

STILL LIVES

EPISODE 5: THE OTHERS

[piano music. Footsteps in dirt]

Traveler: All right! This is Atta's cabin. You, uh, can you two just, um, wait out here for a quick second –

Soldier: Do what you need to do.

[knocking]

Traveler: Atta?

[door opens]

Traveler: Are you in there? I think she's in there. Hold on.

[footsteps on wood floor. Crackling fire]

Traveler: Atta? Are you home?

[footsteps on stairs]

Atta: Sam?

Traveler: Yes! Ha ha, it's me. Er, surprise!

Atta: What are you doing here? We thought you wouldn't be back until midwinter. You can't have covered the whole valley already.

Traveler: Well, it's ... I came across this... you won't believe it.

Atta: You forgot to pack something? Run out of provisions?

Traveler: No, no, nothing like that.

Atta: Then why are you back? Did you find too much to bring back by yourself? We can send a whole foraging party if you --

Traveler: No, I found something more important.

Atta: Sam. There's nothing more important. Our situation's already --

Traveler: Just hold on, okay? Let me show you.

[Door opening]

Traveler: Come on. Come in. Atta, this is, um, they go by the Soldier and the Archivist. You two, this is- this is Atta. She runs things around here.

Soldier: Afternoon.

Archivist: Hi!

Atta: Oh my God. I – how – how did ...?

Traveler: They're about a week downriver.

Atta: How did you find them? How long have they -- how long have you been there?

Archivist: Oh, ages. We --

Soldier: Don't answer that.

Traveler: Come on, we're all friends here! Right? They took me in, Atta. You know that snow last week? They let me stay overnight. There's five of them. These two, plus a scientist, a cook, and a kid around fourteen or --

Soldier: That's enough. Listen, we're here to ask for your help.

Archivist: Okay, but can I just say first, this place is amazing. I can't believe we didn't know it was here. Though you're sort of hidden away, I guess. I'd love to ask you some questions if you've got –

Soldier: Like I say, we're. Here. To get. Help.

Archivist: Right. Yes. Sorry.

Atta: What sort of help?

Soldier: Medicine. One of our own's fallen sick. After we took in the Traveler, here.

Atta: Sick?

Archivist: Oh, it's not the illness, don't worry.

Soldier: No, it's some type of cough and fever. But we're still worried.

Traveler: I told them we might be able to ...

Atta: You offered up our medicine?

Traveler: Well, no, I just said we might ...

Archivist: Tell you what! What if we set up some sort of a – a trade? I don't know, this place is so different, but it could be we have some things back home that might be useful to you here!

Atta: Mm. I'm not making any promises, but we can talk things over, sure. You'll want to talk to Javier. He keeps the supply shed out past the barn.

Traveler: I can take you to Javier --

Atta: No. No, it's ... okay. I'll take her there myself. You two stay here and keep warm.

[footsteps. A door opens. Piano music then footsteps and the baahing of sheep]

Atta: So, what did you say your name was again?

Archivist: Oh, we don't use names back home. I just go by the Archivist.

Atta: Huh.

Archivist: Is that a barn? What do you keep in there?

Atta: Chickens, a few sheep, a pair of hogs.

Archivist: Hogs!

Atta: Yep. Misty and Martin.

Archivist: Could I see them?

Atta: Sorry, I don't think so. Their keeper's out foraging. Belle doesn't like anybody messing with them when she's not there. She used to have a pig farm up in Pennsylvania, before.

Archivist: Wow. Pennsylvania. Haven't heard that name in forever. The Traveler said there were twenty-two people here.

Atta: Yeah. How did you get by with only five back at your farm? We're stretched thin here with twenty as it is.

Archivist: Well, we don't need as much to get by as you do, I'm sure.

[sounds of hammering]

Archivist: Ooh, what's happening over there?

Atta: Ah, we're halfway through rebuilding Anson's house. There was rot in the roof, caved right in when he was sleeping. Here, the supply shed's this way.

