

Book

Prologue

The radio clicks on.

“Factory D sinks in the northern gulf as a cliff falls,” the radio announcer crackles. “Rescue missions are currently underway as the factory sinks.”

Ah. Factory D is sinking?

I could try scavenging something there. Or maybe I could save someone...

Nah, it's too much of a pain for me.

I'm not a hero. I'd rather let others do that kinda work, while I stick to what I know.

Taking a brief look at my watch, I realize I only got 10 minutes to get to work.

Shoot, I gotta hurry or I'll be late.

Right now if I hurry, I can get there perfectly on time.

Gearing up, I put on a light jacket and quickly grab my toolbox.

Grabbing my black boots, I shove them on and open my door to outside.

The fresh air hits me in the face, and I'm greeted by the bright sun. Locking my door with my key, I continue walking outside.

Going down the steps, I sprint to a ladder on a nearby building.

Hoisting myself up the steel rungs, I climb up the ladder. Just another part of my daily life, believe it or not.

As the flat roof gets into sight, I take a quick look around. Upon seeing nobody nearby, I take a breath.

Crouching, I ready myself.

Taking off, I run fast.

Soon I reach the edge of the roof, and as I'm about to fall... I push off the edge of the roof, and fly over the gap between this building and the next building.

Let's go.

Chapter 1

I continue leaping roof to roof. I can see scrap heaps dotted throughout the dark landscape, along with short buildings equipped with flat roofs. Along the buildings snake wires alongside ladders.

All in all, it's bleak.

But it's my world that I'm living in.

And I can't change that.

Heading to work, I leap from building to building.

I follow the same route I always go. It's the same thing every day, yet I don't get bored of it. Well, I do. I actually hate it a lot.

Glancing at my watch, time is running out. I'm close to work, but there's not much time left. I have to pick up the pace.

Arriving at work, I rush inside the building just as my watch strikes 8 am.

"Hey Mr. Ried! I'm here!" I shouted as I rushed inside.

"Almost late, next time come 5 minutes earlier. Now, get to work," Mr. Ried exclaims. "We've already got 3 orders. You can take the 2 that are on the North side."

The North side is always better, the guys there sometimes get me a cup of coffee if I get there quickly, which is a bonus.

"Alright, I'll get on it," I replied back. "Address?"

"Here it is," Mr. Ried exclaims, and hands me a piece of paper. "I'll call you when we get more orders."

"Ok, I'll be ready for the next order after." I acknowledged back as I slipped through the door and embarked outside.

Jogging to the fire stairs next to our building, I race up the ladder onto the roof like I always do. Roofs are easier to navigate than the streets always. This is why I do this, even though it's a pain.

The order I'm doing is in the Northern section, so there's no time to waste.

I start running, leaping and sliding across the city's top landscape, as the wind whips by my ears and burns my eyes.

My breathing begins to labor, but I push through it.

I've always ran, and that's all I'm good for now.

So let's never stop.

The rest of the day goes by quickly as I finish many orders.

Currently, I'm on the pace to get enough money for next month.

Yeah, I don't get paid daily wage or salary. I get paid for each order only, so being quick is a must.

Maybe I could splurge a bit and get better food, if I continue with this pace.

Everything is expensive though, so saving is also important too.

If I make an incorrect choice, there goes lunch for 2 weeks.

Waking up every day. I never noticed it, but I do the same things every day.

I guess I did notice it. I just didn't want to believe it.

The sun hangs low over the horizon

It's getting late as it's 7pm, so I gotta go faster.

Better call Mr. Ried for 1 last order before it's too late.

Bzzzt! Bzzt!

“Hey Mr. Ried, any more orders?” I ask

“Yup, there’s 1 more order,” Mr. Ried proclaims. “The order is in the Western Block, on the outskirts.” He proceeds to tell me the address, and it’s far, deep in the west.

“You’ve done a lot of orders today, good job. I’ll give you a 5% bonus.” he says

“Thank you,” I say, a hint of surprise creeping into my voice. “Any other orders?” I add, but I already know the answer.

“No, that’s the last one.” he reveals.

My eye twitches a bit, and it feels like I have an itch I can’t scratch.

“Alright, goodbye.” I breathe, as I hang up.

What a pain. The order’s in the Western section and far away.

That really sucks, since I just wanted an easy closing order.

I’m actually a little worried, since I’ve never been there, on job or off.

I probably will get lost.

As I ignore the sinking feeling in my gut, I get on my way to the address.

It’s pretty far away, but if I pick up my pace I can probably get home not that late.

8:30 pm probably, 9 the latest.

Upon entering the Western section, I’m surprised at how poor it is.

There’s a small amount of people, and they all look like they’re gonna kill each other and plunder.

Putting my hood on, I try to make myself disappear. I don’t want these people killing me, or stealing from me.

Going deeper into the heart of the west side, I see even less people while the garbage/scrap piles grow in numbers and size.

Soon, I’m just walking on scrap. Dirt is too expensive here I guess.

And...yeah just like I figured, I’m lost.

Every scrap heap looks the same, every crumbling building is the same shade of grey.

This is hopeless.

The sun is setting too, so once it sets I’m officially screwed if I don’t start back then.

Continuing on my journey, not sure if i’m nearing or getting away from the order location.

It smells weird out here. Could even call it poisonous.

There’s not much here, which kinda sucks. No homes, no stores/markets, nothing here.

If there was an inn, I could maybe stay for a night and leave in the morning, or ask for directions.

But alas there is no inn, or anything.

There’s only piles.

Piles upon piles of junk. Discarded clothes, rags, wood, stones, concrete, plastic, every type of material. Garbage.

Suddenly, I'm sent sprawling forward.

"Aghh!" I say before falling onto the dirty scrap covered ground.

Ouch. Pretty gross and it stings too.

I look back where my foot was caught, and I tripped over a piece of wire.

What a pain, this is why I don't like the West block.

Continuing on to march forward, It's almost completely dark now.

Seeing some decrepit buildings in the distance, relief washes over me. This could be where the order came from.

Hurrying forward, I run towards the looming building.

As I near the building, I hear nothing but the wind whipping across the trees.

I don't see anybody too. Well, it's hard to see at all, as it's dark but shouldn't there be someone here? So shouldn't there be noise?

I look at the door of the building, and realize by luck, it's actually the address of the order that I'm supposed to fix. Lucky!

So I did make it then. What a relief.

Putting my right hand forward, I rap my knuckles against the door. The hinges rip from the door frame, and the door falls down.

"Oops, haha..." I exclaim. "Excuse me? Anyone here?" I yell out, hoping the person that ordered is still here and that I'm not alone and that this wasn't a waste.

But there's nothing.

Complete silence.

This is strange and unnerving. Creeps me out.

The more I think about it—who called the order here? And why?

I was extremely naive to come here. All alone especially.

Really? The west block? This place isn't exactly known for being friendly or safe. I'm such a fool.

I'm gonna call Mr. Ried and say no one showed up. I mean, what work am I supposed to do? Who's gonna pay me?

Nevertheless, calling Mr. Ried is what I need to do.

Bzzt! Bzzt!

"Hey Mr. Ried, I've got a problem," I say. "There's no one here to pay or tell what needs fixing."

"Really? I shouldn't have sent you to Western block," Mr. Ried proclaims. "I've never actually gotten an order from there before, I should've gotten Jon to do it instead."

I was appalled by this new information. He sent me on a suicide mission, and didn't warn me or tell me anything.

"I'm gonna leave then." I exclaim to Mr. Ried

“Yeah. No more orders also, as I closed my store a few minutes ago. Be careful around there, it’s dangerous also.” he announces.

“Ok, goodnight then.”

I need to leave, It’s dark, and I’m in the middle of an unknown place really.
Suddenly, a sharp noise echoes in the distance, accompanied by a flash of light.
Just great.
Thunder.

The wind begins to pick up, whipping my clothes around.
Chills run through me, making me shiver a bit.

At this point I either leave now or sleep somewhere to wait the rain out.
Both will take a fair amount of time to get home. I should just prioritize getting home, since I got work tomorrow. Earlier I get home, the better sleep I’ll get.

Upon leaving the building, rain starts to fall.
I start to run, picking up my pace to a half hearted sprint.
Taking off my sweater mid-run, I put it over me to shield from the rain.

It’s getting harder and harder to see, rain washing down on me, and the darkness swarming around me.
Continuing to push through this, I reassure myself it’ll be over soon.

Secretly, I know it won’t be over soon. It’ll take at least an hour in the cold rain.
I can’t see where I am, or where I’m going.
Jeez, if I only was smarter and didn’t come to the Western block, I would’ve avoided all this.
My stupidity inside burns bright. It’s almost funny.

The shirt I’m wearing slowly soaks, cooling my heated skin.
It cools me down, which is nice. But I get colder and colder.
Soon it becomes a little alarming.

I need to go somewhere to reheat—at this rate I’ll get hypothermia.
Slowly inching my way across the dystopian landscape, the rain continues relentlessly.

The rain runs down the slope I’m on.
Under me, it’s smooth.
My heel slides a little. Before I know it, I’m tumbling down the hill.
My mind drifts off, my face being battered by the scrap.
Before fading, I have one clear thought.

“Why?”

Awaking in darkness, I hear the pattering of rain against the ground constant.

Feeling around, there's hard smooth concrete below me.

Where the hell am I?

My body shivers a bit unconsciously.

Touching myself, I realize how cold I am. Alarmingly cold, I need heat fast.

Stripping my clothes off, only my underwear remains.

Geez, this is embarrassing but the only way I can reheat myself.

At least I'm alone.

Once my clothes are fully off, I feel the cool air rush into me.

Exercise is the only way to generate heat. I don't have matches or anything on me, so I'm screwed, but I'll have to manage.

Moving my body around, I jump and flail my arms around.

Slowly my body gets a little less numb and stiff, heat creeping back in.

The air is a little chilly from outside, but I'm slowly getting warmer.

I don't know where I am, but I'm gonna find out.

There's no light in here, so it's dark. Smells a bit too.

Stumbling around, in the distance there's a bright light. Light from outside.

Rushing towards it, the light hits me square in the face, causing me to shrink back and cover my eyes.

Ow, damn that's bright.

Pondering on it, I start to form a conclusion on how I got here.

I'm pretty sure I fainted from exhaustion yesterday so I was left on the slope rolling down.

From there, I either rolled into here, or someone put me here.

Regardless, I'm mostly safe. If I was sleeping in the rain, I would've probably died.

Wringing out my clothes, I try warming myself up. It gets annoying to rub my skin for heat, so instead I just curl up into a ball.

Breathing into myself, I warm decently quickly.

Looking at the bright light, I realize how stupid I am.

I can just go outside and the sun will dry out my clothes.

Putting my fairly wet clothes back on, I slip through the crack into the bright outside.

The sun momentarily blinds me, so I just close my eyes for a bit, looking at the around instead.

Slowly my eyes adjust to the brightness and I can see all around me.

It's a long way back, but since I'm feeling better I'll embark on the journey now.

I want to go home now anyway.

I'm still relatively lost, so the way back probably will take 3 hours or so. I can still clock into work maybe.

Mr. Ried is gonna be mad that I didn't come in for work today, and since my cell is dead I can't call him. Damn this sucks. Let's hope he doesn't get too mad.

Wandering through the scrapheaps is very slow, since I have to be careful of what I step on. Don't wanna fall or break something. It's dangerous.

Walking.

That's what I've been doing since I was of age. Everyone walks.

The human body evolved to make walking possible, as a simple effective way to go fair distances.

Sometimes you like it, other times you hate it.

And right now, I hate it with a passion.

Taking long looks around, the faint blue sky smiles down at me.

My clothes color lightens as they stop sticking to my skin. Everything seems to brighten up a little, a sparkle in the world around me.

I forgot how beautiful the world is.

Lots of ideas swirl around in my head, as a sense of peace I haven't felt in awhile comes over me.

A single voice behind me breaks through it, shattering the silence.

Turning around, I see someone I haven't seen for awhile.

Someone I wanted to forget.

Strutting over to me with a group of people, I'm surprised.

"Hey, what do you want?" I mutter.

"Just saying hi. I'm sorry 'bout what happened a few years ago, ok?" He confesses, "I was a little immature, and I'm sorry, alright? You can rejoin any time you want, you know? There's a place for you here that I miss."

"No thanks. I gotta go home." I reply, as I walk by him. I know he's sorry, but I'm already used to going alone.

Why change now? Besides, he made the issue in the first place. I falter for a second, daring to look back but I don't.

"See you around then." he says to me last, a basic parting gift.

Why does the past always come back?

I don't like thinking about the past, when we have the future. The past is the past, and I don't like going back there.

As surely as birds come back from migration, the past comes back as well. You can't escape.

The final stretch is quicker than I expected, due to my brain constantly chattering away from that confrontation with Jack.

Nothing like that has happened for awhile.

The sun is dipping towards the horizon as I near my home.

Yeah, that took a whole hell longer than I thought, I mean it was NOT 3 hours, or even 4 or 5. It was practically the entire day to navigating since I didn't know where to go.

Now it's like 4pm. Well I think anyway by estimating the sun's degrees in the sky.

Upon making it home, relief fills me. I briskly brush my teeth and take a quick shower in record time. After putting on pj's, I crash into bed, the world slipping from my grasp.

Sleep.

My eyes slowly open, full of the gross crust.

I notice that I'm a bit extra hot and my throat is a little raw.

Ignoring this, I lean back on my side and fall back into the sweet embrace of sleep.

Upon waking again, I take a look around. Something's not right.

I can't put my finger on it, but something's different. Oh and I'm not in my room anymore, I'm in a back alley. I got here quickly.

A strange girl walks up to me, and asks me what I'm doing.

I feel like I know her, but I also know that I've never met her in my life.

Very weird indeed.

Me and the girl walk together to a different building, and she gives me a mask.

Together we do something I haven't done in awhile.

She grabs a hammer and breaks the lock off the building's back door.

Making our way inside, we take everything.

Gems, jewelry, weapons we found inside, everything.

Unexplainably, everything blurs and slowly dims out. It's difficult to keep my eyes open.

I wake up in my bed, realizing it was all a dream. A particularly odd one, I've never had one like that. I must really be stressed.

Waking further, I take some of the crust out of my eyes.

A pain suddenly drills into my prostate.

Pee. I gotta pee, very badly.

I rush to the restroom, pulling my pants down in the process.

Once I reach the washroom, I let it out.

The pain dissipates with it, the satisfaction fair.

I check the time on my phone, and I'm quite late for work. Wow, I slept in today, I gotta go to work, geez I'm extremely late!
Then I see the day.

A realization dawns on me that I've somehow been ignoring all day. I failed.
I didn't call Mr. Ried at all and let him know that I can't go into work in advance.
I didn't go into work for 2 days.
He's a nicer boss, but this is inexcusable. I could get fired.

Since I didn't work for the past day and today yet, I'm down money as well.
I might not be able to afford food, which will affect my work pace, and it's a loop. A hellish loop of me suffering to make means end.
Damn it.

It's 2pm, so I have approximately 5 to 6 more hours of daylight. That much work won't cut it though.
I jump out of bed, and grab my cellphone on the nightstand.
Quickly dialing Mr. Ried, I pray that he understands me.
"Hey Mr. Ried, sorry that I haven't come in for 2 days. I couldn't get back from the west block." I say
"Sorry but you can't just do that. I needed you yesterday as well as today, and you weren't there." he says
Well, damn this doesn't look exactly good.

"I know, I'm sorry. My cell was dead so I couldn't call you and I felt sick too."
"The bottom line is you weren't here when I needed you, nor you told me. That's inexcusable." he shot back.
"This is because of that western block order," I shouted back, my body tensing up. "I felt like shit. And I didn't get pay at all!"
"That's it. No more of this." he exclaims, surprising me.
And he mutters words that I've never ever heard before from him.

Chapter 2

"You're fired." Mr. Ried exclaims to me through the phone.

"Hold on. But I'm your fastest worker and I've worked for awhile here too," I protested to him in hope he wouldn't *actually* fire me.

"Doesn't matter if you ain't even here. From now on, you're not my employee anymore. Goodbye."
"Wait-"

I hear a beep as he disconnects from the call.
What the hell? Who does he think he is, I need this job damn it..

