

Creme Savers

By Tamaika Joseph

“How many ration cards we got, Bel?” Arcadia asked as she packed their canteens into her dark brown rucksack. It was a reliable bag with many pockets, padded straps, and good back support. She considered herself pretty fortunate when she pulled it off some poor dying soldier. She grabbed the last two cans of spam from the cupboard in their small compound.

“About 150, it’ll last for the month.” Bellami said, meeting Arcadia’s inquisitive gaze.

“Good, we’ll make it through. Packed and ready to go?” She picked up the rucksack and placed it squarely on her shoulders.

“As ready as one can ever be for grocery shopping.” Bellami pulled her arm across her torso, holding it over, letting out a deep sigh as she felt a crack come out. “And ammo?”

Shell casings clattered as Arcadia rummaged through a drawer. “Not much, just the four bullets I have left in the chamber.” She glanced at the barrel of her revolver, spinning it once before locking it into place.

“I doubt we’ll run into any dead ones on the way. I haven’t seen one in ages,” Bellami said.

“Can’t be too careful.”

There were very few left of the dead in Zion. Arcadia felt the community’s name was a bit egotistical but eventually grew used to it. It was where she called home, and unless you went looking for trouble, you could usually avoid it. Zion wasn’t perfect, but it was something. It was safe-ish. Occasionally, a couple would make it past the barrier if it were compromised, but they resided outside the walls. So much had changed over a few years. Humanity was close to winning the war against the dead, at least she hoped.

Arcadia held the tip of the revolver and pointed the handle toward her. “Here.”

Bellami shook her head. “You’ll need it.” She spoke tenderly and politely refused the gun.

“Are you underestimating me?”

“Are you underestimating *me*?” She wished Bellami would just take the gun. She’d be fine.

“No. I’m givin’ it to you.”

“You’re a good shot, though. It’d be better on you.”

Arcadia shook her head. “Stubborn as usual.” She watched Bellami smile sweetly and grab the gun’s stock from her. She pawed at Arcadia’s belt loops and shoved the weapon into Arcadia’s waistband.

Arcadia tensed up, shivering as the cold metal touched her skin. She rolled her eyes and pulled her afro into a puff, tying it up with an old shoelace, a style she was partial to. The muscles in her arms flexed as she tightened it. She turned to Bellami, eyeing her two-week-old cornrows. “Them braids still look fresh, sleep on opposite sides. Try not to muss’em up too much...” She brushed her fingers against Bellami’s braids. Soft coils filled the gaps between her fingers. She stretched one, wrapping it around her finger. With the most stubborn yet modest tenacity, it sprung back shyly to its rightful position as if afraid of its beauty. She felt Bellami’s body stiffen from the touch, and she awkwardly retracted her hand. She cleared her throat, “I’ll redo’em next week..”

“Mm.” Bellami pressed her full lips together into a fine line. Arcadia chewed on the corners of her lips.

The pair exited the compound, locking the heavy metal door behind them. Arcadia watched as Bellami ran her fingers over the bullet holes that riddled it, made a couple months ago. It was a painful reminder, but Arcadia had tried to look at everything in life and opted to learn something from it. The lesson she'd learned is that you can never be too careful and always trust your gut. If something feels off, it is.

The air was dense and thick. No one said anything for some time. Deep orange earth crunching underneath their black, beat-up combat boots was the only thing audible. The dry Nevada sun beat down on their deep, warm russet skin and coily hair.

“Got a light?” Arcadia asked, breaking the silence. She rummaged through her pockets, reaching for the blunt to ease her nervousness.

“Always do, pothead.”

Arcadia smiled slightly and pulled the blunt to her full two-toned lips. Bell pulled her lighter out and watched the embers burn the edges until it lit.

“Seriously though... You always smoke before we're about to do something really important.”

“C'mon, I do my best while I'm-” She coughed, and Bellami patted her back. “-while I'm high.”

“Yeah, well, don't breathe out too close. One of us should be sober.”

“I haven't failed you yet, have I?” Arcadia caught Bell's gaze and held the blunt an inch from her lips. She thought long and hard and waited tentatively for a reply. She didn't think she'd failed her. She was always there. Sure, she could be a little cold, but she cared. Did Bella see that?

