

## Chapter 0: Lights in the Sky

*“Growing up, I’ve always heard that we were living in the end times. That one day, something will happen that will punish everyone who deserved to be punished. At least, that’s what I was told. But, does that mean everyone will be punished? Or, will some be spared? What happens to those who were chosen to be spared? Would they die like the bad people or would they continue to live?*

*Or, would being able to live be the punishment?*

*I think about this a lot. Because, since I was born into this world of misery and death, does that mean that I’m a bad person? That I was chosen to be punished? But, why? I didn’t choose to be born.*

*So...why am I here then?”*

The world was muffled while she sat silently looking at the lifeless body before her. She could hear their otherworldly scream echo in her ears. Her stomach was churning and her entire body shook. She felt like she wanted to throw up. She couldn’t open her eyes. The black liquid that the creature coughed up on her face was causing them to burn. All she could see was her hand. It was red from Dad’s grip. The pain still lingered from his hand being ripped away from hers.

Her brother, who sat beside her against the brittle metal wall on the dirty ground, gently caressed her hand. Her skin was ice cold and she was shivering slightly. He didn’t know what to do to comfort her. He’d never had to deal with this before and so, he couldn’t think of what to do next. He couldn’t think at all. He couldn’t get the sound of Dad screaming out of his mind. He peered over the open window just above them at the different coloured lights that broke through the rainy sky above. Each ray seemed to pulse to the rhythm of the otherworld bell sound that reverberated through the sky. The world seemed to be tearing itself apart. Thunder raged in the cloudy, light filled sky as rain banged the sides of the shack like a drum. The sounds of gunfire and the screams of people broke through the static-like drone of the rain.

“Why is this happening?” She quietly said.

“Z...you okay?” He asked her. She didn’t respond. He gently grabbed her cheek and turned her head to look at him as he wiped her eyes. She slightly opened them to see him. But, all she could see was a blur where his face was. But, that voice. That was his voice. All of a sudden, all of the grief that she had been feeling exploded. Tears welled up in her eyes as she leaned into him.

“Daddy... Why? Why is this happening?” She kept repeating through her sobs.

“Be strong. Your little sister is counting on you to be strong.” He heard dad say to him while he hugged her.

“Be strong...be strong...” He kept whispering to himself. He still couldn’t believe what just happened. He’s never seen that expression on Dad’s face before. He wiped his eyes quickly trying to knock the intrusive thoughts out of his mind. “Z, we have to keep going. Mom’s waiting for us.”

“Daddy...you...can’t be gone. Davey, he can’t be gone...I can’t...”

“Shh. That’s enough, okay. Come on, Z. We have to keep moving. Mom’s just around the corner from here. Just don’t think about it. We’ll be fine. We always are, right?” He gently wiped her eyes once more with his sweater sleeve. She could barely open her eyes. “There. Is that better?”

“I can’t see...” She mumbled. He looked up to the creature that he had just hit over the head with the bat. It had landed on the only pile of fabric in the shack. His dirty sweater can only do so much.

“Okay, we’ll get that fixed. Just hold my hand.” Just as she nodded and grabbed his hand, a loud bang came from the shack door. Startled, he looked up at the door to see it shake violently. He grabbed

her by the shoulders and quickly crouched down with her behind the small workbench in front of them. While another bang came from the door his eyes darted around the shack; looking for any type of weapon he could use to defend them with. He quickly jumped up grabbed a shovel he had spotted

“Davey! What’s going on?!” She yelled just as he grabbed the shovel.

“Stay back!” David yelled as he swung at the figure, landing a blow. The figure quickly rolled out of his second attack and crawled backwards holding up its hands.

“Whoa! Whoa! Stop! I’m not one of them!” David readied himself for another swing but hesitated when he heard that voice. “David? Stop, it’s me!” The figure said, still holding up its hands. He immediately recognized that craggly voice.

“Ben?”

“Damn, boy, there you are. Been looking for you.” Ben said, lowering his hands.

“Holy shit...I thought you were one of them. Didn’t recognize you with the mask on.” He dropped the shovel and took a deep breath in.

“Yeah...it’s fine.” Ben grimaced holding his arm from where David hit him.

“Sorry. I hope I didn’t hit you too hard, old man.” He grabbed Ben’s arm and helped him up from the ground, while also giving him a quick hug.

“Where’s Zoe?” Ben said, holding David by the shoulders.

“Ben? I-is that you? Davey?” Zoe said from behind the workbench.

“Oh, kiddo, there you are.” He let go of David, who picked up the shovel from the ground. “Been worried sick about you tw- Zoe, what’s wrong?! Is that blood?” He immediately grabbed her by the shoulders the moment he saw her face.

“No, no. That thing threw up on me. It got into my eyes...” Zoe said holding her arm out as she blindly tried to point at the creature that was on top of her just a moment ago. Immediately, Ben reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small flask and immediately poured in on her face. He then wiped away the black stuff from her eyes with a cloth he was carrying in his pocket.

“There you go, honey. Is that better?” She struggled to keep her eyes open. The stinging in her eyes had vanished slightly as she tried to look around the room. She immediately saw Ben’s face looking at her. His wrinkled face had a worried expression on it as he closed the flask and put it back into his jacket. She looked behind him to David but the stinging made it hard to see his face.

“A little bit...I still can’t quite see.” Zoe mumbled as she shut her eyes again.

“What happened to you to?” Ben asked looking back to David. He was standing behind them leaning on the shovel with his head down.