I put down the phone, my hand shaking.
What am I supposed to do now? I'm gonna lose everything.
Damn, I'm gonna be homeless now.
I have 2 choices that I can do currently.

I could try getting a job again, or go back.
Back to the old life.

Realistically, I don't think I'll be able to find a job—there's probably none available. There's never been any available.

Even to get the job I had a few minutes ago, I had to wait a few months.

I applied to many companies too, yet hardly any of them hire.

Getting hired is a mix of skill, effort and luck. I'm not very exceptional in skill, and effort isn't *that* important, so it all boils down to luck.

And I'm not exactly that lucky.

Since a job is out of the picture, is there anything else I can do?

I could start my own maintenance service.

Actually that's a horrible idea, it's way too risky, and too much work. Paper work is a nightmare too.

The best thing to do is look for a job, as I'll get stable income from it. It's legal too I guess.

'Course, getting a job now will take time.

So in the meanwhile, to get money I'll have to go back.

Do what I used to do with Jack.

Except this time, people don't have my back.

Going into the closet in my room, I rummage through the stuff crammed in the closet.

It's just like I last remember, items scattered everywhere. One thing remains at the back though, that I wanted to leave behind. It's time for a small reunion.

My black backpack sits at the back of the closet, a little dusty but it's the same as when I used it before.

It's got a little wear and tear, but it looks good enough besides that. Anyhow, it's sufficient enough to use.

Once I check what's inside it, I smile.

Good. It has just what I thought it has.

Surfing through the stuff, the deeper I go the better it gets. It has more and more useful stuff inside than I initially thought. Perfect.

Slinging the backpack over my shoulder, I almost laugh at how I thought I would never do this again.

The past always comes back. Escaping it is futile.

As soon as I open the door, I'm shocked.

The cold wind bites into my skin, as white flakes fall from the sky.

Snow.

It's snowing.

Awe fills me to the core, burning into my heart. The cold from outside is futile to freeze my heart, when it's on fire.

Snow hardly happens, since it's generally warm. Or maybe I just never noticed.
The cold air bites into my lungs. The cool burning sensation is nice, like spearmint gum.

I can very faintly see my breath outside, a blurry cloud forming when I breathe out.
Today will probably be the coldest day of the year, at -1 degrees.
I don't mind. It's nice for nature to be cold like me too.

Hopping down the stairs, I tighten my sweater up.
Pushing my hood up, I feel the old habits beginning to resurface.

Looking back when there's no one there.
Scenarios plaguing my mind.
Itching that one spot on my knee.

They're a part of me I guess.

The alleyway I step into is dark and empty. Devoid of life. Garbage litters the sides, clinging to the sides of the buildings for dear life as the light wind pushes on them.

This is the way to the North and East border. I know because I've gone there quite a lot when I was with Jack.

The main idea I thought up is to go to the Eastern block and go in and out of a good house quickly.
Planning for me doesn't work as easy as you think. Things can and *will* go wrong. Life isn't that easy.

Though they generally have guards and stuff, you just gotta go for the underguarded or less protected ones
If worse comes to worst, I can go to the north block and steal factory parts, or scrap stuff as a backup plan. It probably won't be enough to get by, but it'll give me income in case with much less risk.

The scent hits me—a light ashy scent mixed with a faint new car smell. Or something around that.
That means I'm in between the North and East side.

Weaving through the alleys, I go deeper into the boundary between the 2 cities.
The alley suddenly opens to a streetway with quite a few buildings.

Snatching looks at each, I stagger throughout the street looking.
After around 15 minutes, I find a potential target.

Inspecting the place more, I analyze it for any weaknesses. Anything that is or can be a weakness is crucial.

Looking afar from the shadows, it's not by any means poor.

The building isn't like the top 15%, but is solid above average by a good chunk. Not the worst in the East, nor the best. Just ripe for pickings, low medium value low defense. Perfect.

Only a single guy walks around the front of the building. Seems underdefended a little, which is better.

Before I just 'go in' I gotta plan. If I don't plan I'll end up making a crucial mistake. I can break in the front, back, right or left sides. A lot of options.

Front is excluded, as he's there. Back is also generally protected by a camera, it's not weak like in movies. This isn't a movie.

So this leaves the sides.

To get to the sides, I need to distract the guard, or go when he's distracted. Or I could try something else if I think something up.

First, I should probably just scope it out up close and personal, without them seeing me of course. It's not dark yet thankfully, they always beef up security then. Quite a few more hours of daylight about, which is enough.

Surprisingly, the best way to plan is to observe. Not that surprising, but before stealing you need to survey the conditions. See if you can even steal from the place.

So I wait.

The guard is vigilant. He doesn't get distracted or stay off.

He's very focused. I mean, if he loses this job he won't be able to get another job and will probably die. I feel a little bad for him, but it's nothing personal. Not my fault I'm good at stealing and he sucks at guarding.

In total, it's been around a full 2 hours maybe.

Not exactly the most entertaining part of the job, but it's not that bad.

If you focus enough, it's actually mildly fun. You slowly start to form patterns, ideas, and you'll eventually simply 'know' when the guard is going to move.

Watching the guy, something ticks at the back of my mind. He's gonna take a break.

Sure enough, a few seconds later he walks into the house.

So what I've gathered so far, is that the guard covers a pretty decent area.

He generally patrols along the front part. Goes to the far left back to far right, so he sees everything except the direct back of course.

Interesting. There could be another security thing at the back.

Climbing up the side walls is an idea. Could do that when the guard isn't looking.
Or I could check out the back.

After weighing the options, I decide to go to the back of the building.
Upon the guard going to the left side of the building, I dive into the bushes.

Crouching, I sneak through the bushes.
Peeking, I can see the back well enough now.

There's a camera at the back. I kinda figured, but wasn't sure.
It moves back and forth from right to left, which simplifies things a lot if I break in there.

Creeping around the bushes again, I go to the left side, staring at the wall. I can see the guard and camera
in the corner of my eye.

The beginning of a plan slowly starts to form.

There's a small window on the side of the building. Enough to squeeze through if I break it of course.
I could infiltrate through there into the building, but I have to be careful that it doesn't lead into a room
people are in. Don't wanna get pinched.

How am I gonna get past it though? It's probably locked.
I guess I somehow have to break it or take off the glass to crawl through.
I'll have to be extra careful so I don't make noise.

Squinting at the window for more information, I can see it's old. Has a latch too.
Sitting in the bushes without warning, the guard turns around the corner. He doesn't see me thankfully, as
I'm in the bushes.
As soon as the guard leaves, I silently crawl out of the bushes and inspect the window more. It's
weathered, and a bit cracked in the bottom right corner. Latch still holds it closed too.

Trying the latch, it doesn't budge. Locked, as I thought.

Noticing the seams of the window starting to fry, an idea popped into my head. It just might work.

Going back to the bushes, I've fully committed to the idea.
It'll work—it must work.

Digging into my bag, I rustle around til I find a screwdriver deep in the bag. With my hand still in my
bag, I see the guard come around the corner all of a sudden.

Ducking, I wait in the bushes til he goes 'round the corner again.
Crouching, I crawl back to the window from the bushes and pry at the seams. Slowly, the corner started to
budge, and the window moves a little.

It's surprisingly quiet, only the very faint tinkle of the screwdriver rubbing against the rubber.

My hand moves in an awkward way, in turn moving the screwdriver.
I accidentally scratch the window, making a light *tink* sound.

Shoot!
I dive back into the bushes, imaging myself as a pile of leaves.

Around 15 seconds later, he comes, looking around.
The guard doesn't come towards me or the window, instead he looks around and leaves.
Guess he didn't hear? I mean it wasn't that loud,

As soon as he leaves, I go back to the window, prodding at the seams.

This is what I do for around 15 minutes.
Go out of the bushes. Prod at the seams. Leave after around a minute or so. Then repeat once the guard leaves.

But just as leaves fall during fall, the seams break off.

I've had enough with this arduous process, so I decide to take a chance
Carefully pushing my screwdriver fully under the seam, I lightly nudge it up, trying to ease the glass out.
I can't afford to mess up here. If I do, the glass will shatter alerting the guard.

The glass is scratched from my prodding before, but not cracked badly.
Slowly, as I prod and poke, the glass inches slowly and comes out. Relief fills me.
But there's a pretty sizeable crack across it.
Too bad they'll never see this glass again.

Bringing the cracked pane, I go back to the bushes and gently place it down.
After doing a quick double check that I have everything, I grab my backpack and head over to the side window.

Further inspecting the window, it's small. A tight fit for sure.
I don't know if I can even fit through that.

Taking a quick look inside the building from the window, there's a lot of sheets. It looks to be a laundry room, and empty.

Pushing my backpack through the window, it lands on top of the sheets in a big basket.
Taking a deep breath, I try imagining myself as skinny as can be.

First my feet get swallowed by the window. Then my legs, and here comes the hard part: my waist. I don't have an exceptionally big waist, but that window is tight.

I try to relax my muscles, along with forcing air out of my body to shrink ever so slightly. The window scrapes my sides as I slide through.

I land on a soft pile of sheets. For a second, life seems to slip away until I am reminded of what I need to do.

Looking around the sizable room, there's various catalog of linens. It's fairly neat, with a piled amount of laundry on a cart (that i'm in). The air is damp with the smell of mildew and moistness of the underground earth.

Grabbing my backpack that's in the cart with sheets, I walk out and carefully go to the doorway. Slowly opening the door, I peek out.

A wooden hallway fills my view. The smell of food wafts through the air, along with a faint pine smell. So this is how rich houses smell, more or less.

Tiptoeing around, I go down the hallway. Then, the hallway splits into 2 ways.

The classic question when this happens: Straight or Right? I think right in the only option. Side way is always better, instead of going straight down the hallway as you could run

The hallway twists and turns like a snake. I don't want to get lost, so I pick a random room on the left.

The room must be dark, since there's no light from under the door. Peeking inside the room, it is indeed dark. Going inside, I quickly try to get a bunch of stuff.

The plan for me was to go in, get stuff and out quickly.

Feeling around, I scoop up a bunch of stuff. I don't know what it is, but it's mine now.

Quietly closing the door of the room, I turn on the light briefly for a quick check. I gotta know what I got before leaving.

It's shocking. Art supplies. I have art supplies. String, glue, little cute pom poms. What the hell? Where's the good valuable stuff?

The realization hits me like bricks. All around me are boxes, so this one must just be for art supplies. So there could be good stuff here after all.

Let's get sorting.

Opening the boxes reveals something new each time.

Paintings.

Photos.

More art supplies (different ones).

Paper.

Colored pencils (I took a few). Surprisingly tare worth a decent amount.

Some spices (they're expired).

The boxes disappear fast, and soon only a single box remains.

My hand reaches for it, unfurling the cardboard.

Inside is something different than all the other things.

A stack of crudely drawn pictures. Looks to be childrens drawings.

Taking one off the top pile, it reminds me of before a little.

Putting it back, I clean up the room and get ready to go to another room.

Turning off the lights, I rest my hand on the door handle.

Just as I'm about to open the door, I hear footsteps walking through the corridor.

My heart stops in my chest, and I freeze.

Thoughts stir in my head as the steps get closer to me.

Holding my breath, I slowly inch back, and crouch behind a box.

In darkness, I wait for them to open the door, for me to get caught.

But it never comes.

Instead, they walk past the door and head that way.

Once I think they're gone, I trudge back to the door.

Opening it a crack, I peer out.

The hallway is bare.

Slipping out the door, I sprint to the next room.

Rushing inside it, I'm greeted by darkness again. All the rooms unused are dark, makes sense.

Turning on the lights, it appears just to be a similar room as the last one I've been in.

The boxes in this room though, are different.

Sorting through the new boxes, it's looking more promising.

Not exactly the jackpot, but I'll survive the next few days.

An old phone.

Scrap parts. (look to be from a computer or phone)

[insert more]

I carefully shovel the items in my bag, and zip it up.
Turning the lights off, I prepare to escape.
Checking outside the door, the coast is clear.

Going out, I make my way back to the laundry room.
I try to anyway, but I have no idea where I am.
Wandering through the halls, there seems to be no end to this place.

Footsteps echo behind me from a decent distance.
Someone's close. I gotta get out of this place quick.
The hallway seems to stretch out as I walk faster and faster.

The steps get louder, making the passageway walls seem to close in on me.

Suddenly at the end of the hallway is stairs.
Looking back, I can't see the person. I can faintly hear them though.

Sprinting up the stairs, I fervently think about possible exits.
Reaching the top, I'm in a dilemma.
More doors, more hallways, more choices.

The footsteps from the person are getting louder and closer. They're at the foot of the stairs.

My mind and senses are going haywire. I can't take it anymore—I have to escape.
Opening the closest door, I rush into the room.

Perfect, there's a glass door leading outside to a small balcony.
I'm gonna have to jump for it.

Struggling towards the glass door, I quickly fumble with it.
The steps behind me thunder louder. My heart jumps in my chest.

Upon successfully opening it, I walk through and close it quickly.
Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I take out a black mask and shove it on

Shouting echoes behind me, as the person lunges at me.
Going on top of the railing on the balcony, I prepare to jump to the neighbouring roof.
Behind me, the person pounds on the glass door leading to the balcony.

I dangle over the edge, the wind flowing around me.
Stepping back, I take a few hops, and fly off the edge.
Behind me, the door unlocks and the person watches helplessly as I escape.

Sailing in the air, the world seems to temporarily stop.
Almost like in between breaths, it blurs a little.

But just as you need air to survive, the breathing continues.
My flight is cut short as I also fall short of the neighbour's roof.

I bounce into the roof, holding on for dear life.
Slowly I climb up the roof.
My arms feel like burning lead pipes.

Behind me, the guard chasing me yells, "Stop!".
I obviously don't, and instead do my usual quick jump from roof-to-roof.

The light seems to get sucked out of the air as the sky darkens overhead.

Momentarily, I freeze.
The taste of rain fills my lips, that sweet taste of earthy dirt.
Sweat from the clouds, that thickens the air.

These moments will never be taken from me.

[review]

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye I spot movement behind me.
A guard or someone is running in my direction.
Escape time.

I turn up to high gear, and sprint into an alleyway, taking twists and turns.
They're faster than me, and quickly they start to gain on me.
Shoot. This person isn't an amateur at all, it's like they trained every day just for this moment.
I take out a mask from my backpack and put it on—they haven't seen my face yet cause I was far enough ahead of them, so I should protect my identity if they do glance at me.

I run into a main street, and immediately people crowd around us. Luckily, I made it to Central market, the biggest and busiest market in the country!
I slow down, but so does the unknown person following me. There's simply too many people around us.
I weave in the crowd, crouching a little so the follower can't see my head.
Ducking into an alleyway, I make a run for it, sprinting as fast as I can into different alleys.

No sight of the person luckily
I guess I'm safe for now.

I jog back home, looking over my shoulder every while.

Coming back from my first haul in a while, I step up the stairs to my apartment.

I insert my key into the lock, and turn it.

My door opens with a *click* as I step inside.

I see something that really confuses me.

A girl sitting in the middle of my apartment, twiddling her finger with her hair.

Just sitting there staring into space.

I almost drop my backpack, but I'm not risking what's inside it.

What is actually happening right now?

Shit, is this a break in? Is she armed? Am I gonna die?

As I observe her, I notice something.

She reminds me of someone.

Something blurry, almost like a distant memory.

Suddenly she stands up, and walks over to me.

She looks straight into my eyes and faces me.

"Nice place ya got here," she says. "Can I stay here?"

Chapter 3

Why would I ever allow a random person to live in my house, was my first question.

My second question was why me? Why did this random person decide to come to *my* house specifically, it could've been anyone, anyone else.

"Hell no. I don't know you even," I exasperated. "Unless you know me?"

"Yeah, I know one of your friends, Jack."

Jack. Did he tell her she could stay here? No, he wouldn't.

"He didn't tell me I could stay here though. I was waiting for you to come back, so we could discuss me staying here actually." She proclaims.

"You are NOT staying in my house, got it?" I exclaim. "I don't know you at all! Leave."

"How about we play a game?"

"What game?" I say, suspicion creeping into my voice.

"Chess. If I win, I stay no questions asked. If I lose, I'll give you 1000\$" she proposed.

Now this was a strange turn of events. 1000\$. That's a lot of money, enough to last me a full month.

