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I agree with the
timeline stuff

starting in action
Dead Leaves Name creates interest
suggests injury
Intent → Feather led me down the street to the survey team's headquarters. Or, more accurately, I hobbled
Paragraphs only rep let's freaking gooooo
after them as they buzzed here and there between their favorite places in town. The library, the
raised gardens, the only ^{cafe} that still had decent coffee. When Athena found me in the woods,
raised how? what is Rot? If she's still here, I assume it can be cured
scrawny and exhausted, my limbs covered in Rot, she'd taken me to stay with Feather, one of her
scouts. She said that they would know what to do—that they'd take care of me. And they did.
They gave me food and fresh clothes, bandaged my hands and legs with an ointment that would
can be delayed but not cured? what does it do?
stop the Rot from spreading further up my body, and offered to take me wherever I needed to go.
Though apparently, if "wherever" was headquarters, I'd have to make it through a full tour of the
town first. here
"Syd, come look at this!" Feather ducked into a narrow alley nearly a block away from where I
stood.
Another detour. When I rounded the corner, I saw them standing in front of a mural that seemed
to span an entire wall with painted trees and ferns. It was the greenest thing I'd seen since the
Rot took the woods. Dotted among the leaves were hundreds of faces—some skillfully rendered,
affects all organic material?
so that the subjects seemed to peer out at you from the wall; some blurry and barely
recognizable, like they'd been smeared there by a child's fingers. I stopped short at a steely-eyed imagery
face framed by dark curls. Cam? But it wasn't really her. It couldn't be.
Important figure, but how?

Rot + "Dead Leaves" gives me very fall vibes, rotting dead leaves
except now people can rot. Do their limbs fall off
like dead leaves too?

Feather was near the middle, standing stiller than I'd ever seen them, straw-blond hair falling into their eyes and a sturdy hand resting by the face of a child who looked a lot like them. They looked up at me with a smushed little smile.

"Athena painted her for me," they said. "I'm not much of an artist myself."

"Is that your sister?" I asked, but looking at Feather's face, I already knew. I wanted to kick myself.

"Yeah, that's Lily. She, um. It was a few years ago, before we figured out how to ^{not cure} treat the Rot.

She..." They faltered. "Do you have anyone like that?"

IF this ellipsis ends the sentence, there should be a period at the end (....). If not, "They" should be lowercase

"Yes. Sort of. My friend, Cam."

I shouldn't have called her a friend. She'd have hated me for it. Feather seemed to sense my

doubt, but they didn't ask anything more, and I didn't offer. We walked the rest of the way to

headquarters in silence.

"You want to go back out *there*?"

I could almost feel Athena's eyes piercing my skull. Her gaze snapped to Feather, who shifted awkwardly beside me.

"And you said you'd take her? Back through the woods. Where she almost died."

Feather opened their mouth, then shut it again.

"Do you not see the state she's in?"

Athena seems more serious

They're in the HQ - what does it look like?

stunted sentences = stonned disbelief with a hint of "are you kidding me?" very good

Rotted state

I ran my bandaged fingers over my arms. To be honest, she was right—it's just that I didn't care.

Feather clearly did, though. It looked like they were about to crumble under Athena's

questioning.

"I know where the Rot's coming from," I said quickly. Stupidly. "That's why I have to go back. I

can show you. I—I just need to get home, I know I saw something, something important.

Please."

What did she see?

"Oh? And what was that?" Athena's voice was hard.

so she didn't see anything, or saw something else? Why lie?
What's out there Athena wouldn't let her go back for?
I lied. I lied my ass off. It was a figure, deep in the woods behind my house. Years ago, like a

Is a Rotted tree different from a rotted tree? What does Rot look like?
Rotted tree, but not quite—everything around it was dead, but it wasn't like the Rot at first. I

didn't get close. I knew something was wrong, but I didn't tell anyone because I was just a dumb

teenager back then and I thought if I left it alone it would just go away on its own, and

everything would be fine, but...☹

My face was hot, and I felt tears prickling at the corners of my eyes. Athena and Feather were

going to call my bluff—they knew far more about the Rot than I did, and yet I was trying to

convince them I had something to offer. But they said nothing. Instead, Feather laid a reassuring

hand on my shoulder. Athena pressed her eyes shut, then opened them slowly, as if resigning

herself to something unpleasant.

"Feather, there's an extra set of equipment in the shed. Give Syd what she'll be able to use. Be

careful. Stay in touch."

There was a little fast-flowing stream north of town, marking the boundary between us and the woods. Feather and I stood on its pebbly banks and looked out at what was left of the trees.

The Rot was inconsistent. Sometimes it was only surface-deep, where it would leave its mark—soft, dark, and wrinkly, like the flesh of an old piece of fruit—but it didn't kill the host. Breaking contact with the source would slow the spread, and the right treatment could stop it entirely.

Rot implies death; what does it do?

That's how Athena and Feather were able to save me. The trees didn't have that luxury, of course, but some of the oldest ones were still standing. Their surfaces had been completely overtaken, the leaves had shriveled and fallen, and they were beginning to lose branches, but they were still alive for at least a little while longer.