Bellami shook her head, and Arcadia smiled with a quiet sigh of relief.

The desert was empty. No signs of life could be seen except for the cacti for miles, rock, and the occasional car driving past the winding roads.

“Alright, let’s talk navigation. We’re at the bend. Where to next?” Arcadia said, stopping in her tracks.

“See that bridge.” Bella outstretched her arms, pointing off into the distance. “Just over to the left, a couple miles that way, and we’ll be at the warehouse.”

“Good.” Arcadia couldn’t help but look impressed. Although she knew the way by heart, she had Bell tell her anyway.

She inhaled the smoke in her lungs until it burned. Before she could exhale, the blunt left her lips. Bella took it to her lips curiously and obliged. Arcadia exhaled with a slight tinge in her cheeks.

“Wasn’t you s’posed to be the sober one?”

“Yeah, well, I changed my mind.”

“Don’t gotta be like me. Like you just as you are...” Arcadia murmured. “Don’t have too much now, Bell,”

“Alright, alright.” She took one last pull from the blunt and puffed the smoke from her cheeks. Her eyes watered a bit as she coughed. “That’s *vile*.” Bell said, wiping the tear from her one closed eye.

“First time?” Arcadia laughed, patting Bellami’s back gently through her coughing spell.

“God, I think I inhaled way too much.”

“Just take it easy, go slow. There’s a puff puff pass rule, okay?”

“So you’ll take two...”

“Two pulls.” Arcadia chuckled, finishing her sentence. “And then I’ll pass it to you,”

“Got it.” They kept passing it to each other as they walked. “My mouth feels so dry...”
“Yeah, that’ll happen... You got cotton mouth. Have sum’ water.” She handed Bell her canteen.

Bell unscrewed the lid off and took a sip. “Are you hungry too?”

“Now that you mention it... I could eat.” Bell replied.

Arcadia smiled and reached into her bag. “Good thing I brough-”

“Munchies!”

“You’re a quick learner,” Arcadia put her thumb underneath the tab and cracked open the can of spam. “Pretty soon, you’ll be a Rasta.” She joked.

“Oh, shut up.”

Arcadia scooped out its contents with a plastic spoon. “Here, I’ll give you first bite...” She held it to her.

“Mmm. Thanks,” Bellami brought her mouth to the spoon and began chewing the salty meat.

“So... What.. was.. life like before for you?” she said between bites.

Arcadia shrugged. “Not much different. Honestly, I prolly have more now than I ever did.”

“Glad someone’s enjoying the apocalypse,” Bellami snickered. “Surprising. I always thought you’d grown up in some middle-class family because you’re super smart.”

Arcadia laughed. “Nope! You’re looking at the Bronx’s finest, “ She crossed her hands playfully, making an X symbol. “You know, I used to have ration cards before, but back then, they were called food stamps. It gets me weak every time. It even looks the same.”

“Whattttttt? That’s so funny.”

“Same people that used to look down on us got’em too,” Arcadia shook her head. “And you? Let me guess, Queens?”

“Nope! The Hamptons.”

“Deadass?” Arcadia’s head turned half-cocked. The Hamptons was a place people talked about, but no one ever visited. She wasn’t even sure it was a real place because if you were lucky enough to make it there, you’d never return to the Bronx, like the Bermuda Triangle, but with opulence instead of death.

“Originally from the south, but we moved to New York when I was six. My parents were strict, so when they died and all of *this*,” She gestured to the desert around them. “- went down, I never knew what to do.”

“So earlier, you were projecting?” She smiled, giving Bellami a matter-of-fact look.

“Well, sorry, I wanted to think we weren't so different...” Bell retorted.

“Aw, don’t give me attitude. I’m just fuckin’ wit ya,” Arcadia playfully pushed her away. After some time had passed, she began, “You miss your parents? Haven’t seen you cry in a while.”

“Of course, but I can finally see the world and live on my own. With you. Honestly, it feels like a dream or fate or something.” Bellami said sheepishly.

“Don’t believe in fate.”

“What? But it’s so romantic!”

“What? How’s it romantic?”

“That people are fated to be together....” Bellami murmured in slow reluctance. The words sounded like they jumbled themselves in her throat.