"Prove you got a thousand first. Then maybe I'll consider it." I ask her. If she really has the money, I should try doing it

She takes out an envelope from her pocket, and opens it, revealing a bunch of bills.

I snatch the envelope from her and inspect the money. It's really 1000 smackers, all in 50 dollar bills.

Inspecting the money closer, there's no doubt it's real. It's not a fake, or if it is, it's a really well crafted one. Both options are good anyway, I can use the money as is if I win nonetheless.

She takes the money back from me, and speaks in a serious tone.

"You win first, then I'll give you money. Otherwise, hands off." She proclaims.

Thinking deeper about it, I realize she could be armed and kill me if I do end up beating her.

"So, how can we trust each other fully?" I question her, a hint of suspicion twinkling in my eye.

"How about we give each other something as 'hostage'," She proposes. "If any one of us breaks the other's possession, then the other can break theirs."

At first it sounded idiotic. What if she gives me something she secretly does care at all about?

"How do I know you actually want what you give me?" I provoked back at her.

"I have a better idea. Let's exchange information." she concurred.

"Information?" I exclaim in confusion.

"I'll tell you something I've never told anyone, and you tell me the same. It has to be important information that basically holds us hostage against the other. For trust." She informed me.

"Let's write it down instead and sign it, and then exchange it. Even if one of us fakes information, let's say I wrote down I killed someone for example, people will think it's real because of my handwriting and signature." I explain as I grab pencils and paper.

"Alright. It's a little confusing on how you phrased it, but I mostly understand it. Let's do it." She proclaims to me.

I give her a pencil and paper, and we both began writing.

What should I put? What is a secret of mine that I have that's important?

Thinking about it, I know what I should put. It whispers in the back of my mind, the darkest thing I know. Reluctantly, I write it down, and sign my name at the end.

Handing it to her, she hands me her note.

I unfold her note, and as I read, it gets darker and darker fast.

Still, it's not as bad as what I did. I see her eyes widen, but I ignore her and continue reading.

"I was a researcher in an experiment in an underground lab a few years ago. We were trying to find a way to safely burn garbage without leaving chemicals in the air. One day I forgot to seal the chamber correctly we were using to control the burning garbage. There was gas in the air from a leaky canister. Due to that, there was a massive explosion; 40 people died in total. I left that, and took on a new name. They're still looking for me, I've run and hidden a lot. Well enough they can't find me. Signed, Carla TT."

Carla? Carla T.T.? I guess that's her real name? Interesting.

Her secret isn't as bad as mine, but pretty serious. She didn't kill people on purpose though, which is the main thing. By accident is completely different than on purpose even if it was a big scale explosion.

Her eyes continue to widen as she reads my note. "You...you did this?" She questions.

"Yeah, I did." I explain. "It just happened."

She looks at me in disbelief, clearly confused.

"Let's just play chess," she says shakily. "Get the board out please."

"Let's go then." I reply back

Running to my room, I bring out the chessboard back to my living room table where she's waiting.

"Don't even try pulling any bullshit," she exclaims. "If you use force or anything to not let me stay, I will leak everything you said to me. If you do win, I'll leave and fairly give you the money as promised, no sweat."

She extends her hand, and smiles.

"Shake on it."

I bring my hand to hers, and we shake. The deal is sealed, no backing out now.

"I used to play chess," I exclaim as I set up the chessboard. "I'm pretty good, so you're gonna have to be good to beat me."

"Game on." she proudly declares.

I start off with my pawn to e4, King's Pawn, a very common opening. She then brings her pawn to e5, meeting up to my pawn.

Standard stuff so far, but slowly it gets harder and harder to figure out good moves.

We make a few equal exchanges, and I win a pawn, but overall we're basically the same at chess.

Then she messes up, moving her knight that was shielding her rook. I take with my bishop, meaning I made points off the exchange. She takes back with her other rook, and the game continues.

As the game progresses, I make minor errors, making me lose pawns. In total, she has 1 pawn more than me now.

I make a good move, and I take a pawn from her.

In response, she does a great move, ignoring the threat I have on her pawn and skewers my king, taking my rook far behind my king that's undefended.

Damn it!

So far, I'm down a pawn compared to her, and I'm down a full bishop, cause she took my rook. I took her rook before but she took my bishop. In total, I'm down 4 points.

The game starts to heat up as she seems to get better and better. I lose more pieces, and soon it's the end of the game.

She has a knight and 3 pawns left, while I got only 2 pawns. I'm somehow losing.

I take 2 of her pawns with my king, from her carelessness, but it doesn't matter. Her 1 pawn is getting closer to the finish line.

I take her knight with my king, since she just left it there, and I race my king at her pawn.

I didn't make it in time.

She queens her pawn, and suddenly, I know I've lost.

She's really smart. Smarter than I thought for sure.

Checking my king with her new queen, she takes the rest of the pawns I have, as she prepares for checkmate.

Literally no way for me to win the game now.

All I can do as watch as she brings her king closer to me, waiting for the end.

Abruptly, the game ends.

I didn't win.

Neither did she.

It was a tie, a stalemate. She was winning with only a queen, while I had nothing. She moved her queen in a way that I couldn't move my king anywhere,

"I win!" she remarked.

"No, you didn't. It was a draw." I replied.

"But, but I-"

"You didn't check my king, and I can't move my king, so it isn't a checkmate. It's a stalemate, which is a draw." I explained to her.

"Aw man, I basically won though!" She disagreed.

"You would've won if you were more careful." I counselled to her

"Fine, I guess it was a draw," She conceded. "But that's stupid cause I was winning and would've won!"

"Yeah, well you didn't win." I clarified.

"So, what happens since neither of us won nor lost?" she asked.

"How about you live here but give me the thousand, and we'll call it even." I stated.

"That's a deal." she answered back at me.

She hands me the money, and takes her backpack off.

"Alright. Now, what's your name?" I questioned

"You don't need to know. But people call me Catt."

This girl—she's very interesting.

"I'll call you that then," I added. "Catt."

"Yeah, alright I don't care anyway." She declared back.

"You get the small room to the right in the hallway," I decided..

"Alright, alright." She agrees, and disappears from view as she leaves the room to go to her room.

"This isn't bad," she approved. "It's a little small, but I'll take it."

"Ok. Don't stay up late and make noise, or eat my food in my fridge. No going into my room either."

"I know, I know," She grinned. "Now, I gotta go and do something. I'll be back tomorrow."

"I don't care, goodbye." I mused as she left the apartment.

Very weird girl indeed, who just shows up in someone's place and asks to stay, then plays chess?

She left really late too, it's dangerous outside at this time. Could get mugged in alleys or kidnapped, stuff like that. Though she probably knows what she's doing.

Not my problem anyway, it's better she's not here anyway so I don't have to deal with more issues.

I think about following her, but that's a pain, so nah. And if she caught me, that'd be really awkward too, so I'm definitely not doing that.

What should I do before I go to bed?

Inspecting what I got from the steal is a good idea. Or I could steal some more.

I think I'll see what I got so I can estimate how many steals I need to make for the month.

Heading into my room, I carefully take out each item I stole, and place them on the ground.

I've got ok steals. Not bad for an on the fly steal, not that bad at all.

Overall, I have about 250\$ worth of stuff for a day's work.

I mean normally I'd make 200\$ on normal work, but there's no risk with that. If I'm caught stealing, I could go to jail, be killed or have to pay them money.

Basically, being caught means the end of life as I know it, so I can't mess shit up at all.

Stealing. That's my life now.

Checking the envelope with the 1000\$, I count it again to make sure. It actually is 1000\$, It's a little unbelievable.

Chapter 4

The days turn quickly into weeks, and before I realize, even months.

Stealing becomes easier too, more routine. It's just like the old days, except without Jack.

Of course, there have been close calls. But I haven't been caught, so it doesn't matter, and there's always gonna be close calls. Nothing to worry about.

Even Catt is fine too, she doesn't annoy me much. In fact, we're getting along better now. Sometimes mishaps come, but overall we're friends.

Suddenly, everything is shaken by just 1 statement.
A single statement she made.

“I have something to tell you,” Catt exclaimed.
“What? Did you eat my food again?” I asked.
“Not quite.” she said shakily, and giggles.
“Not quite? So you did eat my food?!” I angrily snarl.
“No, no. I have something else to tell you though.” she comments back.

I was about to ask her if she ate the food I marked in the fridge, but she says something I have never ever heard from anyone.

“I...I love you.” she whispered.
Hm? Wha-what, no? Did I hear that right?
Surely she said she loves my food or something, right?

“Excuse me, what?” I inquired.
“I said I love you. Do you have hearing problems? Are you getting old?” she blushed. I could see a weird expression on her face. Was that embarrassment?

“Um...are you sure you love me? How did you fall in love with *me*?”
“That’s not how it works.” She giggled.
“How what works?” I ask, dumbfounded.
“How love works. It’s hard to put into words why I love you, but it’s not physical. True love comes from the heart. And that’s where mine is coming from for you.” she proclaimed.

“You don’t know me.” I exclaim.
“Then let’s get to know each other better,” she cooed.
She touches my hand, and I flinch.
“Don’t touch me” I growled.
She’s initially taken aback, but continues.
“Come on, it’s not a big deal. It’s not even,” she paused and blushed. “Intimate touch yet” she purred.
I can feel something inside me awakening. Something that shouldn’t be woken up.
“Stop. Just stop, get away from me.” I snarl.
She reaches higher, touching my chest.
My mind is going a million miles an hour. I feel emotions I didn’t even know I had.
Something finally snaps inside me.

I draw my hand up, and hear the crisp *Kshhkk!* of my hand connecting with her cheek.
“Oww! What the hell was-” she groans as I run to my room.
I shut the door and lock it, and lay on my bed, panting.
I feel darkness linger around me as I sit on my bed.
Let me think.
Shut up..shut up!

I need to release..

I open my bedroom window, and lean out as I feel my stomach tighten.

“AAuurghh!!” I groaned as I emptied my stomach out over the window.

“Damn it. Damn it all.” I shivered.

I squeeze myself through the window as the wind whips outside and scramble on the ledge.

I’m gonna do what I do best: run. Run away from it all.

Run. I don’t know where I’m going, all I know is I need to escape from this pain.

Later, I come back to my apartment, bursting the front door open.

Immediately I see Catt sitting on the couch, her eyes red.

“Catt.” I say

“I’m sorry—” She says

“No, I am. I did something inappropriate”

“So did I. But I did it first.”

“...I guess we both did something wrong.”

She laughs, and smiles at me.

“But seriously,” I exclaim. “I’m sorry. I really am.”

“It’s alright. I’m serious, I ignored your boundaries.”

She stands up, and I flinch briefly, and before I even know it, her arms are wrapped around me.

I feel her pressing into me, and I want to just shove her away, but I fight it and put my arms around her.

She relaxes in my arms, and snuggles into me.

“This is what you owe me,” She mumbles. “But I guess I owe you too.”

I don’t really like this crap, but if she forgives me I guess I can put up with it.

Breaking the embrace, I suggest we get some food.

“Let’s go get some food, I’m kind of hungry.” I propose to her.

“Food?” she questions, with a sparkle in her eyes. “I like all kinds of food really.”

“But what’s your favorite?” I ask.

“I don’t have a favorite category per se, but I like burgers, fish n’ chips, pasta, really anything.”

Interesting.

“I know a good burger place,” I reply. “It’s close, in the north part of Central City.

“Alright. Let’s go then.” She exclaims.

Arriving at the place, it’s different than I remember. Doesn’t look as good as it used to.

“So, here it is.” I exclaim.

“Great, let’s go!” She bubbles, bouncing into the place.

She’s really weird...

After ordering our food, she asked me a question.

“So, what’s your favorite color?”

“Uhh, if I had to choose 1 color, I’d pick purple. I like red a little, but black is nice too.” I reply back to her.

“I like red too, but orange is my favorite. Yellow is cool too though.” She bubbles to me.

Our food arrives, and we start eating.

Catt takes a bite in a burger, and after a few minutes, the food is gone.

We demolished it, there’s nothing left but crumbs.

“That was really good,” I say in surprise to Catt. “It’s gotten a lot more run down, but the food is still excellent.”

“It’s one of the best burgers I’ve ever had!” she beams.

“Better than I remember. Wanna go? It’s pretty late.” I declare.

“Ok. Let’s go home then.” She agrees, and we head back.

Once we’re back at my house, I flop down onto my couch. She joins me, looking at me with interest. The silence is awkward, so I pipe up.

“So what work do you do now?” I inquire, silently probing for more information.

She doesn’t answer the question, and replies back with “What work do you do though?”

Clearly she has something to hide. So do I, but I didn’t go into a random person’s house.

“Let’s exchange job information then.” She proposes to me.

“Deal. Let’s say our jobs at the same time.” I add.

“Alright. If one of us is lying, they gotta pay 250\$ to the other or get their secret leaked.” She professes.

“Agreed, let’s do it.” I reply back.

We say ours at the same time, and we’re surprised at what each other does.

“You steal stuff?” She exclaims in surprise before I can speak.

“Hey, I got fired recently,” I exclaim in protest. “But first, you’re a private data scientist? Really?”

“Yeah. I used to be a scientist like I said earlier, but I obviously can’t, since the police check records. So now I take data and do my work and hand it back, and they give me pretty decent cash. I use fake names and got 5+ emails.”

She seems very smart. To even get a job like that, it pays well and isn’t extremely stressful.

Really, she’s something else. Not like the people out. It seems extremely cliché, but it’s true. Nothing is like her in this brutal world.

She yawns, and I check my watch.

11:30 PM.

“I think I’m gonna go to bed,” I confess. “Nice talkin’ to you though.”

“Ok. See ya later!” She exclaims, and slowly trots back into her room.
It’s been a long day. Time for sleep.

Turning off the lights, I walk into my room, changing clothes, and getting ready for bed.
Sliding into bed, I close my eyes and think of what happened the past few months.
A lot has happened, it’s a little hard to comprehend. I mean, I got fired, met Catt, she moved in, went back to stealing, love confession from her, it’s been really busy.
I should just go to bed, it’s late. Thinking more will just keep me up.
Turning my mind off, I slowly drift off into the black void.

Later in the next day, I scout out some buildings to steal from.
East city is prime, so I’ll start there.

After a few hours of searching in the city, I stumble across a decent place.
It’s definitely more profitable than the last places I’ve stolen from, but also more guarded.
Looking into a few more places, I slowly narrow down which building is the best.
It ultimately takes me a full day of weighing options, going to each place to scout beforehand, and making decisions.

And finally, I decide.
It’s really ripe for the pickings, but I’m not sure if I can handle the place just by myself. It’s much more guarded than the last place.
I need another person to help.

“Hey Catt!” I yell towards her room.
“What?” She yells back, and peers out the crack of her door.
“I need help for something!” I gesture for her to come out of her room, but she doesn’t budge.
“I’m doing something later.” She replies back, unmotivated.
“I’ll give you a cut, alright?”

“How much are we talking?” She excitedly exclaims, and sprints out of her room to me.
“35%.” I state.
“40% and we got a deal. I’ll do all the techy and chem stuff just for you also.” she proclaims.
“Deal. Let’s get ready then. I’ll need smoke bombs, and for you to disable the cameras. Maybe more too.”

She looks at me funnily, like she’s going to burst out laughing.
“What? What’s the big deal?” I ask, but she doesn’t answer, just smirks.
Sigh.
“Anyway, at least make some stuff. If you do bad, I’ll give you a lower cut. Better, and I might raise it.”
She nods her head, still giggling to herself, and retreats back to her room.

The next day, I check in on her.
“Whatcha got so far?” I ask.
She continues fiddling with a small ball-machine like object, ignoring me.

“Hey! I’m talking to you.” I exclaim.

She doesn’t look at me, so I exit her room and clean up the house.

Not very cooperative to say the least. I should try making her come to me. Food. I could make some food.

As I prepare the food and simmer it over medium heat, I spot her slowly creeping out of her room

The smell of my stir fried pork wafts throughout the air, promising the taste of a lifetime.

She comes over to me, and tries taking some food, but I slap her hand away.

“Hey, first tell me what work you did.” I ask.

She grumbles, and says she finished making a few smoke bombs

“I planned more too,” She explained to me. “Why don’t we use these walkie talkies I have?”

“Great idea! We’ll use them to communicate in the building. Just make sure there’s no one on our frequency, or they’ll hear our convos and capture us.” I warn.