[footsteps]

Archivist: I hope those two are doing okay back at your place. They don't get along too well.

Atta: Sam doesn't get along great with much of anyone, truth be told. He's a real handful.

Archivist: Well, the Soldier can be pretty tough, too.

[knocking and the creak of a door.]

Javier: Atta, hi! I was just doing some --

Atta: Javier, this is the Archivist. She lives on a little settlement about a week's trip away. Sam found them on his foraging expedition.

Javier: A ... what? A settlement?

Archivist: Hi! Yeah, home's nowhere near this size, but we make do. It's great to meet you. This place is so interesting. We had no idea any of this was here.

Javier: I--yeah, uh, we ... welcome? Good to meet you too.

Atta: May we come in?

Javier: Sure, of course, I was just ... right--

[door shuts. Piano music. Flickering of fire]

Soldier: So, uh. This where you grew up?

Traveler: Yeah, sort of.

Soldier: Well, it's loud here. I don't know how you people sleep with all the sheep making all that noise.

Traveler: There used to be cows, too! But they don't do that at night. Noise, that is.

Soldier: Hmm. And that Atta woman. How's she run this place?

Traveler: Oh, it's a whole operation. I don't know how she does it. Farming and foraging and repairs and education for the kids, she coordinates everything.

Soldier: She seems easily flustered.

Traveler: Well, you five weren't exactly casual when you saw me for the first time.

[Cough. Sounds of rummaging through cans]

Javier: So you've met all these people?

Atta: No. There's five of them. Two are here: this one and a veteran.

Javier: Are they all right?

Atta: Seem pretty harmless to me.

[clattering sound]

Archivist: Is this a tin of oranges?! Are these actual oranges? I haven't seen an orange in forever! Oh my God.

Javier: Yeah. Not threatening.

Archivist: I can't believe some of this stuff! Did you get those cans from the city? The Soldier goes there every so often, but not for food, we thought it was all gone.

Javier: Yeah, those were scavenged years back. We're not sure if they're edible anymore. Eating them would basically be a last-resort, which... I mean ...

Atta: Yes. For now, we just keep them as interest items.

Archivist: Wow. Right. Look, uh, do you mind if I ask you a few questions?

[click and whirr of the recorder]

Javier: Sure, I -- what is that?

Archivist: Oh, it's a recorder. I -- I can put it away if you want. I just thought, this is a great opportunity to ...

[whirring stops]

Javier: No, don't! That's amazing. How'd you get it to work? Can I see?

Archivist: Really? I mean -- of course! Here.

Atta: Is this why you call yourself the Archivist?

Archivist: Yep! I have a big reel back home and I've been scrapbooking bits and pieces for years. You know, to make a record of how things used to be, and how things are now, and, uh...

Javier: God, I forgot about this. Circle means record, right? And square is stop. It's like remembering how to read.

Archivist: Yeah.

Javier: It's fantastic.

Archivist: Thanks, thank you!

Atta: What sort of scrapbooks do you mean?

Archivist: Oh, back before I found our farm, that was how I stayed busy. Now the Soldier brings me back bits and pieces whenever he goes into the city. The recordings are really the heart of it, though. I've got enough tape for thousands of hours. My dream is to do interviews – daily, logs, everything. Show the whole progression of time.

Javier: That sounds fascinating. We don't have anything like that here.

Archivist: Yeah, the Traveler was telling me!

Javier: The Traveler?

Atta: That's what they call Sam.

Javier: Oh. I'm amazed you didn't kill him before he could tell you anything.

Archivist: We're not unfriendly! We're not like that, I swear, we're –

Javier: Oh, it's nothing to do with you! That's not what I meant. It's just, Sam is... well. Sam.

Archivist: Aw, he's not that bad.

Javier: If you say so.

Atta: Actually, it's getting late. I should check back with them. I know Sam's cabin has enough space for your friend to stay tonight, but I'm not sure there's space for two.

