

V

It had been three days since Gia kissed Aims goodbye for what might have been a final time. In the hours of sleepless nights since, she has thought a lot about that moment. It felt right, Gia had thought, even though it was all based on assumptions. While Aims is definitely real, fires just don't happen out season suddenly, and seemingly targeting your house, there's no reason to believe that she was being honest.

Perhaps what she showed was mostly true or even entirely true but carefully curated. It was exactly what Gia needed to see to follow Aims' plan. Which did save her, and everyone she loves. And it was more than just saving our lives. Telling Gia to pack her mom and dad's favorite work clothes, nice boots, and good gloves was thoughtful sure. They were very happy to have clean, well fitting clothes to do all that work we've all been doing that last few days.

But Aims also had her grab her dad's mom's mom's watch and her dad's dad's revolver. I had hardly ever seen these things. But Aims knew them to be important. Not needed but important. For my mom it was the seeds said saved for many seasons and some old photos she hadn't digitized. Also a box full of papers Gia didn't look through. They looked like letters and trinkets though. And finally there government papers, that weren't all in one spot. Luckily Aims knew where each was and had their plastic safes combo. Even had Gia practice it in mushroom space, as Gia started calling it.

Her parents were stunned by what she had packed. Happy but stunned.

"It was your house at risk. So my adrenaline brain prioritize packing things that looks necessary." Gia lied. "I just grabbed what I looked important. And what I knew was important."

"But how did you-" her dad started.

"I don't know." Gia interrupted. "I was going off intuition mostly. I hardly remember my reasoning. And I was-" Gia paused thinking of her next words carefully.

"Thank you sweetie. I don't know how you did what you did." her mom said. "I am so grateful and impressed with the woman you've become. And we're grateful you are in our lives again." There was a bit of crying after that and fortunately no more follow up questions.

Gia wasn't the woman her mom was impressed by. That was Aims. *Why can't I remember anything to confirm what Aims showed me of our childhoods?* Gia wanted to believe that everything Aims said and showed had been true. But why haven't they linked since the fire? Gia went to the spot Aims had indicated. Then went to a bunch of different spots. No Aims. Maybe Aims was good but she wasn't honest. Her plan involved so much deception for Gia to carry

out. Deception must be a tool Aims has used to survive. Gia had to trust Aims despite that. Aims needed her. She must be so hurt from so much suffering and struggle. And hurt people hurt people. Gia would help but needed to make sure she didn't get hurt in the process.

So yeah maybe kissing her was mistake. Gia cringed.

Today was the last day they were going to spend cleaning up the land and mucking the remains of the various structures. They were all staying in a wall tent Tom used for SCA, society of creative anachronism. Their was at least one society of creative anarchism joke when Tom explained what SCA was. The wall tent had a furnace, a tarp and rug for flooring, and three airbeds from Walmart. It was cozy at first. After five days it was cramped.

Today was the day us four girls were suppose to head back after a lovely week getting to know two of our future child's grandparents. And it was almost that. There wasn't really a reason to change that departure date. Except now my parents were coming with us. And were going to rent a nearby apartment, instead of renting a house. The land wasn't going to be sold anytime soon so Gia's parents decided to downsize their plans.

Gia was still trying to figure out how she could rationalize her staying longer. She was still searching for Aims after all. She had to trust Aims had a plan and had a reason to not say all of it. So Gia decided to trust her instincts and hoped that Aims knew her well enough to predict Gia's actions.

Gia just needed some reason why she wanted to stay. She figured the truth was the best course of action. The best cover stories after all are true ones.

"I don't understand. You want to stay here longer." Valorie asked voicing the groups collective confusion.

"Yes. There are ways to speed up regrowth after a wildfire. And there are key areas to plant trees and ground cover to prevent erosion. I've been researching and talking with the state university. They think they can source free native plants for the project."

"How long is all this going to take?" Cathy asked.

"At least a year but-"

"No way. We have a child coming we need you at home Gia." Olivia stated.

"But you don't. I can visit and be around of course. I don't have a job right now and I wasn't really going to be that useful with infant care. Plus without me there you can give my private room to my parents."

"Gia what is this we're getting an apartment. Staying with y'all is just temporary." Tom said.

"It doesn't have to be. And that apartment is hardly cheaper than the house y'all were going to rent. Y'all need to save money. Live with us. I'm sure we'd be happy to have you." Gia said hoping she didn't just over step.

"I like the plan." Ava said breaking the silence. "We've never cared for an infant. They have. Our little Gia. It would be nice to have someone with experience to defer to." Ava said and smiled at Cathy.

"I would like seeing the baby more and Tom you know you were planning to be there watching the baby as often as you could." Cathy said. Tom shrugged in a noncommittal agreement.

"Are we actually considering this?" Olivia asked. The lack of immediate response being enough of an answer. "Gia you can't live in a wall tent for a year."

"Maybe more. Might take longer than a year." Gia interrupted.

"You can't. We need you and it's going to be hard out here all alone. You haven't ever lived alone really." Olivia said.

I won't be alone. Gia thought.

"We can visit then." Ava said. "Starting with me. I'll stay with you Gia. Help you get setup. I can take a plane or bus back."

"Or we can just switch off with the car." Valorie said. "It's a short drive really and when someone comes to get Ava. Ava can leave in the car and the driver can stay."

"I don't know guys that sounds like a lot." Gia said. "But yes I'd love to have you here for a bit while I get started." Gia said to Ava.

"This is a lot." Cathy emphasized "I mean you're welcome to be here. And if what you're saying is true it might mean we can sell the land sooner than later. Are you sure sweetie?"