“Ok.” she replies, and goes into her room.

She shuffles around in her room for a bit, and emerges with 2 walkie talkies.

Throwing me one, I catch it.

“Here’s a plate.” I exclaim to her, letting her choose her food.

Sitting at the kitchen table, I gesture for her to sit with me. “Come, eat here.” I suggest.

She grabs what she wants, and plops down next to me.

“So, any plans or ideas?” I ask.

“How about you sneak into the building by simply just pretending you work there or something?” she exclaims.

Now that’s a bold idea.

“Interesting, but what if they ask for verification? Then I’m caught.” I explain to her.

“That’s why you have confidence, so they don’t ask and instead assume. It’s easier than it looks,” she argues. “I know the psychology behind it.”

Over the next few hours, we work out a detailed plan to infiltrate the structure.

Lots of ideas and questions form, and slowly a core flow happens.

“So you’re going to go in, pretend you’re supposed to be there, and scope it out a lot mainly.” she explains to me.

“Yeah, but what should I be? A delivery driver? Maintenance worker? Plumber?”

“Just go with your gut. What fits you best?”

“Good point. I’d say maintenance worker, I did that job actually before stealing so it does make sense.”

“Be ready in 30 mins then. Let’s do this.”

Grabbing some tools, we gear up, readying for the job.

I still have maintenance worker gear from the actual job I did before, so I can use that to

Leaving for the place 15 minutes later, we're finally ready.

Reaching the target, the place looms above me
Darkness seems to gather around, whispering discouragement.
Let's just hope this isn't my last steal.

Me and her are taking a much different approach than I normally take. She gave me the "Normal Person" idea: Where I use fake confidence to pretend I'm supposed to be there. No one will suspect someone that's supposed to be there, correct? Confidence is key.

Putting on my cap, I tug it down a little. This is scary, one mistake and there goes the rest of my life. "Life is on the wire, the rest is just waiting."
That's what they say, and sometimes it's true.
I really should try new stuff.

Walking into the building, I pretend that I'm supposed to be there.
Catt said confidence is key, so I'll fake it till I make it I guess.
Since they probably have cameras, I do have to look down so they don't see my face.

Strolling through, I continue on my way throughout the building.
People pass by, but don't even notice me really. I'm just another person here.

The method really does work.

Looking around, I navigate throughout the building. I can't really find what Catt told me to look for, but my eyes are peeled.

Finally, I find it. Archived documents. Catt said they were in the room titled "File Storage", and inside would be cabinets with lots of files/documents inside.
Valuable information. There's lots of stuff that, if sold to the right people, could get me the right price.

Trying the door, unexpectedly it's locked.
Damn it.
Searching for the nearest bathroom, I scope around. Lucky, there's one across the hall.

Going into the small bathroom, I lock the door, and take out my walkie talkie.
"Catt, doors locked."
Silence.
Then the intercom crackles to life.
"Pick the lock."

I haven't done it for awhile, but I'll give it a try.
"Alright. I'll keep you updated. See ya."

Turning off the walkie talkie, and putting it into my pocket, I unlock the door and step outside into the hall.

Making my way back to the File Storage room, I take out a paperclip I have in my pocket and bend it around, making it straight.

Trying the lock, I slowly listen for the pins inside the door moving up, as I guide the paperclip's top in. Slowly, I get through each pin. It's a slow process, and I'm a little worried about being found out, but this will be over soon.

Just gotta finish the door.

And I finish the last pin, all the pins are up!

Putting my other hand on the door handle, I tug it down and open the door.

Problem correctly solved, now for the serious part.

Going into the room, I lock it behind me and take a quick breather.

Which cabinet should I try first?

After 15 minutes, I've gotten a pretty decent amount of documents that look good.

Quickly skimming them over, I prepare to leave, carefully securing the documents into folder and place them into my backpack.

Putting my ear to the door, I make sure no ones around.

Hearing no footsteps, I carefully unlock the door and peek into the hallway.

Opening the door fully, I strut outside, walking with a slow measured pace that echoes "I'm supposed to be here."

A few people walk by me, don't even give me a look.

But then a guy comes up to me and talks to me.

"Hey there," he says to me. "What department are you in?"

Good thing Catt got me to rehearse some lines in case this happened.

"I'm doing maintenance. Been called in to fix some stuff."

"Oh. Have a great day then, I appreciate you doing this."

"Thanks. I get paid for this ya know, but you saying thank you really is nice. Thank you a lot."

"It's no big deal, I'll see you around then."

The guy leaves, slowly walking down the halls. What a nice guy, normally people are never like that.

As I exit the building, nothing happens. No alarms, no lights, nothing. A quiet steal is a successful steal, so I guess I did it.

I did it.

After walking a pretty decent distance from the place, I take my walkie talkie out of my pocket.

Speaking into it, I say "Mission complete. I'll meet you at the corner spot."

"Ok. Make sure no one follows you, see ya there."

Putting it in my pocket, I make my way to the spot we arranged beforehand.

Looking behind me, it seems I'm safe.

Successful steal I guess.

Reaching the spot, Catt hasn't gotten here yet.

"Catt come on!" I whisper in the walkie talkie, waiting for her to arrive.

Finally, I see a silhouette of someone approaching. As it nears, I realize it's not Catt.

Where is she?

The person gets closer and closer, and just as I think he's an enemy, he turns another way. Just a fluke.

Another shadow of someone approaches, but this time as they close in, I realize it's Catt. Safe.

"I got a buncha documents, you'll inspect em later and give them to the proper people, alright?"

"Yup, I got the connections for it."

"Nice. Since you *did* help me and do lots of work, I'll give you 55% instead of 40 for being good."

"Thanks, but that's hardly anything. Make it 65%."

"56%. You would've originally gotten 40%, be grateful. Geez."

"Fine, fine. 60% it is, after you factor out my living costs to be here."

"We'll discuss this later. For now, lets go home and check our plunder."

Walking back, I go home as she follows me.

Making my way up the steps, I take out my key to the apartment and insert it, twisting the handle to the right.

The door pops open, and I head inside, keeping the door open for Catt to come through.

Taking my backpack off, I put it on a chair next to the living room table.

I pick out the documents from a folder in my backpack, and place them on the table.

"Here's all of the papers. Sort through and sell em'."

"Hey, you're really getting me to do a whole lot of work. More work means more cut for me. 65% now."

"Fine. Just sell them. That's also 65% of earnings still subtracting basic rent I'm giving you now."

"I know. I'll sell these by the end of this week, so 5 days."

"I'm heading off to bed then, see you later."

"Goodnight then."

Heading off to my room, I sit on my bed.

Another day, another steal. My head leans back as I move around in my bed, switching to lying down.

I won't sleep though. There's chores to be done, and I can't leave them. Besides, it's not that late yet, only 5pm.

Getting up, I go out of my room, and start on some tasks.

After an hour, everything is completed. I think anyway.

Dishes, check. Laundry, check. Vacuumed, check.

I'm missing something.

A rumbling sound comes from none other than my stomach.
Dinner. I missed dinner.

Checking the fridge, I realized I didn't just miss dinner.
I forgot groceries too.

Heading out, I get some food from the local store and bring it back home.
"Catt! I'm making dinner."

She's in her room sorting the documents so I'll try to not bother her too much.
Taking out some ingredients, I start cooking.

Quickly, the meal slowly forms, the scent rising across the rooms.
Taking a plate and filling it with food, I walk into Catt's room and quietly set the plate down on a nightstand.
"Here's dinner. I'm going to bed soon, so goodnight."
"Goodnight."

Leaving her room, I go to the bathroom and get ready for bed.
It's been another quite long day. Sleep is always one of my favorite parts of the day.

It's peaceful, unlike Catt. She's really annoying sometimes, but other times she's fine.
What a girl.

Chapter 5

The months passed in a blur as I found myself getting more and more used to her.
We're best friends basically, even though she clearly wants more.
I don't really yet, for me simply being best friends is enough.

Checking my fridge, I'm kind of hungry after a steal I did.
And a lot of food is missing.
CATT!

What the hell, why'd she eat my food?
Bursting into her room, I'm greeted by silence.
Wait, silence? What?

Where's Catt?

I call for her
"Catt? Where are you?"
No response.

I search the house frantically, but there's no trace of her.

She's gone.

I search her room for a hint of anything...maybe this is a sign? She could've suicided.

No. She isn't like that.

I see hardly anything that arouses suspicion as I look around her room.

Then I notice it—her bed is neatly folded, which is much unlike her.

And I spot a small thing in the middle of her bed.

A note. A crisply folded piece of paper just lying there, almost begging to be read by me.

I slowly reach my hand out and take the note, unfolding it.

“If you're reading this, I have left. You don't need to know why I left. I love you but I can't bring you into this. If any people come to the door and accuse you of being with me, deny. Deny, deny, deny it. *Do not* find me. I'm leaving using a raft if that gives you any hope. I love you. Burn this or eat it, or whatever after you read. Just leave no trace of this. Goodbye with love, Catt.”

I stare at the note, the eerie quiet almost making me shiver. It's never been quiet ever since she was here...I think maybe I miss that now.

I reread the note, again and again, hoping that maybe I missed something, and that she's coming back in a day or 2.

But she's gone. She did this and left.

Just when I thought I made a friend, she had to leave.

Gosh I really need a break from all this.

Maybe this is a joke. This has to be, right?

Surely she's gonna burst through the door?

The silence is deafening.

She left.

But where did she go?

That's the real question.

And why? She only lightly specified why too.

A quick analysis of the note seems that she's going on a raft, leaving from this place.

I know she might be crazy and extremely energetic, but she isn't stupid. This has to—must be a lie.

No one leaves here by boat, as it's a death sentence. In the oceans, no one ever, ever comes back.

So if she didn't leave here, where did she go?

Well, firstly she most likely wanted to throw me off about where she was really going.

The good hiding spots in this city are anywhere in the Western block, the shorelines, maybe the Northern block—but I'd doubt she risk that, and the pipes. So either the Western block, in the pipes underground or the shore.

Still, the shoreline has people. The Western block or pipes are the safest option, so she went to either one of them probably.

To fully make sure, I need to look for clues and not go in blind.
Don't wanna look for her in the wrong place, and waste my time.

Walking into her room, I take a long, hard look.
Upon searching through her room, there's absolutely no clues whatsoever.

I check her dresser, nothing. The desk is empty too.
Nothing. She cleaned out what she had left, or erased any possible clues she had accidentally left.
Searching is not that hard, but I'm slowly getting demotivated. There's still no clues so it seems like a waste of time.

Opening books on her shelf, I don't see any clues really.
Looking inside one, the first page says "DIARY" in thick pencilled lines.

Perfect, this is her diary. There must be something on about where she's going!
I shuffle through it, looking for anything, any clue where she could be going, but I don't see much.
Checking the dates on it, it looks like she's had this diary for a while. The first entry was about 2 years ago, and she does entries generally once every 3 days at least.
Nearing the end of the book, I almost skip her last entry.
Her last entry was yesterday, so before she disappeared.

"I finally made the decision. I'm leaving. I love him, but I can't drag him into this. I'm taking everything.
Good thing I left early, cause this book is almost full.
P.S. If anyone is reading this, there's no information where I'm going, haha. Don't find me."

Well, that's anticlimactic. I figured it would have a little new information, but nothing.

Going back, I search through her room again. Under her bed, I find not

I search for 2 hours, but I yielded nothing. She completely covered her tracks.

The pipes. That's where she's going.
Figures. It's well hidden and a technically safe location.
It'll take awhile to find where she is, but it won't take forever.
What a trip it'll be, I could even find new information.
I'll leave in 2 hours after I pack and map out some routes, that's the plan.

I look around my room for things that could be potentially useful down there.
Gathering a few items, I put a few things in my backpack.

Hmm.

How will I not get lost down there? I need a way to navigate.
I got it! I think I have an old map of the pipes somewhere.

I stride over to my room and pick through the dusty books off my shelf.
Cough cough! I should dust more.

As I search through the books, I find a peculiar one. It's an old book, worn on the outside greatly, and faded.

I open it and see a lot of writing, and something clicks.

That's it! This was my old diary when I was younger, about 12.
It's a little nostalgic actually, seeing my bad writing and neat dates.
I close the book, and put it back on the shelf.

I carefully comb more through the books, and finally find the one I was looking for.
"Pipe Dreams by The Eastern Explorer's!" Is what it's called. A bit dated, but will be extremely useful.
Most of it is already known information like "Some pipes are flooded, so bring a raft or know how to swim".
Nevertheless, it's all I need to traverse the underground.

That's all I need.

I gather more equipment and supplies, stuffing my backpack full.
If I don't prepare correctly, I could die.

Grabbing my stuffed backpack, I put on a coat and trudge outside.
Clouds darken over the horizon as rain begins to fall around me.
It's getting late and dark, so I should hurry up.

So, the main issue is that there's no actual entrance to the pipes that's legally available.
So I'll have to take questionable ways to get into the pipes.
Walking, I see the building I'm going toward into the distance.

The old pipe management building. It has access to the pipes (I think), as they used to send management teams down there. Or so I've heard from older people, and read in books.
If I'm lucky, they'll have the gear the management teams used to go down there.

Finally I arrive, taking a long look at the decrepit building. It's not in very good shape, the roof is patchy, the building itself is sagging, and there's lots of moss.

Breaking down the door was extremely easy—the door itself was rotted mostly, and the hinges were rusty.
Simply kicking the door broke it down.
A cloud of dust rose up after that though—and I didn't move back, standing my ground.
I regret not moving back now, as I breathe in the dust, and hack away.
Cough cough, hack cough

I wave my hand, and brush myself as I walk over the door into the building.
The building itself looks alright outside, but inside is a completely different story.

Inside, it's completely ransacked. Looks like thieves came here—maybe 3 years ago.
There's not much of anything, and what is left is in piles on the ground.
Broken chairs, desks, lights, everything in an office space, and more. Random garbage too, looks like some people dumped stuff here.

Turning on my flashlight so I can see better, it really does look bad.

I navigate through the building, shining my flashlight around and jumping over garbage.
Carefully making my way around, the place really is in bad shape.
Everything is destroyed everywhere, not a corner safe. I figured it would look a little bad inside, but at least the ground would be half clean.
The ground is covered in trash basically, so I'm walking in a small lane.

The building is bigger than I thought, as I quickly get lost.
I'm just wandering, but eventually there'll be an entrance to a pipe.

Stumbling across a particularly interesting room, I carefully look around.
Luckily, it's the station that monitors the pipes. Exactly what I was looking for.
Logically, it should have an entrance to the pipes if it monitors the pipes. I think the exploration team in charge used this as an entrance in the pipes.
Before, when the pipes were still being used, they had to monitor the water to make sure it was safe.

Sneaking around, I investigate the room more.
I can see the control panel and mechanics. Fairly complicated, but I'll figure it out.
As I click buttons, nothing happens. When I think about it, there's no power here. Why would it even work in the first place? I'm an idiot.

I shine my light through the plexiglass, and see a huge object. A pipe.

The pipe goes through the wall. I open the door, and look at the pretty big pipe. It's about 5 feet tall, and rusty. There's a weird plate on the side, jutting out. I haven't really seen these kinds of pipes that much, so it's really interesting to see one in person.

Feeling the pipe, it's solid for sure. 50 years ago they did make quality, compared to what they make now.
I rub my fingers along the plate jutting out on the pipe. I try lifting the plate, but it doesn't budge.
It could be the entrance to the pipes actually.
Lifting it again, it moves a little, and slowly inch by inch, it lifts up, exposing the interior of the pipe.
Great.

I climb into the pipe, and finally, finally I got inside!

Step 1 is done now. All we have is step 2 left: to actually find her.
It's a little smaller inside, so I actually have to crouch. I know this is going to hurt after like 5 hours of walking—or crawling actually.
Gosh, it would've been so much easier if she just told me before leaving.
What a pain.

I've been walking for a while. Well, half walking since the damn tube is small.
It's gonna be a long trip. That's for sure.

Chapter 6

I swear, I'm never doing this again, good grief.

The only thoughts I have are moving forward and finding her.
Both prove to be getting harder, as my body is getting tired, and I haven't spot a single clue of where she is.

The flashlight I brought is starting to flicker. Good thing I brang 10 more batteries, which is enough for 5 more changes. More than enough to find her, I hope.