Javier: Oh, I've got a sofa you could use, no problem.

Archivist: You do?

Javier: Of course. I'd love to hear more about this Archive thing. Maybe I can give you that interview.

Archivist: You--you can?! I mean, thank you! I'd love that. I'd- I'd love that.

[piano music. Opening of a door and footsteps]

Traveler: Sorry about the dust! I haven't been here since early fall. Um, here, let me take your coat.

Soldier: I got it, I got it.

Traveler: Sorry, I know it's not exactly luxurious.

Soldier: Hey, I don't need fancy. You saw our place. This is fine. Don't you have locks on your doors, though?

Traveler: Not really. We broke most of them getting into these huts in the first place. It used to be some sort of campground, Before, but as you can see, we've tacked on additions and put up the barn and made it our own! Anyway, we don't really need locks, do we? I mean, it goes against the community feeling, that's what Atta says.

Soldier: Sounds like Atta is asking for people to steal each other's stuff.

Traveler: Hey. This is my home, all right? So you can -- you can leave it alone.

Soldier: Easy, easy. I didn't mean anything. Sit down. Alright, look, just pass me that bag. I'll make supper. I'm no Cook, but I'm good enough.

Traveler: Oh. I ... I can do it, it's, uh ...

Soldier: You're putting me up. This is me paying you back.

Traveler: All right. There's some pepper in the drawer.

[piano music. Sheep bleating and footsteps]

Archivist: Is this your house? It's beautiful!

Javier: No, this is Adam's place.

Archivist: Oh.

Javier: It is beautiful, though. Oh, wait here, I need to pick up my daughter.

Archivist: Your --? Oh, right! Go ahead.

[creak of a door. Distant indistinct voices and chuckling. Door creaks]

Javier: She's dead tired. Aren't you?

Archivist: I didn't realize you were, um. Married? I mean, had a baby? I mean –

Javier: I'm not. AJ's parents got the flu last year. I offered to take her in.

Archivist: Oh, that's awful.

Javier: It was a tough winter.

[a door opening and shutting. Feet on wood floor]

Javier: Sorry about the mess. I, uh -- didn't realize guests could exist.

Archivist: No, this is great. We don't have privacy back home. Everyone lives in the one farmhouse, so this is pretty amazing.

Javier: I'm going to put AJ to bed real quick. There's a cat around here, don't be surprised if he comes out.

Archivist: Great, great, take your time.

[Piano music. The sounds of clinking silverware and crackling fire.]

Traveler: Hey, this isn't half bad!

Soldier: No need to sound so surprised.

Traveler: I'm not. I'm not. But it's good.

Soldier: Well, you've got a lot of spices here. Good potatoes, too.

Traveler: Thanks. There's usually more. The dispensary is being stingy 'cause there was a blight last harvest.

Soldier: A blight?

Traveler: Yeah. We lost about half our crops. Already had to slaughter the cows to get through autumn. That's actually why I was out and about near your farm, see? Because Atta's hoping there are winter plants to forage we haven't found yet.

Soldier: And what's the verdict?

Traveler: Don't tell her, but I think it's a lost cause. I do know some safe mushrooms, for the record, and there's decent yellowfoot chanterelles near your place, and some rose hips a couple days out, but it was hardly enough to keep me going while I was out there, let alone make a difference in our stores.

[sounds of eating]

Soldier: I'm not trying to criticize again, I swear, but -- they sent you out alone?

Traveler: Yeah, why?

Soldier: I'm just ... surprised. You probably got this back at ours, but that's just not something we'd -- we would ever do.

Traveler: Yeah. I ... yeah, I did get that. Um, that's just how our farm is. I - I don't know, maybe that's just how our farm is to me. I get the sense people here don't like me? I joined a little late, I guess, and.... Never mind, I'm being stupid.