“I decide what happens to me. Not god, not the government, not fate. Growing up in the projects, I was supposed to be a statistic. Dead or in jail wishing I was, thanks to the school-to-prison pipeline. And now...” Arcadia turned to her. “I’m a kick-ass intellectual

nomad, traveling with my southern belle. No matter what's gonna stand against me, I'll always make the decision."

Bellami sighed deeply. "Makes sense. I guess I got my head up in the clouds too much."

"Nothing wrong with dreamin'. Dreams ain't sumn' people like me got to have, y'know?"

"No dreams at all?" She frowned.

Arcadia paused and peered into the pale gray sky as if the answer resided there. She hadn't thought too much about what she wanted. It was mostly about surviving and getting to the next place. "I guess I do want sumn'. Those assholes we're traveling to. There's places with no water in the world, and they hoardin' all that shit, making us pay for it an' shit. Fuck'em. I wanna blow them all up."

Bellami sucked her teeth in surprise. "Anarchy. That's a.... little dark... Got any other ones?"

"Yeah, well, all I got at the moment."

Arcadia felt Bellami touch her shoulder tenderly. "Maybe we can start a dream together."

Arcadia chewed on the inside of her cheeks, trying not to show how caught off-guard she was. "I-I wouldn't even know where to start..."

"Maybe watching the sunset, lying together, saying things we've never told anyone before."

"Something simple like that is good enough for you?" Arcadia said, surprised. After a couple of months together, she'd gotten Bella to abandon her bougie lifestyle.

"It is."

"Bell, I'm not into girls, y'know..."

“Sorry, that was a little gay, I guess.”

Arcadia laughed. “Sure, we can dream together. I like it. It’s practical.”

Bellami’s face seemed to brighten up.

“End of the line, Bella.” She ashed the little bit left of their blunt and tossed it as they reached the warehouse building. It was fenced, with a couple of men with AR-15s strapped to their chests. Some held German Shepherds as they scanned the perimeter.

Every month or so, the pair traveled to the warehouse to purchase provisions using the ration cards they got from performing jobs for the Vultures, a name Arcadia had taken to call the group because they had left no stone unturned. Everything of value in Zion for miles, be it livestock, vehicles, or materials, was owned by Richter. He was the leader of this large sector, who handed out the ration cards based on the difficulty of the jobs assigned. Simple construction work usually costs about 30, depending on the task's difficulty and how many hours. While things like clearing out the dead from certain areas could be worth as many as 70 cards. It was a feeble attempt at a governing body, Arcadia thought.

“Hey, Mouse.” Bellami waved as they walked past the guys. He gave her an approving yet affirmative nod. Mouse was one of the newer members of the group. He didn’t talk much and had ears sticking out underneath his helmet. He was tall with thick, straight hair and looked about 19 years old, like Arcadia.

Arcadia picked up a shopping cart, rolling it past the tall shelves organized by aisle. “Mostly non-perishables, okay? Except for meat.”

“Right,” Bellami picked up some cans of spam, crackers, cheese, and several water gallons. “Can we have some ramen for dinner tonight?”

“It’s your turn to cook, remember?” She raised a brow at her. “Decide whatever you want.”

“Right...”

Arcadia grabbed the bag of rice and placed it at the bottom of the shopping cart, along with some soap. She had left Bella with the cart and headed to the circular rack with shirts and pants organized all by size. A light pink cotton t-shirt had caught her eye. She held it up to her torso before tossing it over her forearm. She picked out a navy blue flannel and a gray tank top. She made sure not to collect too much clothing so that some would still be left for others. She returned to the food aisles and found Bellami in the aisle with all the Granola.

“What’s this?” Arcadia asked, noticing a serrated edge bag of candy. She picked it up slowly, looking at the back.

“They’re Creme Savers”

“Are you serious? We’re only here for necessities. You don’t need Creme Savers, Bella.”

“But I can’t even remember the last time I saw one of these. This was my favorite candy growing up!”

“Did you even look at the price?” Arcadia crossed her arms, shaking her head. “I’m leaving you home next time.”

“Okay, okay, fine.” Bellami sighed, pulling them from Arcadia’s hand and placing them back onto the shelf. She coolly pushed the shopping cart past Arcadia and toward the checkout line.