Abruptly, I hear a clank to the left side of me. Feeling around, all I can feel is the pipe wall.

Pushing my ear to the pipe's wall, I hear it again.

Clank.

What the hell?

Suddenly I hear more clanks from that side. Then a new sound.

Thunk.

I feel a wet sensation creep up my legs.

Water. The pipe I'm in is flooding!

Shoot. I gotta make a run for it.

I start to run with the water, but I can't hold my ground. The water seems to almost attack me.

I feel the water engulf me, and my breathing slips.

My head dunks under the water, and I can't breathe

MSHSP!!

I slip out of consciousness as my world turns black.

I awake, my body shivering.

It's cold, all around me.

My breathing is hazy, wheezing.

Closing my eyes, I want to drift off to sleep, but there's something I need to do.

Where am I?

I'm on the ground of some sort of material.

It feels slick and smooth, and is a little nostalgic somehow. Reminds me of the big half pipes I used to skateboard on.

Oh, this must be an old pipe.

Interesting, I've only heard about them from people I've talked with during my job.

Apparently, they were made with a different type of plastic.

And are very durable, but were also pretty expensive, so they went out of construction quickly.

But how—how did I get here?

All I remember is being in a pipe, and water rushing in

Oh! The water current must've pushed me here somehow.

What a pain.

The new pipe I'm in is huge though. I can't see, but the sides are a good distance away from each other.

I can't really see anything as I don't have my freaking flashlight.

Panic runs through me as I feel around. I guess I don't need to worry anymore about light.

Backpack. Where's my backpack?

Feeling around, I can't find it anywhere in the pipe. Leaning my back against the back of the pipe, something is in between me and the pipe. My backpack probably.

Touching behind me, it is indeed my backpack.

Well, having it on for a while makes it feel like it's not there so that kind of makes sense.

Taking my pack off, I feel around in it for anything useful.

My hands are shaking. Everything is jittering.

Some batteries, a spare set of clothes, plastic bags, and some more stuff.

Flashlight. I found a spare flashlight in my bag. Good thing I packed this one.

Taking it out and inserting batteries in, slowly it flickers to life.

The tunnel is illuminated, my hands gripping the flashlight as I look around.

I try to stand, but stumble, my legs weak.

There's almost some sort of fog over me—what was I supposed to do again?

Slipping, I fall onto the ground, my body unconsciously shaking.

The flashlight rolls away from me, my eyes beginning to close.

All at once, a single thought penetrates from the incoming darkness.

Survive.

Finally realizing what's happening, my brain finally wakes from its nap.

I'm freezing to death, otherwise known as Hypothermia.

Shuffling around, I inch towards my flashlight, and tentatively scoop it up.

Reaching in my bag, I take my clothes out. My hand feels like a piece of jello, jittering a little.

Numbing creeps up my arm as I shakily pull my shirt over my head.
My legs feel like cinder blocks, but I can't stop. To stop would be to give up.
All I want to do is curl up into a ball and let the void take me, but I need to live.
I need to find Catt.

My shirt comes off, air rushing into my chest. I shudder violently, shuffling around in my bag for a shirt.
Gripping a dry shirt, my hands feel like rubber,
Agonizingly I push the shirt on, slowly inch by inch.

Repeating this process with the rest of my clothes, it's a slow lengthy process. If I make a mistake, then
my clothes will fall into the small stream in the middle of the tunnel, which is not good.
My skin is cold and wet, like an old rag.
The only way to heat myself up is movement. I really don't want to move, I'd rather sleep, but I'll die if I
don't.

Fumbling with my flashlight, I turn it on, and look around.
Yup. It's an old pipe.

Gathering my thoughts, I continue on the journey of walking.
As time ticks by, I feel the warmth slowly seep into my body as I recover from hypothermia. Thank god I
know about it or I'd be a goner.
My joints start to slog, as it gets more and more difficult to simply move. It hurts.

The shaking I did before must've overused my body. I'm tired.

Continuing to limp, I hear noises directly ahead of me.
Someone speaking. Someone I know.
Catt. I think I may have found her?

Approaching the voice as the pipe takes a turn, I see a light coming from a flashlight.
Shining my flashlight at her, I yell "Catt!", hoping she's just come to me.

Everything hurts from the massive, long hike it took to get here.
Even just walking a short distance burns my legs.

She turns her head at me and looks right at me. It's unnerving, weird. Almost like she's staring into my
soul.
Struggling over to her, I say "What are you doing?"

She blinks in surprise at me, and looks confused.
"How'd you find me?" she inquires.
"Well, I basically eliminated options and found a little evidence suggesting you were most likely here."
She's appalled initially, I mean there was a 25% chance I went to the wrong place

Even so, down here I don't know where she actually exactly was, meaning I could've searched for awhile and never found her.

"I got lucky too." I exclaim.

"You don't want to be here anyway, why did you even look for me in the first place?" she asks.

"That's not important right now. Why did you really run away?" I shoot back, hoping to understand her better.

"You already know," she mystically replies. "The police think I purposely killed those people in the lab, and yeah."

Oh yeah..

"Why did you follow me though?" she questions.

"I don't know. You're basically my best friend, and I missed you I guess." I spoke back.

She giggles, and briefly blushes. "Sure, sure. Totalllly."

Sometimes, she really pisses me off.

"So, how exactly are we going to live underground?" I exclaim in confusion.

Surely she knew what she was doing?

"I've lived here before," she proclaims. "Right when I made the mistake as a scientist, I came here for a while to lay low."

She does actually know what she's doing.

"But how?" I profess, confusion bubbling inside me. "You need food, clean water, sanitary stuff, etc. How do you live here?"

"Well, think about it. Canned food, a bit of dishware, a few clothes, matches, flashlights, that's it. All ya need to live underground."

She really thought about everything. Initially, she looked pretty naive. I didn't know how useful she is.

"Let's go back to my camp," she decides. Touching my chest, she notices I'm a little cold.

"Hurry, quick. You're frozen, I'll get you some heat."

Hurriedly rushing, she drags me to her camp and starts fixing a quick meal for me.

She throws a blanket over me, and huddles near some stones, placing some wood chips down.

"What are you doing?" I ask while squeezing the moisture out of my other soaked clothes.

She doesn't respond, grabbing a match box, and striking a match.

The warm oranges burst from the top of the match, burning the air. Slowly, she carefully places the match down into the wood chips, igniting the small pile.

As I notice more, I see that the wood chips are inside a rock circle a little above. I get it, she put the fire on rocks so it doesn't melt the pipe. The pipes are only made of plastic or steel, so they sometimes melt.

She's definitely smarter than she looks.

A small fire begins to start, smoke wisping up. Light emerges from the fire, and I can see more clearly. Heat starts to burn into me, the feeling coming back into my fingertips and toes.

"Thanks Catt. But also no thanks, you didn't need to run away without telling me."

"Sorry. I was impulsive, but I didn't want to drag you into this. The police, they're still looking for me. Change names, run, I can't bring you into this rushed life of mine."

She can be so immature sometimes.

"You're selfish."

Her eyes widen in shock as she glares at me, and she does
Bringing her finger to her mouth, she chews on her nail.
Biting down, her nail disappears down to the cuticle.
Turning around, she walks away from me, leaving me in silence.

"I'm sorry ok?" I yell, but she doesn't respond or turn around.

As she leaves my view, I stand there.

The quiet is deafening, almost eerie.

Why am I like this? Why do I always push people away?

The fire blazes, smoking up as I just stand there, staring at it.

All I can hear is the crackling of the flames, as I watch each piece of wood slowly turn black and burn up.

Soon I find that the fire has gone out before I knew it, and I'm hungry.

Rummaging around, I find some crackers. Not an ideal meal, but beggars can't be choosers.

Sitting on the ground, I wait for something.

I don't exactly know what, but I just can't find the energy to move.

What a pain.

My head starts to droop as exhaustion kicks in.

Sleepy time.

The next day, I awake to a sore back.

Standing up and stretching, I crack my body lots more than I even thought was possible.

Sitting down and sleeping on a hard pipe does that to you I guess.

Looking around, there was a weird machine in front of me.

Picking it up, I examine it. I've never seen anything like it.

A sleek black box, with a thin opening. Attached to it were 2 wires extruding from the back. Out of each wire came a small bud of something.

There's nothing on it, so I don't really have an idea for what it might be. There's a few buttons, and a knob.

Checking the back, turns out there's also 2 batteries in the back as well.

Clicking a bunch of buttons, the machine hums to life, whirring.

After waiting for a bit, nothing happens.

Silence continues to permeate the air, broken by the occasional brr from the contraption.

Inspecting it closer, maybe the little slit in the middle has something to do? Maybe I need to insert something into it, like a key?

I guess I'll ask Catt when she comes back.

If she comes back.

Back to doing nothing, as usual.

Hearing footsteps, I turn around.

I see Catt approach me, thoughts and emotions bubbling inside me.

As they reach a boiling point, I spill everything out.

"Catt, I'm really sorry about that. I was insensitive towards you, and if you don't forgive me I understand."

She looks a little surprised, but then she smiles at me.

"It's not a big deal. I overreacted, and I was under stress and it was that time of the month."

"Thanks for being so understanding. This is just like before when we both messed up, though I mess up more."

"It's fine, really. We just need to respect each other's boundaries better."

"Of course. I actually have a question though, um what's that black box?"

Pointing to the contraption, she takes a deep breath and explains it to me.

"I call it a 'Music player'. It plays music through those speakers into your head using audio discs, or AD for short."

She's not smart.

She's a freaking genius, who the hell comes up with this?

"Who really are you?"

"I'm just Catt."

"Sure you are."

She just gets more interesting by the days, and more mysterious too.

"Can you maybe play a song on it?"

"Which one?"

“Hmm...how about Roundabout by Yes?”

“That’s a pretty long song, choose something shorter. I haven’t made the disc yet actually too, so I can’t do it.”

“What about Walk Like an Egyptian by The Bangles?”

“I actually got that one in that pile over there, so I can do it.”

Catt stands up and walks over to a case, and looks throughout the discs there.

She smiles, and holds one up, walking over to me, and putting the disc into her machine.

After a bit of whirring and noises, Catt grabs the wires, and puts the speakers into her ears.

I can hear a faint noise emanating from around her. It’s the speakers.

Taking the buds out of her ears, she hands them to me.

“Here, have a listen. Isn’t it super cool? I mean, it wasn’t that hard to make.”

Music fills my ears as I push the small speakers into my ears. It’s a little uncomfortable to have objects inside my ears, but it’s not really a big deal.

I can hear the music well though, and the audio quality isn’t bad.

“It’s good Catt, very interesting. Still don’t know how you really made them.”

“Well it was a little more difficult than I initially thought, but it wasn’t too bad. Just a short passion project.”

She starts the fire back up, my core starting to warm once again.

Life never slows down.

But I wish this moment would last forever.

Chapter 7

We’ve been living in the pipes together for about a week now.

To survive, we obviously need food and water, which is a problem. So every 2 weeks, I go up to the surface to buy food with my savings, and with what I find down in the pipes.

As I explore more with Catt, the pipes become familiar. I know how to navigate decently well around here.

Surprisingly, there’s valuable stuff down here. We found a pouch with gems and a note that a supposed gang boss stashed.

Here is the safest place to hide stuff, so it makes sense valuable stuff is here. Old artifacts.

It’s actually nice down here. Peaceful compared to the hustle and bustle above.

Relaxation is much easier than I initially thought.

I mean, once the daily duties are out of the way, it’s free rein basically, nothing else to do. And yeah, pretty much after that we explore for maybe a few hours, and the rest is empty time.

No work or as much chores. I got like 5 hours free per day.

But even so, it seems to go by much faster now.

Especially time with her is so fast. I don't know why, but simply being with her speeds everything up. "Time flies when you're having fun," huh. That's what people say, and I guess it's true sometimes.

The more time I spend with her, a weird tension starts to buzz in the air. I've never noticed it before. Something surfacing from the depths. It makes me stutter sometimes, sweat, and feel like I'm going to blow up.

I could be contracting something, but I'm not really sure. It's just particularly odd.

The days get into a rhythm though, and progress is made inside the pipes. Exploration becomes fun, almost a daily pastime.

On a particular walk around, we stumble across something bizarre to say the least. In the huge pipe we're in, there's a stream. And on the stream, there's a weird skeleton on a floaty, just there.

"Catt, look. What the hell is that?" I exclaim to her.

"I don't know, but let's find out," She yells back as she dives into the stream, swimming over. "Come on!"

She's so excited over *a corpse*. Really, she's different, and not in a good way either.

Before I reach her, she throws a rock at the skeleton, nudging it slightly.

The rock bounces off the skeleton, falling into the water and sinking down.

A chill washed over me. I don't know what it was, but it felt like I wasn't supposed to be here.

"Uhh Catt, let's leave. I'm kind of hungry, so can we go back to camp and eat?" I ask her, but she continues wading toward the skeleton.

"Lemme just see what this is though," she replies back. "Isn't it interesting?"

"Yeah, it's interesting I guess, but there's something off about it." I explain to her.

Ignoring my protests, she splashes water at the skeleton, and grabs the floaty that the skeleton is on, and turns it over.

I hear something. The wind picks up, making me shiver a little.

It's unnatural.

Wait, wind in a pipe? That's not normal, not at all.

"Catt! We should go, please." I yell at her, but she doesn't turn around.

There's a whistle sounding from everywhere around us, but none of us are whistling.

The whistling was loud. Piercing the silence, it felt like it was stabbing me deep in the heart.

Suddenly, something happened.

Something that couldn't be real.

A monster of some kind, rose up from below, breaking the pipe with a *Krrschk!*
Yeah, I must be dreaming right now, because monsters don't exist.
But it's real. Too real to be dreaming.

I looked next to me, and I saw Catt shaking, her eyes wide with fear.
No, this wasn't a dream.
What have I done?

How did this even happen?

Yeah. I frickin' released a monster. A monster.
Hard to believe, but it's true.
I don't exactly know how I did it, but I need to fix it. Quickly.
Or the whole country will be flattened, which is kinda not good, since I live here.
Oops.

Catt screams, and starts to run.
Following her, my eyes begin to mist. Was this the end of life as I know it? Or life at all period?

The horrid thing chases after us, breaking the pipe we're in.
Creaks and groans echo through the pipe as it starts to strain.
Plastic splinters around us, as the enormous monster erratically lunges at us, dirt falling through the cracks forming at the top of the pipe.

We're about 400m from the monster. A decent distance, but it's closing fast.
"Catt!" I exclaim, as we run. "Where should we go?" I ask. "Where are we?"
She looks at me with determination, and says, "I have no idea."

Well, this doesn't exactly look favorable.

Still running, up ahead is a drop off. The pipe ends here, and falls into a big collection system, basically a huge container with different pipes going into it, and were supposed to drop their water there.
"What are we gonna do?" I ask Catt, but she doesn't answer.
She's ahead of me, and she jumps off the pipe out of sight.
"CATT!" I yell, but she's gone.

The monster is close, and the pipe ends. What the hell am I supposed to do, and where did Catt go?
"Can't ya see me?" she exclaims from somewhere. "Just jump and swing back. There's a pipe below the one you're on, to the left. So quickly, go!"
She wants me to swing down to the left to a pipe.

The ground beneath me starts to shake. The monster is about 100m from me, and closing fast.
"Damn it!" I yell, before swinging down below me, and to the left.

Before I knew what was happening, I flew into Catt, knocking her down.

“Ouch, what the hell?” she exclaims in frustration towards me.

I rub my head, as I pick myself up.

“Sorry, I didn’t really know what I was doing at all.” I confess to her.

“It’s ok-” she says, but suddenly there’s a *Brsskphh!* from above.

She nods at me, and we run down the pipe. Slowly, the diameter shrinks, only being a bit taller than me, about 6 feet.

Loud noises echo down the tunnel as we exit.

Running, we make our way through the tunnel, continuing to go through the twists and turns.

I hope the monster doesn’t make it out of the pipe system.

Chapter 8

As the pipe starts to lighten up, the end of the tunnel closes in.

Catt’s still in front of me, and leans out the pipe, peeking outside.

“There’s not really a good way to put this, but we ain’t getting out.” she announces.

“Whatcha mean?” I ask, but seeing a glimpse of outside, I already know.