Soldier: Hey, no, it's all right. You're not being stupid. Listen, I'm sorry I was so hard on you at first. Keeping you out, and everything. That's another part of how home is for us, you know? With just the five of us, we gotta keep everyone safe, and we're responsible for that. So not having locks, or sending people out alone, that's ... well, I just don't get that.

Traveler: Yeah, I know. I don't hold it against you. I know why you did it. It's nice to see that, you know? The way you five are. I guess I just haven't had anything like that, since Before.

Soldier: Well, that doesn't have to stay true. Seconds?

[piano music. The sound of dishes in water]

Archivist: Thanks for cooking. It was amazing.

Javier: Of course. How's the fire going?

Archivist: Uh, great! Going great. I am great at fires.

[laughter. The striking of flint to tinder]

Javier: Let me.

Archivist: Thanks. Here, Chainsaw!

[cat meows]

Archivist: Ah, he's cute. Why's he called Chainsaw?

Javier: Just wait until he starts purring.

[flint strikes and the sound of flames]

Javier: So, how about that interview?

Archivist: You were serious?

Javier: Course I was.

[purring and a meow]

Archivist: Okay! I ... here.

[click and whirr of recording device]

Archivist: I'm here on the second farm with Javier -- what's your last name?

Javier: Ortanez.

Archivist: -- Javier Ortanez, who is hosting me for the night. His cabin is single-story, half a dozen rooms, made mostly from dark wood. He's just started a crackling fire.

Javier: So... how do you usually do this?

Archivist: Uh, usually?

Javier: How do you usually interview.

Archivist: This may or may not be my first formal interview.

Javier: I thought you had four other people at, uh--?

Archivist: I do, we do. But the Scientist is pretty strict about time management, so I keep this to myself, basically. Anyway, I want this to be organic, I don't have a list of questions or anything.

Javier: I have a question for you.

Archivist: Great! Shoot.

Javier: What's with the names? The lack of names?

Archivist: Oh! That? I don't know. It's just... just our way, I guess. I mean, I guess if I had to give a reason, it gives us some separation? Between who we are now and who we were then, and everything that ... happened.

Javier: Like a control thing.

Archivist: Yeah. Sort of, it.... It's part of how we keep things grounded in today. Normal, you know.

Javier: That doesn't feel normal.

Archivist: We've been there a decade. It's normal by now.

Javier: I guess. All that time and you've never gone hunting for other people?

Archivist: Have you?

Javier: We have, yeah. We lived about a month's trip northward before this, that was four years ago. Harvests were pretty thin up there, so eventually we decided moving south was safest. When we found this place, we sent out a search party every year, but I guess we didn't go far enough to find you.

Archivist: Right. Right. I suppose we just don't have that instinct. When the Traveler showed up ... I mean, we didn't turn him away, but I get the sense the Soldier and the Scientist and maybe even the Cook would have been happier if he just ... hadn't?

Javier: So, what, they want to be alone forever? Don't the five of you feel lonely at all?

Archivist: They want to survive. I guess that's how they think we should do it, is alone, with people we trust.

Javier: How old are they?

Archivist: Older. I mean, I don't know exactly, but I think the Soldier's early or mid-sixties, and the Scientist and Cook are in their fifties. How old are you?

Javier: 33. You?

Archivist: 28.

[fire crackling]

Archivist: Do you feel lonely?

Javier: Yeah. Sometimes, and there's twenty of us. Life with five... Isn't it stifling? Don't you miss ... I don't know. Love? Risk? Sex?

Archivist: Oh. Um. I ... uh, I don't really think about those things. That's -that's part of the Archive, I mean! That's the best I can do, is memorializing all those-- those things. That's survival for you.

Javier: I can't really picture survival without them.

[end sound of cat purring. Fade into sound of fire crackling]

Traveler: ... hadn't even been in the States for six months at that point and I suppose I didn't have much of a sense of scale yet. Started walking. And walking. I must have walked across half of Ohio before finding this petrol station that had a few rolls of powdered donuts. I'd thought for sure I was dead. Three days later, I came across this group moving south and joined them. Sometimes God looks like the Hostess logo.