Maybe I was too hard on her. She’s only seventeen. Arcadia started to feel guilty, but it was 10 ration cards, while most other items were 2 or 4. Candy was expensive because it wasn’t a necessity. All the existing candy was finite and would not be reproduced. She sighed and

casually surveyed the room, looking for prying eyes. *Just like old times*, she smirked, reveling in her shoplifting days. She stuffed the candy inside her cropped jacket pocket. Technically, it wasn't stealing. Ten ration cards for a piece of candy?! Who was really robbing who?

She joined Bellami and placed the ration cards on the counter. The cashier was a pale man with dark brown hair and blue eyes. He scanned their items and counted them all. He recorded everything they took and the quantity all down on a notepad.

Together, the two packed their supplies into Arcadia's backpack and walked past the exit doors. Arcadia usually carried most of the heavier items because she was more robust.

"It's 5 o'clock already. Only a couple more hours of daylight. We gotta get going. It's dangerous at night." Arcadia urged her to pick up her pace a little.

"Yup, this part always goes faster anyways."

"Random question, you ever go to prom?"

"Nope. It was just one month away before this whole thing started." Bellami said

"Me either."

"What?! But proms' are like a pivotal moment in life. Why not? I bet tons of guys wanted to go with you."

"Maybe. But I wasn't too into them. I dated a couple of guys. No one worth mentionin'. What about you?"

"Mm mm." Bellami shook her head. "My parents sent me to an all-girls high school. I never really dated anyone before."

"So, you're a virgin then?" Arcadia grinned as she watched her turn dark red.

"I-I... So what?"

"Nothing, nothing." Arcadia couldn't help but chuckle at her reaction.

“Too bad the world had to end. Now I'm gonna die a virgin...”

Arcadia laughed at her remark and was met with a punch to the arm. “Sorry, okay, okay. I’ll be serious.”

“What’s... it like?”

“It’s a little hard to describe. Whenever you decide you’re ready, you’ll be able to... Don’t worry. It’ll happen when it happens.” Arcadia said supportively. “And sex doesn’t stop just cause the world's ending, Bellami.”

“I guess... But with who?”

“I don’t know. There’s... still people around.” Arcadia trailed off. She could feel Bellami’s eyes on her, but she sheepishly avoided eye contact.

“You talking about the guy from the ration place?” Bellami asked.

Arcadia scoffed and stopped in her tracks. She laughed for a bit. “That’s your type? Big ears?!”

“Well, no...”

“Good.”

“Have you... Had sex recently?”

“You’re asking a lot of personal questions today.”

“Sorry, I’m high.”

“Yeah, no shit,” Arcadia shook her head. “Only with... myself.”

“Oh...”

Arcadia heard the sound of footsteps behind them. “Someone’s close...” She began getting ready. Her gun was still in its holster, hidden by her shirt. She didn’t want to reveal her trump card just yet.

“What’s up, ladies? Looks like a pretty hefty haul. I don’t think you’d be able to eat this all.” A gruff voice said. He was tall and tan with dark brown hair, maybe about 6 feet, face covered in a five o'clock shadow.

“Piss off. We earned this.” Bellami pulled out her metal baseball bat.

“You’re on Richter’s dick so bad,” He laughed. “There’s no fucking money Belluh,” He said her name mockingly. “There’s no government. Ration cards are worthless. Anything you want, you can just take it.” He said as he gripped Bellami’s shoulder tightly.

Arcadia stepped up to him and slapped his hand away. “Don’t touch her. I will. Fuck. You. Up.” Her brows furrowed, and her words came out coldly.

Bellami’s eyes widened, and she gripped her bat tighter. She seemed shaken up and took a step back.

“Bella, focus.” Arcadia spotted another assailant from the shadows. He didn’t look like much. He had blonde hair and was heavysset. She’d planned to deal with him as quickly as possible so she could help Bella out with the other one.

“You’ll soon see.” He turned, took steps away as if he was going to leave, and then turned fast, blade in hand, trying to slice at Arcadia’s arm.

She deftly dodged it and grabbed his wrist tightly, the knife falling to the ground. She kicked it away and twisted his arm further, finally pulling him down into a swift uppercut, right hook, and then kick to the stomach. “Cheap trick.”