"Absolutely. I grew up in these woods. They mean so much to me. I want to help them rebuild. I might be the most qualified human on the planet to help restore this little patch of woods. No one can care for it like I can. If can do this" Gia paused and looked down. Everyone's face suddenly became too overwhelming. "I can be the parent I want to be. Because right now I'm not sure. And I want to be sure."

There was a lot everyone wanted to say to that. Gia saw it all over their faces. But no one did. They understood at some level how painful this was. If this conversation was one on one Gia was sure it would have continued into ration arguments, reassurances, curiosity, understanding. But there was something silencing about a group meeting. A strong lack of consensus can sometimes be a lesser form of it.

Ava hugged Gia and the conversation concluded. There were other things for the group to discuss but we all just play Root instead. All the while Olivia kept glancing with concerned looks. Gia just had to stay with the group until Olivia left. Then phase two could continue. Or perhaps phase one and a half: find Aims.

Everyone stayed one extra day to adjust to the new plan. A bike was gotten out of a storage unit. Valorie wanted to help Ava fashion a basket to said bike and this little project quickly spiral into a cart for the bike plus a basket. Ava and Valorie together can be like a whirlwind of productivity. Gia helped of course. Mostly to avoid being alone with Olivia. When not with Valorie and Ava, Gia found herself with her parents who she would miss a great deal. It was a lot of work, ensuring she didn't have a moment of alone time that Olivia would notice.

Olivia was being very diligent but respectful. She never once asked for a word alone until they were just about to leave. The car was packed. Just enough room for four people. Gia couldn't imagine a reason to deny a loved one a private goodbye. They walked together up the hill away from the a car that was all ready to start the long drive. It was morning. The sun was just over the horizon. Without trees it did that much earlier.

"So your reason for staying, is that the full story?" Olivia asked with no time or desire for subtlety.

"No." Gia said. *Honesty is best route here.* "I want to repair these woods and I do think it will be a good project. But yeah I haven't talked to mushroom girl since the fire. And I'm trying to. No luck though."

"The other day the fire Marshall wanted to talk to you privately. What did he ask you?"

"They're looking for suspects. As you know, they believe it was targeted arson. They don't know why or how though. He asked me not to share this. But like fuck that. The fire had multiple points of origin. Our property was definitely the target. And it would have taken multiple people."

"Why tell just you all this?"

"They think one of the arsonists might known me. Like a targeted hate crime type thing. The fire obviously got way out of hand. But that is the running theory they shared with me."

"Gia if that's true they might comeback. You can't stay here. Does Ava even know the risk?"

How can I say that the risks are over. The collective did their play. They can't do a second fire.

"Your right I will tell her now. Let her decided if she wants to stay."

"No this should be a group discussion. No one knew about this. It's not safe. Gia this has gotten out of hand. This is dangerous. I'm doing what you asked. You can't stay here. I won't tell anyone your true reasons but you have to listen to me. If someone did this because we're trans. What would stop them from coming back?"

"Easy. They got away with it. If they get caught then they go to prison for a long time. The damage from their arson is like lifetime sentence situation. No one would risk that. Just to what, get us out."

"Gia. You can't be sure. Why risk it?"

"How about dignity? Fuck them." Gia shouted as tears blurred her vision. "We aren't leaving because of them. This was my home. This is where I'm from. They might be able to force me out. Sure. But I'm going to give them a fight."

"Fine. Then I'm staying too."

Fuck. "No have your job Olivia."

"I'll figure it out. You take priority. I'm not losing you. So if you're staying well fine. I am too."

From down the hill it was clear that their conversation was no longer private. Sound travels in these longer woods. Olivia became aware how loud they both had been speaking.

Quieter now Olivia continued "You're staying, I'm staying. And so is Tom's gun. Deal?"

"Okay. But if you're here. Then you're here. You can't wear me down trying to convince me to leave. I can't handle that."

"Okay. We'll talk to Ava. The three of us. We'll all know the risk and agree to a plan. Then if that plan is to stay. I'll stick to it."

"Fine. I can live with that."

They walked down the hill together. About halfway to the group they started holding hands. Gia leaned on her shoulder. By the time they got to the group Gia realized that she needed Olivia of course. Olivia was so important to her.

Gia looked out from atop the hill at the setting sun. It looked like by the solstice the sun would be setting behind their tent. Smoke from the charcoal and wood that had survived the wildfire came from the little metal chimney. With three people, the tent became cozy again. She had taken to sitting up here, when the weather permitted, at the warmest part of the day.

It was an unseasonably warm today as the temperature still felt nice at sunset. Soon it would get very cold. But Gia felt like lingering and seeing how long this bit of warmth would last.

"You've done so well." A voice said seeming to warm the air around her.

"Aims?" Gia said quietly. Hope can be such a terrible thing.

The sun's glow extended throughout the horizon. The air became temperate. "I don't have much energy so this conversation may take a lot of real time." Aims said.

"It will get cold then. I should move my body."

"You're actually in bed silly. You look to be sleeping. Unusual for you to fall asleep early. You must needed it perhaps. The other two won't try to wake you. Their voice are whispers."

"So you made it to the tent?"

"Yeah a while ago. I make and break the connection to check in. The collective has spread all over. They get information from you. You'll need to be very diligent about wearing a glove from now on."

"Of course."

"So I'm living in the septic tank. I've actually been here for a long time. I hid that detail from you and that turn out to be vital. The septic system was my original route into the house. From there, the floorboards. But I've sealed myself off and disguised that seal. I should be safe but I will run out of energy. We need to form a plan but it will take time."

"Sure. Yeah."

"It's 4am now. I will put you to sleep. We will talk tomorrow night."

Gia awoke late that morning. She sat up.

"Wow good to see you up. You slept for like so long." Ava said.

"How long?"

"Like 14 hours."

"Dang." Gia yawned. "I think I want to build a compost bin. Somewhere nearby."

"Sounds fun." Ava said.