Soldier: That's quite a story. I can't imagine us ever picking up and moving. We've got the perfect spot. Well, at least I think so, anyway.

Traveler: It's comfortable, that's for sure

[fade on fire crackling. Fade in on whirr of the recorder]

Archivist: ... Wow that is an amazing color. But how'd you make the paint?

Javier: Ground-up flower petals. Took me all spring to get enough to paint the hair.

Archivist: That's amazing. You know, the Scientist would see something like this and say it's a waste of time. That's what she always says about my Archive. Anything that people actually want to do. A waste of time.

Javier: That's the point of time.

Archivist: Exactly. Oh my God exactly. Can you tell me who else has a hobby? What are people here ...

[fade sound of recorder. Fade in on sound of fire crackling]

Soldier: ... maybe I think at the end of the day all I want is a quiet spot. Some place I can go and feel that bit of quiet in the back of my head take over.

Traveler: I know what you mean. Where you don't need to pretend or get nervous or ... anything.

Soldier: Yeah. And even Before, I never really had that. But now I do. When I'm having supper at the end of a long day, you, over at our farm. That's it, you know? What else could I ever want?

Traveler: Sounds like heaven. I don't know if I've ever had anything like that...

[fade from fire crackling to recorder whirring]

Javier: ... not really scared by any of it anymore. I think when I couldn't talk about it, that was when it scared me the most. Because I'd think of the last moment I saw my brother and think, what if this happens to everyone else I know, and that secret horrible thing was just hiding in me and terrifying me. But now that I can say it ...

Archivist: It doesn't have so much power.

Javier: Exactly. I think a lot of people won't say the things that matter to them, because they feel like ... feel all sorts of things. Maybe ... like it matters less once it's out there, like describing something makes it simple. But you can try to describe something for a thousand years and it'll never be perfect, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't try. So -- that's my very long-winded answer. Sorry.

[meow of cat]

Archivist: No, this is great. This is great. I completely agree. I want to talk about things. I want to stop being scared of what already happened. I don't know how that even – it doesn't make sense.

Javier: Okay, then.

Archivist: Okay.

Javier: Where were you from, before everything?

[crackling of fire]

Archivist: Baltimore.

Javier: Yeah? Did you like it?

Archivist: I loved it.

Javier: How long's it been since you talked about it?

Archivist: Thirteen years.

[Piano music. Crunching footsteps and chirping of birds]

Archivist: Good morning!

Soldier: Someone slept well.

[sheep baahing]

Traveler: Did you stay with Javier? He's great, isn't he?

Archivist: So great. We talked about everything. His storeroom -- it's sort of like an Archive, you know? And he has this cat, Chainsaw, that purrs like a chainsaw, and this daughter AJ who—

Soldier: Do they have medicine?

Archivist: Yeah. Half a bottle of Axathin.

Soldier: Axathin, really? I bet that could do it! Did you settle on a trade?

Archivist: Um, uh, not yet. I mean, we talked about it, and I guess we have a couple possibilities, but Atta would have to sign off on anything, so we couldn't.

[sound of hammering in the distance]

Soldier: You stayed there all night and didn't figure it out? Okay. What are these possibilities?

Archivist: Well, they both seemed interested in my recorder, so maybe that? Look, Sarge, I was thinking... maybe if they could do trade for the recorder, I

could just stay here and interview a few more people, and learn some more ... You wouldn't have to stay any longer! You could bring back the medicine, and I could follow after in a little bit!

Soldier: Did you forget why we're here? This isn't some anthropology trip, it's a rescue mission. We need you at home. You're sure as hell not making that trip back alone. And every second we spend here is a second that could be used getting back to the Cook, as far as I'm concerned.

Archivist: I didn't forget why we're here! I'm not suggesting we delay getting the medicine to the Cook –

Traveler: Can you keep it down? People are watching ...

