else than every other time you ask", he grinned. The countdown above the door read 14 seconds. Soon enough I would be cut from this view for the next 72 hours. In that same second, I saw something. On the rooftop of one of the smaller buildings at the margin of the city, right across from our bunker, there was something moving in the orange light of the uprising sun. Or rather someone. There was a bunch of people on that rooftop, and it almost seemed like they were watching us just like I was watching them. I never saw people in the city. I knew from Kade that they were still there but usually they only came out for a short time when they needed food and then returned to their hideout. No one would dare to sit around somewhere, especially not on a rooftop exposed to everyone and everything. "Hey, how about we grab some breakfast, I'm starving". I heard Kade's voice but it was as if my ears were covered by something. The monotonous electronic voice started counting down from five, the door already started to close. "Cassia?", he asked. I didn't know what it was but something inside me snapped in that moment. The countdown was at two seconds and there was only a small gap left by the door. Without hesitation, I leapt forward and passed the threshold. "Cass, don't!", I heard Kade shout and from the corner of my eye I saw that he tried to reach me. But I was already outside and at this moment the door behind me closed with a dull sound and I heard the bolts locking up inside.

That's when I started to realise. I was outside on my own in a world of destruction and chaos without any armour, food or water and the door would not open for the next 72 hours. What the hell was I thinking?