“Pipe ends by flowing outside, from a cliff. We can’t go off the cliff.” she explains.

Damn. What can we do now?

Crawling next to her, I see what she means.

If we climb out of the pipe, we’ll fall as we’re on a cliff. Be crushed by the ground.

Screams echo throughout the city.

“Catt! What’s happening?” I exclaim, as I look around at the distant Central City.

There’s something straight out of a nightmare.

The monster is right there, breaking everything, everyone.

“Looks like it burrowed from the pipe system to the surface,” Catt estimates.

“This is horrible. We gotta do something!” I exclaim, but what is there to do?

“The police force is attacking it. I’m sure they’ll take care of it. In the meantime, we need to get out of here.” she says. “This is perfect for us to get supplies in the city—since everyone will be distracted.”

“Great point. How do we get down from the cliff though?” I ask.

She sighs, and takes out a knife.

“You like sailing?” She questions.

What a random question though.

“I don’t really get what you mean, but a little I guess..?”

“We’re gonna sail. On land.” she announced.

Sail? On land?! It doesn’t work like that.

Moving back a bit, she grabs me and puts me behind her.

“You stay. I got a plan, don’t worry.” she says, but I’m not very confident in her.

Watching her, she takes her knife and cuts the pipe.

“Wait! Why are you destroying the pipe?” I ask, but she doesn’t answer.

Slowly, she cuts through most of the pipe, and takes off a semicircle of the pipe.

“It’s not that big, but enough to fit us.” She exclaims.

The pieces start to form, and I understand what she’s gonna do.

“You’ll need a front piece to protect us then.” I state.

She cuts more pieces out from the pipe, and before I know it, the pipe isn’t hanging over the ledge anymore. She cut so much off it!

Taking half of the pipe, she places it on the tunnel ground, and has a smaller piece of the pipe.

“It’s time to go.” She exclaims.

She hops in the semicircle of the pipe she cut, putting a small piece of pipe in front of her.

I slide behind her, and slowly the cut piece leans over the cliff, dangling over the air.

Dangerous. But it’s the quickest way, and fun too.

Hearing a thunk, the pipe piece we’re on dislodges from the pipe it was stuck in.

Going over the cliff, our pipe rattles against the cliff ground, causing my teeth to shake.

“Aaaaar—rre y—ouu su—rreee th—iss wii—lllll w—orrrk?” I yell at her, but she’s quiet again.

Sliding down, our half pipe is picking up quite a speed. I think it’s around 30km/h. It’s picking up speed fast.

Hitting a big bump, we leap into the air for a quick second.

Landing back down, my butt hits down hard. Ouch.

The tube is picking up max speed, at around 60km/h.

“Th—iiisss is—gett..ing da—nnngeer—rrroussss!” I yell to Catt, but I don’t think she can hear me.

We’re mostly down the hill, only about $\frac{3}{4}$ ’s left, when I spot a cluster of rocks nearing us. Catt seems to see them, so we slowly tilt to the right away from them.

Our tube slowly begins to slow down, as we aren’t going down. There’s a hill up ahead.

As we reach the hill, I expect the tube to slow down, but our pace continues. Going up, we fly off the hill, going meters above the ground.

In the air, I float up, above the tube. Everything does.

Grabbing down, I try holding onto the tube as we start to lose altitude.

“Oh no!!” I yell as we fall down from the sky.

The impact of hitting the ground makes my vision turn red momentarily.

Everything swims in front of me, aches pounding like a hammer into my head.

Leaning back, I look at the sky.

Wetness seems from my legs as the pain seems to dull and fade out. Blackness starts to envelop my vision as I close my eyes...

Someone touches my chest, lightly shaking me.

Opening my eyes, a hand is shaking me.

“You’re bleeding. Wake up.”

I want to sink into the sweet embrace of darkness, but alas I have to go with someone to do something.

The shaking continues, accompanied by the same voice.

“Come on! Stop messing around.” It repeats again.

I don’t care.

Slowly, I feel my consciousness slipping.

The darkness is overwhelming, and I yield.

Sweet dreams.

Waking up again, I slouch up.

Where am I? What is this?

I’m in a small room, the plastic of a tube cutting into my sides.

Plastic? I’m laying on a half tube of plastic? Weird.

There’s a blanket over me, but that’s it.

Oh. I remember now. We were trying to escape, and crashed. I fainted, and she must have brought me here or something.

Touching myself around, my left leg has a rushed bandage, along with my face and chest.

The wounds are fairly rough, still tender, and my body’s worn out. Meaning it’s only been a few hours.

Slouching up, I take a long look around the room. The ground is dirty cement devoid of anything.

Anything except the walkie talkie right next to me.

Grabbing it, I fiddle with it, clicking the speak button.

“Come in, I’m here. Catt?” I yell at it, but no one responds.

I guess I’ll lie in wait.

Time passes very slowly (or I think), as no transmissions were received from the walkie talkie at all.

My head begins to droop, closing my eyes.

Only for a few seconds, I need a break.

Without warning, the walkie talkie crackles to life.

My eyes burst open, and I quickly crawl over to the walkie talkie.

“Anyone here?” It speaks, and immediately, I click on the talk button.

“I’m here, I’m here,” I yell into it. “Are you Catt?”

“Yeah. I left you the walkie talkie so when I left we could communicate.”

“Why’d you leave me?”

“I have to get some food and resources for later.”

“Ok, where are you though? I’ll come find you.”

“If you really want to be with me, I’ll meet you near [xx] in 30 minutes. Make sure to bring the walkie talkie with you.”

“See ya then.”

The receiving stops, and I prepare to head out. My body still aches, but I’d rather be there than doing nothing.

I take a quick peek outside. The coast is clear, so I continue outside. Carefully, but surely, I get to the place.

5 minutes early, I wait there. In the distance, there’s distant sounds of panicking and screams, echoing off the walls.

As the time ticks by, I look at a nearby clock. It’s time now, where is she?

More time goes by, agonizing minute after minute. My mind starts to wander, making up horrible scenarios. She’ll come across the corner eventually right?

But she doesn’t. Seconds turn to minutes, time continues on.

15 minutes late, and she’s still not here. Nothing from the walkie talkie too.

Speaking into the walkie talkie, I send some messages, but receive no answers. It’s like she disappeared almost.

The distant screams and crunches in the background get louder, and less distant.

Catt suddenly appears around a corner, her eyes darting around.

“Catt! What’s happening?!” I ask, but already know the answer.

“The police, no, nothing really can kill the monster. Didn’t even leave a single scratch.”

“Worst case scenario it seems.”

“We gotta go right now actually. The monster is coming this way, we don’t have time.”

Just as she says that, the monster comes into view, behind a few buildings.

“Come on!”

“You don’t gotta ask me twice.”

Starting to run, I take the lead while Catt lags behind.

She’s slower than normal.

Looking at her more closely, I see that she’s carrying a plastic bag.

“Why do you have a bag?”

“It’s the stuff I grabbed before finding you.”

Taking the bag from her, we continue running. She goes ahead of me, leading the way.

Our pace starts to slow, but luckily the monster isn’t following us, so we escape.

As we go to a broken building to take a quick rest, we catch our breath.

“Catt, what should, I mean can we do?” I exclaim to her.
She just stares at me. A ghostly stare, like she’s peering through me.
“Catt?” I question. She doesn’t move a muscle
“What do we do?”

“I don’t know.”
She’s never said that. She’s always known what to do mostly.
Normally she could think up a solution. But this time, we’re in over our heads.
This could be the end. The end of the world. The end of normal life. Maybe even the end of us.

“Catt, let’s go.”

Heading off, we go somewhere.
Somewhere else so we leave the lingering depression.

Finding the entrance to the pipes again, we go back inside the maze.
The familiar smell hits my nostrils as we make our way back to camp.
It’s far, but she knows the way. I’m even getting to know the way.

Reaching our camp, we have a brief moment of safety.
The air feels like milk thickening into butter.

“We don’t have many options.”

I don’t really want to discuss the future, but we’re screwed.

The decisions shrink as we debate on what we should do. Decisions.
First a few minutes pass. Nothing chosen yet. Then a few hours. No decision either. A few days even, and we still don’t know what to do.

It wasn’t for nothing at least, we narrowed it down to 2 options.
Fight or leave.

“Final decision Catt, what are we gonna do?”

“I don’t really know, but we should fight the monster right?” she replies back.

“We should try at least once. No point in giving up without even trying, right?” I ask her.

“Let’s do it then,” She exclaims. “What kind of attack should we try first? Trap? Chemicals?”

“I don’t think brute force works, I mean looking at our police force, their guns didn’t really do any damage. Neither did their javelins or anything really.”

“So that means it has a hard exterior shell then,” She concludes.

“Looks like it.” I add.

“Let’s try chemicals then. I can make bombs, acid, gases, all those should work.”

She just casually suggests this. Chemistry isn't this easy, yet she's acting like anyone can do it.
"Ok, let's try bombs first. The strength of each bomb will determine how hard its shell is." I explain to her.

"Good idea, I'll get on it then. Could you get some of these materials from above?" She asks, before scribbling some stuff down on a piece of paper.

Handing me the piece, I see some stuff I've never heard about.

"Checking laboratories is the best idea." She suggests to me

"Alright. It'll take me a while to get these, so bunker up. I'll bring more food back too." I say while getting ready to leave.

We say goodbye as I part ways, heading towards the pipe that goes to the surface.

The road is arduous as I make my way. It takes awhile, but eventually the brightness of the surface appears.

Noise echoes throughout the city, but it's not close enough to worry about.

Spotting my first target, I head towards it.

Sneaking inside the deserted lab, it's empty.

Briefly checking the floor plan stuck on the wall, I memorize the route I need to take, and head off.

Shattered glass crunches beneath my feet as I navigate through the halls.

Catt told me that to get the ingredients for the bomb, I need to go to the storage room in labs.

After reaching the storage room, there's hardly anything left. Most of it is gone, but there are a few discarded vials in the back marked.

Checking them, I sort through until I find the ones I need.

[ingredient-2] and [ingredient-6]. I just need 4 more things.

Leaving the building, I go to the next lab on my map that Catt gave me from her science days.

Finally, I gather all the ingredients. Making my way back to the pipes, I stop by a few deserted places to steal some food.

There's not much food anywhere. All the good food was taken, only scraps remain.

Coming back down to the underground, I meet back with Catt.

"Got all the stuff ya need," I exclaim. "This took awhile to find, so it better work well."

She doesn't respond, focusing on some metal she's fiddling with.

Chuckling to myself, I ponder on this.

She's always been like this, ignoring me when she's doing something.

Placing the items down, I leave her to her work, and sit near the fire.

Grabbing some food, I nibble on some chips, waiting for her to finish.

Tiredness seeps into me, and I head off to the makeshift beds.

“Catt, I’m going to bed. Wake me in 8 hours or so.” I yell to her before laying down.

Thoughts swirl around in my head, but I put them to rest, drifting into the darkness.

Chapter 9

Most of our supplies are not very neat, being all across the ground and our “camp”. We gotta tidy up, and seeing Catt cooped up in her area, I guess it’s up to me to clean it all up.

Gathering most of our supplies, I neatly pack them up into 2 big backpacks and another bag. It’s kinda a lot for fitting into 3 bags, but somehow I did it.

Waking later, I check back on her.

“You done?”

She doesn’t answer, this time fiddling with some other thing.

Leaving her be, I decide to check on what we got for supplies.

Sifting through our stuff, we got a pretty good stash. Food for a while, a decent trove of clothes, etc. More than we need actually.

Suddenly, a noise pierces my thoughts. Footsteps.

Footsteps coming from the left side of the pipe.

Going over to Catt, I whisper to her. “I think there’s people here, we gotta leave Catt!”

“Alright. Let’s leave now then, pack whatever’s left.”

“Everything’s already packed, just a few of your things left and a bit of mine. The people will be here in 5 mins minimum, so we gotta leave in 3.”

Standing up, I go over to the other stuff we have, and pack my stuff. It fits reasonably into my big backpack and other small bag I carry.

Looking at Catt, she’s cleaning up her stuff. She has a bigger backpack than mine, and also a bigger bag. Both are full to the brim almost, no room wasted.

I quietly call to her. “Catt, let’s go.”

Slinging my backpack over my shoulder, I pick up my other bag.

The voices in the distance get louder, and I speak to her again. “Catt, I’m gonna walk ahead. Catch up to me.”

Leaving her I tread on, sneaking a quick look over my shoulder as the gap between us widens.

She doesn’t protest at all—doesn’t even speak. Just continues packing all of her stuff.

Some of the stuff we left, but we kept all the basic necessities.

As I get farther and farther away from her, her outline in the darkness isn’t going toward me.

The noises are louder, and I see a light faintly in the distance behind Catt.

The people are here. She really needs to hurry now.

I'm not stopping for her, it's not my fault that she didn't go earlier.

I see her finally start to move in my direction, her heavy backpack weighing her down along with her bag.

She slowly closes the gap between us, and we leave the group with the flashlights away.

They're still behind us, but a safe distance away that the flashlights won't expose us.

Whispering to Catt, I ask her, "What should we do?"

"Well, we need to know why they're down here. Could be a threat to us, or potentially helpful allies."

"Let's just listen in on their conversation then."

Continuing to walk, we wait til there's a divergence in the pipes, basically the pipe splits into 2 ways.

Eventually it happens, with the group still trailing behind us.

Hiding in the other diverging pipe, we wait until they get closer, keeping our ears open.

It's a little hard to hear them since they're a bit away, but slowly their voices get closer.

Crouching down, I put my ear in their direction and hold my breath.

Faintly I can hear their voices.

"Man I'm hungry," The guy in the green exclaims to his buddies. I am too, but food needs to be rationed.

The small group continues to speak with each, slowly moving along.

In total they have 5 people—so in a fight me and Catt have 0 chances of winning.

They talk about pretty normal things—them being low on supplies, the monster's origins, wishing things were different, etc.

Don't seem too bad, but you can't trust just anyone in this world.

Going next to Catt, I whisper in her ear. "Either we leave now and avoid em' or we confront. We gotta decide now."

"Let's go."

Withdrawing away from them, we try to get a good distance away from them while being quiet.

I accidently step into a puddle, which causes a little *Plllshh* sound.

The group hears it, and alarms go off in my head.

Instinctively, I run out of there. Catt lags behind, caught off guard but she picks up the pace.

Shouts go off behind us, along with "Who's there?"

Slowly we outrun them and escape.

"Slow down!!" Catt says to me, her breath light and fast. "I can't keep up."

I finally figured out her weakness. Physical activity, for endurance.

Our escape was slightly close, but we made it out.
“Let’s get to attacking the monster, Catt.” I say to her.
“We’ll beat it this time,” she says to me with a renewed vigor.
She’s a little cute sometimes. Makes me laugh.

Light pours in from outside, momentarily blinding us.

“Finally we’re outside. I don’t mind being in the pipes, but nothing beats fresh air.”
Taking in the smells from outside, my body relaxes. Inside the pipes is ok and all, great for surviving but not thriving.

“I prefer inside as it’s more peaceful—away from everything.” Catt says with her all-knowing intellect.

There’s no immediate sign of the creature, so we slowly navigate through the landscape, hiking along.
The ground starts to shake, and looking around, we see the beast. It’s pretty far away.
“So how are we gonna get the bomb to explode right next to the monster?” I ask Catt, as she fiddles with a device.

“This is the remote for the bomb,” she explains. “So we can put the bomb wherever, and push the red button then the remote explodes the bomb.”

“Alright.” I reply back. “What’s the optimal denotation point?”

“Well, I don’t know for sure, but the best angle for it to hit is most likely under the monster or inside of course.” she concludes.

“So which one should *we* do?”

“Underbelly is better, as inside it could deconstruct the bomb with its stomach acid of course.” she professes.

Currently, I haven’t really done much. She actually made the bomb, so I should at least do something.

“I’ll be the bait.” I volunteer.

“Ok. So I’ll put the bomb somewhere, you’ll get it to chase you around to where the bomb is, and I’ll detonate it.” she instructs.

“Sounds easy enough.”

I don’t think being bait is that hard. I mean it’s only for like 10 minutes, and Catt will probably help me if I’m in serious danger. It’ll be fine surely?

We reach a good spot near the monster, and we stop for a few moments.

Catt hands me a walkie talkie, explaining why we need it.