Soldier: We don't even know whether we can get her medicine! Because you didn't do your job!

[sound of footsteps]

Traveler: Nothing to see here, everybody! Everything's fine! You two, stop, please.

Soldier: You know, I tell the Scientist to go easy on you all the time. Maybe I was wrong. I don't know how you got so distracted in twelve hours, but we're leaving today. All three of us. I don't like this place.

Traveler: Sarge ...

Soldier: And as long as you're all eavesdropping, I got a question for you, too. How the hell do you work out sending the Traveler out in near-winter on a foraging mission by himself?

Traveler: Sarge, be quiet -- I told you, there's been a blight –

[murmuring from the crowd]

Soldier: I don't care. Blight or no blight, that risk is downright stupid. You didn't even care that you might be throwing his life away? What kind of people are you?

Crowd 1: Hey, now --

Crowd 2: That's none of your business!

Crowd 3 (simultaneous with previous 2): Who do you think you are?

Traveler: Sarge ... I really don't mind ... it's not ...

Atta: That's enough. Settle down, everybody, it's all right.

[crowd simmers back to a mutter]

Atta: If you have so many problems with the way we run this place, then you're no longer welcome here.

Archivist: Wait! No, please. Let me get Javier.

Atta: Did you two work something out?

Archivist: No. I mean, maybe. I mean, we talked about -- I can give you this recorder for the Axathin.

Atta: I can't make that deal.

Archivist: I've got more equipment back at our farm. I have a second recorder. We have logs of -- remember, the logs I told you about? Even just some of the tablets --

Atta: I'm sorry. I like your gadgets, I do. I like your project. But I've got a responsibility to everybody here, and their safety. That has to be my priority. Travel safe.

[crunch of footsteps]

Archivist: Wait.

[footsteps stop]

Archivist: We -- we can give you food. We had a bumper crop this autumn. We've got more than we need for five people. Give us the medicine and we can bring you a loaded cart in another couple weeks. Please.

Atta: I can't spare all of it.

Archivist: And we don't need all of it! Just... just enough. Just something.

Atta: All right. It's strong stuff. Three doses could cure almost anything. Everybody, I'm sure you have something else to be doing besides standing here.

[A sudden rush of feet]

Atta: Get your things. Javier will meet you at the gate in half an hour.

[Piano music. Rattle of pill bottle]

Javier: Here it is.

Archivist: Thanks. For this and -- and the interview, and ... yeah.

Javier: My pleasure. It was ... something to meet you.

Archivist: It was something to meet you too.

Javier: Good luck getting back. But, um, I'll see you in a couple weeks? When you bring the food?

Archivist: Right. Of course.

Javier: Can't wait.

[footsteps. Sounds of geese]

Traveler: You ready to go?

Soldier: Got the medicine.

Archivist: Here.

Traveler: We're off, then! This way.

Soldier: That way, son.

Traveler: Right! You're right. That way.

Soldier: You okay?

Archivist: Yeah. I ... I feel terrible. I shouldn't have said that, I don't even know where it came from.

Soldier: Well, it worked.

Archivist: What if they ration out their stores and don't have enough because of me?

Soldier: They'll make it through. You did what needed to be done.

Traveler: What's taking you two so long?

Soldier: We're coming! Come on, let's get going.

[footsteps. Piano music. The crackling of a fire and coughing. Door opens]

Scientist: So I checked the dial on--Cook?

[a hacking cough]

Scientist: Cook? Can you hear me? Cook.

[coughing peters out]

Cook: If ... working ...

Scientist: Hush. Here, drink up.

[pouring water]

Scientist: Absolutely not. I'm not spending any more time on that thing. God, I can't believe I let you talk me into it, this is exactly why I said we should focus on your recovery! We--

[another cough]

Scientist: Sorry. Steady. I didn't mean ... it's not your fault at all, okay? It's my fault, this is all my fault. Steady. Here -- drink. I'm here now. I'm not going anywhere.

[crackling fire. Piano music]