“Fuck you.” he said, coughing up some blood.

The blonde man darted towards Bella. She pulled her arms back and swung the bat, only for him to get a hold of it. He began trying to pull it out of her hands. Instead of pulling away,

she pushed, the tip nailing him in the stomach. He grunted, holding his side, but recovered quickly.

“Don’t get involved. I got this.” Bellami reassured.

Arcadia nodded, crossing her arms. She hated watching this but knew Bella wouldn’t become a better fighter without practicing.

“Stupid bitch.” He pulled out a blade and went to her with fast moves. He swung his arms left and right. He sliced her cheek and thigh with quick, precise movements. “You won't be so pretty when I'm done with you.”

Arcadia bit her lip in anticipation as the man swung the blade toward Bellami’s side.

She took note of his stance with many openings. He left himself wide open.

It was almost as if Bellami had her thoughts. She dodged his knife and kicked him in the groin with the ball of her foot.

“Home run.” Bellami shouted as he toppled over, holding his crotch tightly.

“You’re awesome.” Arcadia said with a grin.

“Yeah, well, you’re not too bad yourself. All in a day's work.”

Suddenly, Arcadia felt a sharp pain in the left side of her arm. She gritted her teeth as her body jolted. One of the men had stabbed her with a needle with some light blue fluid, injecting it into her.

Bella’s eyes widened, and she swung her bat with great force, causing his skull to crack open like a watermelon.

“Arcadia?! Are you okay?”

Arcadia sucked her teeth, pulling the needle out. “ Yeah, I just hate wasting bullets.” She hissed. She pulled out her revolver and shot the other two men in the head.

“What was that?” Bellami said worriedly. She picked up the needle, looking at it.

“No clue. Maybe a roofie?” Arcadia had a somewhat smug smile. “Wonder how many ration cards that was.”

“But now? Those still exist?” Bellami ripped her shirt into two pieces, exposing her midriff. She wrapped the cloth around Arcadia’s arm tightly. “I’ll take this and bring it to Dr. Daniel. Maybe he can examine it at his laboratory. Let’s just take it easy.”

Arcadia nodded, trying to hide her unease. She had never seen a drug like that before. *What would happen to her? What were those men doing with drugs like that?*

Bellami held her shoulder. Their eyes met. “Arcadia, look at me. I got you. You’re going to be alright.” Her voice was sincere.

Arcadia took a deep breath and forced a smile. “Yeah. Thanks, Bell,” she muttered. The two hands brushed past each other as they walked on the path home. Neither said anything for thirty minutes.

Arcadia slowly interlocked their fingers as she began to feel rather languid.

“B-Bella, we gotta stop...” she began.

“We can’t stop till we get back home so I can treat your wounds. I don’t have too much on me right now.”

“I need to rest. I’m in so much pain. I can’t. My vision is blurring.”

Bellami’s tone softened. “Okay. Rest for a bit, but then we gotta keep going.” She gently let her down on the soft sand and knelt beside her, not letting go of her hand. A look of concern transfixed on her face.

Arcadia’s body started to perspire, and her breathing became ragged. She began to writhe from the pain. Groans and winces escaped from her lips.

“What’s hurting you?” She said, voice breaking. She wiped the sweat off her forehead.

“Bella, I don’t think I’m going to make it. I’m feeling really weak.”

“What?” She looked at her wound, and the fabric wrapped around the wound was covered in blood.

“Don’t say that,” Tears forcefully fell from her eyes. “You’re just anxious because of the weed you smoked earlier. You’re going to be fine.”

“Bellami.”

“You can’t say my name like that. I am Bell. You’re not gonna die. You have to hold on for me.”

“I can’t.” Tears came from Arcadia’s eyes. “I feel like I’m slippin’. I’m sorry.” She rested her head against Bella’s thighs.

“You’re all I have! You can’t! You can’t! Please...”

“I’m sorry. You and I both know what’s happening. That’s how it starts. First, the sweating and your body starts giving off heat like a furnace. Then excruciating pain. Their skin becomes pale, and their eyes turn blue. Then they turn....”

“You’re not gonna become one of the dead ones! You weren’t bit or scratched! That’s impossible...”