“We’ll use this to communicate. I’ll be hiding so the monster doesn’t go after me of course, so we’ll use this.” she says.

“Perfect. Let’s do this then.”

Leaving her, I slowly walk toward the beast.

It's decently far away, which is kind of annoying. Means that I have to run farther back, as the bombs are where we were before.

Making some noise, I yell out at the monster.

Upon successfully provoking it, I run back the way I came.

It quickly follows, gaining on me in the process.

This is a lot different than I pictured it in my head.

Much more difficult than I thought too

The beast is chasing me down like I'm a chew toy. It's gaining on me too, even going into buildings or cleverly under places, it just plows through it all. Doesn't even notice the structures.

It's doing all this and gaining on me, while I'm running full out.

Wheezing, I scramble up a nearby ladder, and jump from roof to next roof of the scattered, run down buildings.

The monster really flattened the landscape quickly. Hardly any buildings are what they were before. Before I let the monster out.

My legs start to shake from exhaustion, as I reach my breaking point. It's been like 30 or 40 minutes of full out running, and Catt hasn't exploded the bomb yet.

I know where the target point where I need to get the monster is, but so far the monster has gone there only twice. Both times if the bomb did explode, it wouldn't be a fully direct hit, only on a side.

So I get why Catt didn't explode it yet.

But this time—for sure I'll get the monster to go over it and get a direct hit.

Running into an alley, I spot the bomb far ahead of me, the monster growling behind me.

As I charge ahead, the buildings behind me are swiped away with one claw from the great sea being. Guess he's getting fed up too.

Jumping over the bomb, I sprint even faster, reaching for everything I have left into one final burst of speed.

I need to mostly clear the blast radius when it detonates or I could get injured.

As the monster closes in on the bomb, I escape ahead, being a decent distance away.

The seaform is right above the bomb now, as it hisses at me.

“Won't be hissin' long, that's for sure.”

As the words leave my mouth, the earth shudders under me as the bomb explodes under the beast.

Smoke gushes up into the air, as a loud *gawrall* comes from the beast.

It's a cry of agony, yet it doesn't fall. It falters for a split second, but continues chasing after me with a renewed anger.

Wasn't...that supposed to kill it? Decently injure it?

It closes in on me before I know it, and I stutter for a second.

No damage at all? Nothing? Impossible.

For a brief second, it's underbelly shows with hardly any damage. A slight burn discolored it's belly, but no signs of damage.

Suddenly, a shadow comes over me.

Looking up, I realize how stupid I am. The beast came here because I didn't run.

Locking eyes with me, the seaform moves his curled scaly hand towards me.

There's no running away from this. It's simply too fast to run away from.

Chapter 10

As I close my eyes and accept my grim fate, the monster hesitates.

What's it doing?

It leans back, and stays there for a few seconds.

Well, if it ain't gonna kill me, I'm gonna leave while I still can.

Picking up the pace, I jog away from it, my heart pounding.

The monster doesn't follow, so I start to go full out.

All at once, there's a huge blast of air behind me, knocking me forward and slimey green goo surrounds me.

The stench is unpleasant, filling my nose.

Taking a peek behind me, I realize that the seaform sneezed. That's why he couldn't kill me.

I must have plot armor or something, because this is incredible luck that I didn't die.

And another lucky thing is that the monster didn't follow me too.

I escaped.

Sneaking into a dilapidated building, I go into a dark corner.

I'm a little cold, covered in this gross goo, but it's tolerable for now.

Taking out my walkie talkie I speak into it.

"Catt? I'm safe, where are you?"

"I'm in the building. I saw you almost die, and run. Sorry I wasn't there to save you."

“It’s no big deal, since you were a bit far and no point in endangering yourself too.”
“Anyway, let’s meet at the apartment. Try to clean that gross snot off you first though.”
“I know, I know. It’s worse than you think, I got half covered in it.”
“Ew. I’ll uh, see you later then.”
“See ya.”

Putting the walkie talkie back into my pocket, I try to clean off the snot.
Most of it sticks, and doesn’t come off easy, but I continue trying anyway.

Trudging back, I dejectedly walk back home.
If the bomb didn’t kill it, that means its hide is tougher than we thought.
Catt will find a way to kill it though. I’m sure of it, she’s smart.

Stepping up the steps to my apartment, I walk inside.
Taking off my mucked up shoes, I go straight to the shower, putting my clothes in the trash.
I don’t want to make my washing machine dirty, or dirty other clothes indirectly.

The warm water cascades down me, clearing the slime off me.
Nothing like a hot shower to fuel the soul.

The front door opens as someone walks around the house.

“Who’s there?”
“Oh, you’re already here.”

It’s just Catt. I kind of figured anyway.
“I’m in the shower right now, so hold tight.”
“Ok. I’ll make some food for us.”

As I finish showering, I open the curtains and grab my towel, drying myself off.
A smell fills the air, slightly burnt.

“Catt! I think the food’s burning!”
“No, no, it’s fine.”

I think she needs some help.
Wrapping a towel around my waist, I run to my room and quickly shove on some clothes.
The burning smell gets more intense as I hurry.

Bursting into the kitchen, I look around for the problem.
There’s some sort of dark stuff in a pan, burning up.

“What the hell is that?!”
Catt looks at me and gives me a nervous chuckle.

“I-I tried to cook some eggs for us...uh it’s not a big deal, I can cook another one.”

So she isn’t good at everything. Well, nobody is perfect, and if someone was it’d really be boring.

Taking the pan, I throw the disgusting burned discs into the trash, and get some fresh eggs.

“Catt, it’s really not that difficult to cook. Just think of it like chemistry.”

“It’s impossible. You just don’t get it.”

“Sorry, but you’re paying for those eggs. I’m a little short on rent anyway, we need to save.”

“I tried to do something nice for you and you’re so mean towards me!”

I didn’t expect this. So she gets mad when she needs to face up to her mistake.

“Take action for responsibility. If you knew you couldn’t cook very well, why did you wait til I came out to oversee you?”

“I’m not some kid, I can make my own decisions. And I wanted to make you a meal.”

“You know what, just lemme teach you.”

“No, I can do it myself.”

“Like you burned the egg? Sure. To correctly cook an egg, you don’t burn it black!”

“Shut up!”

This was the first time she really yelled at me.

“Don’t talk to me like that.”

“You’re the one being rude.”

“I’m not the one burning eggs.”

“Idiot. I tried to be considerate so you wouldn’t have to cook.”

“Yeah, and you made it worse. Eggs aren’t cheap y’know. They cost a pretty price, so don’t waste them.”

She sighs and looks down.

“I didn’t mean to. I just don’t really know how to cook.”

That’s strange.

“Didn’t you learn from your parents? Or maybe siblings/grandparents?”

She pauses for a moment, and the silence creates an invisible barrier between us.

As the words echo from her mouth, it leaves me in silence.

“I don’t know them.”

I tried to say sorry, but I couldn’t.

She gave me the same look as I had that day.

That fateful day.

“I don’t feel well.”

Leaving her, I go to the front room, putting on a light jacket and getting ready to go outside.

“Wait! What are you doing—where are you going?”

“I’m leaving.”

“Why?”

“I need some alone time.”

Going outside, I close the door and leave her to her thoughts.

I don’t like looking back on the past.

The past is the past. Nothing will change that, so why think of it? Why even care?

I hate the past.

All it does is remind me of my parents.

Accidents aren’t by chance.

Nothing is on purpose.

Heading downtown, I find a broken store.

Peeking inside, I tiptoe around.

There’s nothing really here, most of the items are gone. Looks to be a bar.

Checking under the counter, nothing.

At the back of a cabinet, there’s a whole lotta bottles though.

Upon further inspection, all of them are empty.

Sorting through them, all of them are indeed empty.

Except there’s a few bottles at the back, full.

Not even touched.

Stuffing them into my backpack, I exit the abandoned bar.

Wandering through the streets, I aimlessly go around looking for a high place to sit down.

I’m feeling like overlooking the city, and just taking it all in, with a nice drink.

Spotting a dilapidated cell tower in the distance, I direct myself towards there.

The steel shines like a beacon, blinds me briefly as I reach the base of it.

Climbing the ladder, the world below me shrinks.

The wind picks up, trying to tug me off but I remain.

Reaching the top, I take a long look at the city below.
It's cluttered everyone. The monster really did damage.

Taking one of the bottles, I pop open the cap and take a swig of it.
Burns a little, but it leaves a nice warm feeling in my stomach.
Exactly what I was looking for.

A few feelings hit me, but they don't matter. My eyes are a little heavy, my muscles a little weary.
I don't want to spoil this moment.

Upon finishing the bottle, I chuck it down below me.
Time to go before I fall off the tower.

Putting the rest of the bottles in my bag, I carefully try descending down the ladder.
Much harder than the way up. I feel a little dizzy and nauseous, but I push through.

Halfway down, my hands strangely start to hurt, and my vision is a bit odd.
Feels like there's static in my brain.
It's almost like I have a headache.

Missing a rung, I slip and fall.
Luckily, my reflexes save me, even if they're slower than usual.
I hang barley to the ladder, my legs slack.

My hands shake, but through and carefully put my legs on the bottom rungs.
Once I'm secure, I slowly make my way down the ladder again.

Upon reaching the ground, my head is feverishly buzzing. It's hard to think.
I feel like passing out right now, but I gotta do something.

Hmm.
Oh that's right. I gotta go home.

Stumbling back, I walk.
I can't really remember the way home, so I'll just guess it.

The sun disappears slowly down the horizon as I struggle home.
I don't know where I am.

My breath labors, and my legs start to ache.
How long have I really been walking for?

Darkness covers the land, my vision slowly dimming.
Stumbling, I trip and fall. My vision spurs, and everything dims.

My eyes close, and I briefly lapse out of consciousness.

Awakening a bit later, I look up.

The moon is fairly bright in the night sky, casting a thin coating over everything.

The tiredness is taking hold of me.

Closing my eyes, I dim the lights inside me and sleep.

Within my slumber, I faintly here something familiar, but I ignore it.

Slowly my dream comes to an end, and my eyes open.

The dim room I'm in is interesting. Familiar somehow.

My brain feels like mush stew, or maybe tv static. Glitching nonetheless.

I can't remember what happened yesterday, but just like water evaporates, slowly the pieces click into place.

Well, most of them. I can't exactly remember how I got to this place.

Examining the room, it looks familiar.

Oh wait. This is my room.

"Catt..." I weakly shout, my voice tired.

Coughing, I father myself and stand up.

The dizziness gets much worse, and my stomach feels like it's crawling up my throat.

Stumbling out of my room, the apartment is dark.

Shuffling towards my fridge, I take out some water.

Chugging back, I drink cup after cup of water.

I'm so thirsty. Alcohol does that to you.

As I satiate my thirst, I slowly walk toward Catt's room.

Hesitating, I wonder if I should wake her to ask how I got her.

Thinking about it, I realize how stupid I am. She probably brang me here in the first place! I can't wake her, she's sleeping!

Struggling back to my room, I lay down back on my bed as my brain feels like a slushy mess.

The next day comes fully, yesterday's events washing over me upon waking up.

My head pulses with a dull pain.

I cook a quick breakfast since I don't feel that good.

We sit down and eat.

After we finish, I think about the past few months.

Since the bomb obviously didn't work, I suggested chemicals to Catt.

"You're really good at them, so find out what the monster can't breathe in, and do it. I don't think fire or explosions will work."

"I got one chemical that'll probably work. Unfortunately, it also harms us so we'll just have to wear gas masks. Not really a big deal."

"Perfect. Let's do it then. Do you have the materials needed for it?"

"Let me check. Meanwhile, can you make us some food? I'm starving, and I can't work on no fuel obviously."

"Ok. I'll make beans and hot dogs."

As she retreats back to her spot where she works, I gather the food and start heating it up over a fire.

Quickly, the warm aroma of food fills the air. It reminds me of when I was younger, I don't know what age, or the details, but I was hungry.

There was the best food I've ever had, on the table, served by someone with a kind face.

I try to remember, but I can't, no matter how hard I try.

A few days go by, as Catt experiments a little with the best emissions, and good ingredient mixes.

I don't understand any of it really, but if it helps beat the monster I'm all for it.

Eventually, she finishes the canisters.

We're ready for the second attack on the monster.

Going up to the surface, we slowly walk around, waiting for the monster.

After a day of travel, we find it in the distance. Perfect.

This time, I'm not being bait. Last time was too scary.

Catt plants the canisters in a secure position, and we go over behind a scrap pile to hide.

Me and Catt are huddle up, waiting for the monster to get close enough to where the gas canisters are hidden.

She has a remote control for all of them, so we can be safely out of the gas zone.

As the monster nears, her fingers tap rhythmically on the controller.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap, tap.

Her speed picks up, like a bomb getting ready to explode.

Click, click, click, click.

She flips all the switches, and hissing can be heard faintly in the distance.

“The chemicals just released.”

I stare hard at the monster, waiting to see for any sign of weakness.

Time ticks by, and my hope is replaced. Bit by bit, my hands shake and my palms sweat.

No reaction so far.

It doesn't seem to care.

“Hey, shouldn't this work?”

“95% sure it should work. Most living organisms can't survive that gas, except a handful with a modified gene.”

I guess this is it. We win.

Well, I figured that we would win, but the monster wouldn't fall.

The chemicals had no effect.

It's not dying.

“Catt. Why isn't it working?!”

My voice raises in pitch. This was our biggest chance of killing it, and it didn't work.

“Don't worry, there's more ways to kill it.”

She's really calm. She must have another way to kill it if she's so confident.

Upon spotting us, the monster charges.

Me and Catt scramble out of the scrap heap we're behind, and narrowly run out in time.

Still, the monster is on us quickly.

It's breath rushes around us, and death seems to come up under the ground at us.

The ground shakes and suddenly a rush of air hits me.

I push Catt in front of me, then unexpectedly something slams into me.

My vision blurs as my body flies through the air. I think I'm flying anyway—I don't know what's happening, I can't see or think very well.

I wait for the ground to push into me, but it doesn't come.

Just as I think “Am I floating?”, I crash into the ground. My back first slams down, then comes my butt, legs and rest of me.

Tumbling over, I'm beat.

I don't even try moving.

Opening my eyes a little, it's blurry.
I can't breathe.
My lungs aren't accepting air.
Struggling, I try taking air in but it can't get past my throat.

"He...help me." I whisper to the air, before laying down and accepting my fate.

I feel something wet come from my leg and chest.
Taking a glance, blood seeps out from under my shirt, the wound stinging.

My head starts to spin, as I lay there helpless.
The world dims, like someone turned out the lights inside my head.
My eyes droop, but I silently fight it, struggling to stay away.

My body is on fire, with an immense pain emanating from my left leg.
Taking a quick look, nothing is there.
It definitely feels like something's there, with this pulsating pain.
But no.
My left leg is gone.

As I scream, there's my blood everywhere.
I never have truly felt this scared in my life.

In the misty distance, I can see the remains of my left leg, crushed.
The monster leans down and eats what's left of it. Damn that monster.
Before I even know it, Catt is carrying me.

It burns, the heat is too much. It feels like my life is coming to a close.
The end credits are going to play, and I'm going to die.

But not today. I can't die today.
There's still more of the book left. I've hardly lived that much.

"C...Catt, am-am I going to make it?"

As she carries me, we retreat into an abandoned structure, and she lays me down.

"I don't know much about first aid, but you won't die."

As I lay on the ground helplessly, Catt ties a torrent around what's left of my left leg.
She then peels off my shirt. Looking down, I spot my wound.
Not exactly minor, but I might actually survive this. Thanks plot armor!

The pain is dull, pressing into me. Soreness creeps into my muscles, as a wave of exhaustion hits me.

Sleeping is tempting, but I can't just sleep in this condition.
I need to stay awake so I can see that Catt is safe.
If she dies, then I'll probably die, since I'm helpless now.

As she applies pressure with some of my clothes on the affected area, I cringe in pain.
It hurts badly, but it's also relieving. I'm not dead yet.

"I'm gonna clean the wound, it's not going to hurt that badly."
"Make it quick."

Bracing for the pain, I try relaxing myself but it's hard too when waiting for the pain to strike me.
As I lay on my back, waiting for her to expose and dress my wound, I hear the sounds of Catt preparing medical supplies.