If Rot can't kill, then this shouldn't be a surprise

The same couldn't be said for the underbrush or the ground cover. They sagged under the Rot, and the smallest plants had liquefied to coat the ground in a slimy mass. Walking through it unprotected was likely a death sentence. There were no animals in sight. Aside from the running water at our feet, it was completely silent.

What protection are they using?

Good description

"Syd?" Feather's voice sounded unnatural. It was too loud, too present.

elaborates on

"We're not going back," I said, trailing off to a whisper. Disturbing the silence felt wrong.

"We're not going forward until you tell me why we're doing this." They must have seen me hesitate, and continued, "I don't care what your reason is. I just need to know you know it."

"It's stupid."

"Tell me." It came out harsher than either of us were expecting. We both flinched. "Sorry."

"I told you I left someone behind. Cam. I have to go to her, I have to see her and...I have to give this back." I showed Feather the pendant hanging around my neck—a pressed clover encased in

I think showing this before and leaving it as a question for a bit and explaining it now could be satisfying

What happened?

amber resin. Cam had lent it to me a long time ago, before the Rot, before we stopped talking. "I don't know."

For a moment, Feather just looked at me with an oddly steady expression. I thought they might be angry. I was putting us both at risk, and for what—closure? It's not like I was the only person to lose someone to the Rot. But then a crooked little grin tugged at the corner of their mouth.

"Okay. Let's go, then."

I hate the rain.

It was coming down in sheets, chilling us to the bone and making it impossible to see more than a few dozen feet around us. We'd found higher ground on top of a large rock, and Feather was struggling to put up the shelter we'd packed. I was no help at all. self-deprecation

The Rot on my limbs seemed to resonate with the cold. A deep ache ran through my arms and legs, and then a numbness. I couldn't stand—my legs gave out completely when I tried, and Feather had to carry me up here. They said it wasn't my fault, that they'd agreed to this. But it was a mistake.

I noticed a line of Rot creeping above my bandages. I didn't mention it. There was nothing to be done, not when we were stranded like this.

uh-oh, do they not have the medicine? Seems like an

Feather got the shelter up just as night fell. There was no way to get dry, but we crept inside and oversight huddled together to keep what little warmth we had.

what ache? Loss? ⑥

Hasn't spread
In the afternoon sun, I almost felt normal again. The ache never fully went away, and the new Rot didn't fade, but at least I could walk, so we did. We were getting close. I told Feather what to

look for—a clearing in the woods, big enough for a few houses, or whatever was left of them.

The place where Cam and I used to live. We almost missed it—the houses had collapsed in on themselves, and a layer of liquefied Rot coated the foundations.

It affects inorganic matter, too?

From there, Feather and I went northwest. I was retracing my steps from the day we had to evacuate, when I'd left our group to go after Cam. She hadn't wanted to leave, and despite everything, I couldn't let her disappear by herself. So I followed her past the old playground site

and up the hill with the red maples, up to the boundary of the Rot when it had just arrived, years ago. Even then, it moved quickly.

Implies something changed from then to now—did it speed up?

I watched Cam kneel at the top of the hill. I think she was curious. I think she was stubborn. I

finally called out to her when the Rot began creeping up her legs. She didn't say anything and

didn't move. I don't think she could have then, even if she'd wanted to. But she did look at me, and there was pure, bitter resentment on her face. I looked back at her, and I looked down at the

Rot creeping over the ground towards me, and I turned around, and I ran.

what does that look like?

It took me years to find my way back to her.

Now, Feather and I stood together at the top of that hill. I pulled the clover pendant over my head

and laid it on the ground.

Rot doesn't kill, so where is Cam? Liquefied? Would have it still be killing, or is it like a parasite that uses the host?

"I feel awful," I said.

About leaving? Or about why Cam was mad before?

"I know." Feather wrapped their arms around me in a hug I didn't deserve, and burning tears

started to roll down my face. We stayed like that for a moment. Then we started down the hill.

memory

Emily - maybe I'm just biased towards apocalyptic fiction with unique threats, but I found your story particularly engaging. The "Rot" is an original concept you captured well with your effective writing. "Dead Leaves" reminded me of fall, but not the beautiful kind with bright leaves - the miserable kind where it's raining and cold and brown leaves melt into mud (and that's a good thing, if that was the tone you were aiming for). The title, too, is highly effective - it raises questions and lends imagery to the story before it even begins.

That being said, I wanted more. I wanted to see what the Rot does to people, not just trees and underbrush. Syd's arms and legs are Rotted, but what does that look like? What did she see when it was creeping towards her? Aside from making her weak and cold, what does it do? What does she think it did to Cam? Has she seen people Rot before? I feel like answering some of these questions would immerse the reader in a world that I wanted to be immersed in. I was also confused by some of the Rot's rules. It decays organic matter, but houses, too. How could Feather and Syd walk through it safely? For that matter, how did Syd get Rotted in

the first place? And if it doesn't kill things, what does it do? You don't have to answer everything; I enjoy stories that leave some mystery, but if you don't explain all of the rules, you have to keep them consistent. Finally, I wanted more details on Syd and Cam's relationship. Why did they stop talking, and why was Cam so angry with Syd after the Rot caught her? I think giving their relationship more detail would lend the emotional scenes more impact and provide more context for Syd's guilt.

Overall, you have a great story that certainly invested me, but I want to see more details to really pull me under. Make me fear the Rot. 😊

Good luck and happy revising!