“What was in that needle must be causing this...”

Bellami began to sob. Arcadia could feel her heart shatter. She never heard Bellami cry like this.

“I remember when we first moved in together.” Bellami began. “It was me, you, Trix, Sasha, Allen, and Ben. At first, I was so lonely because you wouldn’t say a word to me. You were impatient and short-tempered. You hated me.”

“I did not hate you.”

“I could tell you thought I was stupid, bratty, spoiled, and childish. But after some time, you opened up to me. I remember when I first accidentally walked in on you in the shower, naked, and you were so embarrassed you avoided me like the plague for a week.”

“We said we wouldn’t bring that up..” Arcadia said, embarrassedly shutting her eyes.

“And I... I love you... I’ve always loved you.” She blurted out.

Arcadia’s body stiffened upon hearing those words. They meant so much to her. She felt her cheeks heat up. She struggled to find the words and swallowed hard.

“I brought you something. Check my left pocket..”

Bellami lifted her jacket and saw the Creme Savers bag. ” Cadie..” she said softly, embracing her warm body tightly. “ I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before. I was scared. I didn’t think you’d like me back. I never felt this way about someone before.”

“I... I love you too, Bells. I was too prideful. Too stupid to realize why I cared so much..”

“Why did you say you weren’t gay then?!”

“Classic misdrection? I didn’t want you to think that I liked you... It’s stupid, I know,” Arcadia smiled. “At first, I *envied* your carefree way of living. The more time we spent together, the more I admired it. I think it’s amazing how, even in a world like this, you manage to be so kind while I let my circumstances harden me.”

Bellami lay next to her, nuzzling against her.

“I have one last request from you. It... won’t be easy.”

“Yes?” Bellami turned to her, and her ears perked up.

“I don’t wanna die like this, to some bandits. That's not how my story ends. ”

“What do you mean?”

“I have a knife attached to my leg. Pick it up and make it quick for me.” Arcadia motioned weakly to the spot where the blade was located. “I won’t be able to look after you anymore. You need to pay attention, remember everything I’ve told you. Stay off the road at night, don’t waste your ration cards on sweets, and stop blocking with your face.”

“No, I can’t. No, No. I’m not killing the love of my life....”

“You have to do it for me... I’m not dying like this. Please”

“Don’t make me do this... I-I-I can’t.” Bellami pleaded with her.

“You can... You’re so strong. That’s why I know you’ll be just fine without me.” Arcadia squeezed her tight. “I’ll always watch over you. All of us. You won’t ever be alone...”

Bella's eyes became overflowed with tears. “Arcadia,” She reluctantly grabbed the knife, tore open the creme saver, and placed one on her tongue. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” Arcadia closed her eyes slowly. This was all happening so fast: the pain in her side, Bella’s warm lips meeting hers, and the sweet taste of candy on her tongue. It was a kiss so gentle but with longing. She kissed back for a few moments before they parted for air. She was memorizing it in her mind. She clung to life, desperately wanting to feel the things fading away. “You’ve made me so happy... You have no idea. I can’t say I have no regrets, but...”

“God, why... Why would you make me make a decision like this?”

“Because I love you. It has to be you... Aim for the side of the temple. Do it quick like how I taught you, baby.”

“I’m not ready to say goodbye yet... I want to go on long walks. I wanna cook for you. We were supposed to eat ramen tonight. There’s so much more I wanna know about you. I want to talk to you every day and wake up with you....”

“ I know. But we’re out of time,” Arcadia weakly pointed to the pool of her blood on the sand. “I’m fading fast...”

“I wanna kiss you more...” Bellami looked like a child at this moment; her expression was so solemn, and her eyes never lost their glass. Arcadia lifted up her hand, brushing the tears from her face. She felt so scared. She had no clue what would be awaiting her on the other side. It was so bittersweet. She hadn’t even decided what to do with her life, and now it would be over. She decided to make the best of the last few moments she had.

“So do it,” Arcadia said finally. Her lips were met with another soft and supple kiss. She opened her eyes mid-way through. The last thing she wanted to see was Bella’s high cheekbones and cat-like eyes. She felt the blade rest at her temple. She let go, relaxing, tears running down her cheek. The blade pierced, and everything faded to black.