Suddenly, a burning pain hits my leg, causing me to gasp.
I grit my teeth, letting the suffering wash over me.

She finishes, putting a clean cloth bandage on the area, filling me with relief.
The pain has settled for the more part, though the tenderness remains.

I hold on to Catt's support as she stands me up.
"Let's go. We need to get to camp." Catt urgently exclaims to me.
Tentatively moving up I slowly hop behind Catt..

"I'm going to get something, wait there."

Sitting down, I briefly rest my sore body til she comes back.

Around 15 minutes later, she returns with some stuff.
Wood and some cloth.
I watch her with confusion. She went to get scraps? We should've just went instead.

As she moves stuff around, slowly I understand what she's doing.
She wraps the cloth around my foot, and gives me the wood pieces that act as crutches.
They even have cloth on the handles.

"Thank you Catt. I really appreciate this."
"It's not an issue. If you didn't have this, you'd be in pain."
"You did this for me. I guess I owe you one."
"Thanks to this, we'll actually get there a few minutes quicker."
"You mean thanks to you. I wouldn't have been able to ever think this up."
"Let's go now."

Testing out the equipment she gave me, I can walk. It's much more tolerable, and easier.

Really, what could I do without her. She's the best girl.

We successfully make it back to camp, after a decently long walk.
My body really is sore, and especially my leg hurts.

I'm so relieved to lay on the makeshift bed, as the coolness of the pipes welcomes us back.

"I'll make you a prosthetic. I'm not very good at it, but I'll try. It'll take awhile."

"Thanks Catt. I don't know how I'd live without you."

"I caused this on you. If I never pushed us to the skeleton weird thingy, this would've never happened."

"Eventually someone else would've found it. It's not your fault."

"It is."

She leaves quickly, leaving me alone.

Really is something else, almost like she's not from this world.

As the weeks slowly go by, the pain subsides for the most part.

Where my leg used to be, a defeating emptiness stays.

Only a stump of my leg remains, its former glory days gone so quick.

Every once in a while, I wake up and try to get out of bed.

I never remember and always fall.

It hurts more every time.

Running.

I was so good at it.

Now I can't even walk.

Just that fact shatters my heart into a million pieces.

It stings.

But I can't change the past, so I must accept it.

That's the way life is. If you can't change it, accept it.

I think that anyway.

Catt continues working on the prosthetic for awhile.

It takes a lot of time and effort.

Slowly, I stop talking to her. Why would I talk to her when she's doing so much while I can't do anything at all?

I've never felt this useless.

Our interactions are less and less, as she sinks more and more away.

I might as well be living alone, because I hardly see her.

But today, something different happens.

Catt calls me, a yell unlike anything I've ever heard from her.

"I finished it."

She comes over to me with cloth covering a long object.

Taking the cloth off, she reveals the object.

A prosthetic, made of wood mostly, except the top is smooth gleaming metal.

She gives me the prosthetic and helps me put it on,

Easing it into place, a slight shock almost makes me yelp from the cool metal meeting my stubbed thigh.

"Not bad. It's pretty good." I say to her, while testing it out.

"You'd better appreciate it, after how long it took to make."

She's got a funny expression on her face, like she's trying to belittle me.

A laugh escapes from my mouth, and her face twists more.

She can really be funny sometimes.

After doing a quick test walk, it's good enough to walk on for a while. I think.

"The good thing is that it works as intended."

"Of course it'd work as intended! I'm a genius after all."

"No need to get so conceited."

"Hmph."

She's not normally like this, so what's her deal?

Is she trying to show that she can be useful if I marry her?

Nah, she's probably just getting a little bit big in the head.

The next few days are simple. Just simply more testing the prosthetic, and relaxing.

We're still planning to kill the monster. We thought up many more ways.

Mainly we thought of traps, sharp weapon, or huge blunt object.

Nearby as this happened, buildings rotted. Structures fell, food grew more scarce.

The monster only become stronger. It slowly became more of a threat the more people it killed.

People dwindled, the monsters victims growing.

This didn't make it strong.

But as me and Catt tried more and more to kill it, it's true strength was revealed.

Me and Catt, we tried lots of things. Traps, fire, chemicals, bombs, none of them worked.

The hide of the beast is just too thick, and it's too strong for traps. Chemicals aren't strong enough too since the thing is simply immune. Or too big.

This just proves how strong it is. It survived as an enemy from Catt. If it ever finds us when we're unprepared, we could die.

Through all this thinking, a question itched at the back of my mind.

"So Catt, since we didn't kill it, should we leave?"

"What do you mean by leave?"

"Boat ourselves out of here. Leave this island."

"I don't really care either way. I'm down for whatever you want to do."

She's a true friend.

"Let's go study the monster then. Might as well put up a fight before trying to leave."

We looked in history books, libraries (what was left anyway) and there was absolutely nothing on the beast.

It's truly unique, a massive sea form. Before, I would've even called it beautiful, until it tried to kill us multiple times.

It's hungry for blood.

The only thing we can do is hide now, and pray it doesn't find us.

"So Catt, let's go to the pipes for one last time before we go to the docks."

"Alright. Let's go to the docks in a month, as I just want to pack everything up and create some tech for the water."

"Perfect."

We head to the pipes again, the last time.

It's been a few days in the pipes. Catt has created some new tech quickly.

Sleep has been alright, but something just feels off.

Laying down, I close my eyes and push my thoughts aside.

Sleep time.

Gasping, I wake from a dream that I haven't had in a long time.

It was a day before my grandpa passed, when he said some words to me.

This time, he just said one word.

Endure.

As I remember all this, a slight smile spreads across my face.
Normally I don't really care about blood relatives, but he was different.
Reflecting back, he really was the father I never had.

I'll sure as hell endure.
I've always endured, like running. I might not be able to run that well, but I can still endure.
So I will.

The months pass, and soon a full year passes.
Time was quick when we simply hid around the city.

And it's over.
I don't know how, but we did it.
We survived.
The monster finally left the city. I reckon it got bored of us humans.
A lot of people were lost. The infrastructure has been damaged beyond repair.
But we made it to the end.
We had to hide, but we didn't lose.

It was a stalemate. The monster didn't win, nor did we. It was a tie.

What a life to be living.

Epilogue

Recovering from the destruction of the monster was by no means easy.
Everyone that survived was helping, building toward a better future.

The big corps were gone luckily, most of them went out to sea or got killed.
They didn't know how to fight, nor the troubles of our simple lives.

I'm happy that they're gone. A new world dawns.
Though it doesn't matter anyway—they'll come back in new ways later.
Just like a virus, they persist.

But for now, I'll enjoy this life.
I'll strike them corps down as long as I can.
And we'll all be happy.

Somehow Catt and I officially got married last week.
Wasn't exactly a good marriage, and I know I'll be annoyed for the rest of my life by her.
But I love her.
And she loves me back.

We'll make it work.

For sure.

And if it doesn't?

I'll do what I've done my whole life.

Not run.

Endure.

Notes & weaknesses

Switch up notes:

- Pipes with 0 light means you can't see in the darkness. Fix this with either bioluminescence, flashlights or night goggles.

Themes:

- Sometimes problems can't be solved, and you just have to wait them out instead.
- It's important to grow. Don't just keep it the same way, change it up, take risks. (Life is on the wire. The rest is just waiting)

Some topics are:

- Daily survival
-

Points to improve:

- Pacing in some areas is too lengthy
- Excessive internal monologue - Repetition, show vs tell.
- Dialogue clunky or weird - Show, don't tell.
- Integrate lore more effectively
- Overuse of some stylistic choices - (...), ugh, argh!, etc.
- Simply use less tags, said is ok.
- Past tense is incorrect, use present.

Strengths:

- Wordbuilding, good voice.
- Action scenes flow correctly and are effective

Worldbuilding

In a rural dystopian world, a guy gets tangled up into the unknown with a girl. They flee the city, and find something that could threaten the world as we know it.

Plot for book:

Act #	Information	Parts
1	Introduction - First conflict shows, with MC losing job, and meeting Catt	Prologue: In a city, a guy is getting ready for work. He's getting bored of his daily life. Action calls. Chapter 1: He's doing his job, but an issue happens, so he goes back to his house. Sleep in. Chapter 2: Gets fired, and goes temporarily back to the dark life. Does his first successful heist in a while. Then he meets a strange girl, she wants to stay there.
2	Catt Arc - her character shows mainly, and shakes up the MC.	Chapter 3: She proposes a chess game. They play, it's a stalemate, so she lives there and pays him money. To prevent cheating or any problems, they give each other personal information that's important so they can't just kill each other in their sleep Chapter 4: They begin to form a bond, and he gets a confession from her much later. That sparks something—a wrecking fire in him, and they sort it out. After sorting it out, they get food and learn more about each other. Then they make a steal together. Chapter 5: Much later, she runs away, just as he starts to reciprocate feelings a little to her. He finds out she's going underground, so he follows to find her. A huge walk around underground happens.
3	Monster Arc - The main conflict appears	Chapter 6: Eventually he finds her, after getting mild hypothermia. She brings him to her camp, and warms them up. She says stuff, minor fights between them. They make up, and live together underground. Chapter 7: As they explore the pipes, they find a skeletonish corpse on a floaty. Poking the skeleton, they wake an ancient sea monster, and try escaping. Chapter 8: Making it up to the city, they run away, but the monster emerges, and begins killing everyone in the city. It's either they somehow kill or leave. They decide to fight it, attack it, but they can't kill it. The monster comes up, and they try multiple different ways to kill it, but it's futile. Finally, they try one last method, but alas it fails. The end. They've given up. After a year, the monster retreats, and they emerge alive, hiding.

Goes from city → meeting girl → connection over 2 months → gets a love confession from her → She becomes a runaway → they go underground in the pipes → find a corpse → waking ancient monster

Setting: A city. Big dumps, lots of water, dirty, cluttered, decent population, but not too big. Houses stack on top of each other almost, wires hang everywhere, ladders are places, everything wants/needs to be at the top it seems. There is no “edge” to the city. It just is. People are free to venture beyond the city, but nobody does, because they're scared. Big plants are made for manufacturing, some shut down and wasted.

Like Mumbattan in the Spiderverse, with a City of Ember touch.

Food and basic necessities:

Most food is grown in controlled environments. Huge warehouses that are basically greenhouses.

Vegetables are much cheaper than meat. Meat is harder to get, as cattle and stuff are rarer.

Water is plentiful, as all of it is freshwater. Of course, water on the ground and sewers and stuff is undrinkable due to viruses.

The temperature and ecosystems

The sun is weak. It's half as bright as real life. The climate is moderate. Hottest is 30c, lowest is 0c. Just 2 seasons: hot and foggy or cold and wet. Mostly it's either raining or dry, but in the cold/wet season, rarely it can snow. Snowing is pretty rare, it has to be really cold, (0c or below). It generally happens once a year at most, and a light snow.

Wildlife is definitely lacking. Used to be lots of wildlife and animals, but factories destroyed it. There are lots of insects, but bigger wildlife is gone. Small water bois be there though. (fish)
In underground areas, wildlife flourishes.

Tech: limited technology. Basically from the 2000s. Radio is the main form of communication. Limited TV, no internet phones. Sailboats are common forms of travel. Cars are not here. Bikes are though, and also another common form of transportation

The reason the people never ventured far from the city is mainly the scare factor. But it's hard to travel outside the city, as it's either night pitch black or foggy. On rare days it's clear and great, but people don't go. A few names have gone out, but they never returned. The city is also technically an island. A sinking island that has been slowly pushing itself into the ground

City Zones

City zone	Description	How big the location is	Notable locations
North	A slightly cooler place, more industrialized. Factories dot the skyline, with lots of pollution and smoke. Industrial residue is carried to the West. A lot of blue collared jobs are here, hardly any homes here.	Very big 30%	•
South	An interesting place. A lot of people live here, but it's not very dense.	Medium 20%	•
Central	A very dense city, considered the heart of the entire country. Has a	Small 15%	• Central Market - the biggest market in the country
East	For the richer people, generally these people are the owners of factories. Hardly anyone goes here, except to live the rich life or get a nice job serving the rich.	Very Small, 10%	• Court Mall - Most expensive plaza and mall in the country. • Eastwood Estates - Most expensive houses/mansions are here, prime stealing pickings except for security

West	The slums. It's like the opposite of the East, as it's extremely poor. Also used as a dump as well, people scavenge here frequently, and piles upon piles of garbage lay here. Very few people live here, as it's very disgusting and loud with the garbage shifting, and dangerous.	Big 25%	●
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MC lives in the Central block, close to south side, and a little close to the outskirts of the west
In total the city has around ~75, 000 people. A few cities, outskirts are sparsely populated generally.

Characters

Characters

MC is not a hero. He's human...

MC is a younger male.

He is stoic mostly, hiding his emotions, though he doesn't have much emotion. He's numb. He has a clearer moral compass, and doesn't mind breaking rules.

Knows when people are flirting and being rude, etc. but doesn't care.

He generally turns people and everyone away, wanting to just be alone. He runs from his problems instead of dealing with them directly. He avoids, runs, doesn't reflect. Secretly he wants more, but doesn't really know as he mentally trapped himself.

He doesn't really care about anything, except he hates being touched, and if someone bad mouths his parents, he will rage.

Surprisingly loves sleeping, needs at least 7 hours to function properly, normally gets 8 hours which is higher for someone of his age. 10 hours of sleep is his max

The goal is to survive. It originally was to survive, he's stuck in a monotonous loop of the same stuff every day, and it's getting boring.

Endure.

MC lore:

MC grew up in a bad household. Parents died in a scarp slide (landslide but garbage version) his parents were actually bad (according to his grandparents, which IS true) but he thinks they would've loved him. He got taken in by his grandma, as his grandpa was gone. He lived with her til he was ~16 and moved out, due to his grandma pushing her depression onto him in a way of mild physical abuse. Then he encountered a gang, Jack's gang. He was with them for a while, a year or 2. They stole together, ate together, were a makeshift half-family for him. He then had a falling out with Jack, Jack put his hand on his shoulder, and then MC got really angry, as MC has deep trauma about being touched by ANYONE due to his parents dying and a fragmented mind. MC and Jack had a fight (mentally mostly with a little physically) and MC left. MC then lived alone up til now, and vowed to get away from that life, being a maintenance worker.

MC is physically kinda active, as he does maintenance on various things. He is NOT super strong, or even strong, just ever so slightly above average. He is good at jumping high also, and is ok at fighting. Can beat an average person with his boxing, but loses to people who practiced for like 5 years, as he is just a little more than a novice.

For stealing, he's thin and flexible: great for stealthy stealing. Fast too, as he did running for his jobs. Does a little pickpocketing, but mostly goes for breaking and entering, to steal and leave.

Catt (Carla TT.)

Catt is interesting, she seems like a very strange girl. She's unpredictable, emotionally there, almost the opposite of the MC. She cares a lot about things, and is thankful for a lot too.

She's pretty confident, and bold. Playful, and may hurt MC but will try to reconcile if she goes too far. NOT a tsundere, but close. She is close to teasing, but does mean no harm and will say that afterward.

She knows the pipes like the back of her hand, being in there a lot when she was younger.

Skill wise, Catt is sly. She's quick, but not physically that strong. She knows how to use chemicals proficiently, as she used to be a scientist til an accident with an experiment. For cooking, she's completely helpless, failing to cook even simple dishes.

Jack

Jack isn't well known much, but he used to be with MC, he was the leader of a small gang consisting of 8-12 people. Jack is a hothead, but generally tries to reconcile stuff.

Jon

A coworker that's not seen, but said. Worked longer than mc.

Publishing

Kindle Unlimited.

-Royal Road strategy:

Finish most of my book (only a few or no chapters left)

Make chapters 2, 000 to 3, 000 word est (1500 < chapters > 5000)

Dump 3 - 5 chapters

1 Daily chapter every day

Royal road is geared toward:

- Isakai
- LitRPG/game systems
- OP protag
- Adventure/action fantasy

So I am *off meta*.

Within posting time if I have a low follower to view ratio, is there:

Issues with my blurb, cover or first chapter?

Done enough marketing or taken my story's genre and reader base into account?

Shout out swaps are good for marketing.

Scribblehub is also an option

Ways to end a chapter correctly:

- Re dictate a promise
- Resolution
- Cliffhanger
- Time period jump or POV switch
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