“H-have you seen Mom?” She could hear David stuttering.

“She sent me to look for you two. She’s on the boat already looking after everyone else.” He looked around the small shack. “W-where’s your Dad?” They both didn’t respond to his question. David had his head down and Ben could see his hands were shaking. Zoe had dark lines on her cheeks from the tears of black liquid on her eyes. He glanced at the creature on the ground. Part of it’s head was crushed in with a broken bat beside it covered in the same black goo that was on Zoe’s face. They were the only ones in the shack.

“Ok. Maybe he’s at the boats already.” Ben said in a quiet voice. In the blurry darkness of her vision, Zoe could still see Dad. The intensity of the light covering him. All she could see was his silhouette as it was ripped from her grip as he faded off into the sky. It kept replaying in her head. Her heart felt like it was going to burst out of her chest.

“Alright, kids. I’m going to take you to your mother, okay? Just don’t worry. We’ll be okay.” She could feel his rough skin against her eyes as he attempted to wipe her face. “You going to be alright, kiddo?”

“I-I just...my eyes hurt.” Ben sighed. She heard it shake as he took another deep breath in and let out a cough from behind the mask he was wearing.

“Boy. Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah.” David struggled to say.

“Okay, honey, I’m going to carry you. Boy, follow us and I’ll take you to your mother, alright?” She then felt Ben pick her in his arms. She huddle into his body as she wrapped her arms around him.

“Hey, hey. Davey. We’re going to alright, okay?” Ben said as he walked closer to him. “Come on, tough guy. We’ll make it. Just follow me and keep an eye out.”

“Okay...” David said after a deep breath. He picked up the shovel as he walked out of the shack behind Ben and Zoe. Just as the door to the shack closed, he looked back and caught a glance of that creature just as it disappeared.

They walked out into the cold air and the intense rain falling from the lit clouds above. Ben let out a small cough from the fog that made its way through his worn-out respirator. While they all walked in silence, Zoe held onto Ben with one arm while she kept wiping her eyes as she tried to get the stinging out of them. It was slowly going away. The rain or the splashing ocean beside them must be helping in washing away the goo. Behind the sounds of the bell that rang in the air and the quiet gunfire in the distance, she could hear the ocean raging beside them just underneath the makeshift pier they were walking on.

“Ben, what’s happening?” Zoe asked.

“I don’t know, kiddo.” He responded.

“Does this have something to do with that lightning this morning?” David asked, while watching the sky dance above him.

“No. Uh, I...don’t know.” Ben trailed off. David could see something in his expression as he looked up at the lights above them. He’d seen that expression before. But, he hadn’t seen it for a while. “All I know is that I need to get you two to safety. Your mother’s worried sick about you two.”

“Is Mom okay? Is she...sick too? Are we sick?” Zoe’s voice shook as she spoke. She could feel her anxiety spiking in her chest and her breathing started to speed up the moment that thought entered her mind.

“No, nobody’s sick.”

“But, I saw Marcie-”

“Nobody’s sick. They’re just...Don’t worry, okay? We’ll be fine.” Ben turned to David who seemed disoriented. His gaze was empty as he looked down at his feet. “Hey, boy.” Ben stopped. “We’ll be okay, alright? Nobody’s sick. It’s not...it’s not a sickness. We’re okay.”

The memories of seeing that strange lightning in the sky flashed in Zoe’s mind. The way the different coloured lines of the lightening that slowly traveled across the cloudy sky was unlike any storm she had seen before. While she sat on that nook in her room watching the strange light in the sky, she could almost see shapes in the thunder. Creating forms of people and faces. Or, at least, that’s what she thinks she saw. That was just before Dad came home in a frenzy.

Dad...he was just with us. He...he was right there with her. He was...holding her hand.

“Ben, what’s that?” David said while Zoe was lost in her mind. She could feel Ben’s body tense up the moment he spotted those shadows in the distance behind them.

“Boy, run.” Ben said. She could hear his breathing speed up suddenly as he quickly broke off into a sprint. “Hey! RUN!” Ben yelled as he ran off with Zoe in his arms. Zoe opened her eyes slightly and looked back to whatever they were running from. All she could make out in the rainy fog that surrounded them was oddly shaped shadows running towards them. They looked like people but their arms, heads, bodies. Everything didn’t look natural. As Ben ran with her in his arms, she could hear those shadows otherworldly sounds overtaking the sounds of Ben panting.

Rounding a corner that led up to the rest of the marina walkway, David was just about to catch up to Zoe and Ben when suddenly out of a broken shop window a shadow fell out in front of him. Just as he looked to where he was running, he tripped over the shadow and hit his head on the ground. The impact left David dazed. His hearing was muffled, and a high pitching ringing sounded in his ears as he tried to recover. On the ground, David looked back to the figure who was already standing above him. Silhouetted against the rainy sky above and in his dazed state, he couldn’t see too many details of this figure he tripped over other than its unusually large head. It had two glowing, orange lights where its eyes were supposed to be. It was making a strange noise as it towered over him. It sounded like it mumbled

something that resembled “Sinner.” Suddenly Ben ran up to the shadow and shoved it over with his shoulder.

Zoe death gripped Ben, trying not to fall out of his grip.

“Get up, boy!” Ben yelled. David started quickly crawling backwards, trying to make sense of where his arms and legs are. He watched the figure slowly get up from behind with an elastic sort of movement. Finally getting to his feet, David grabbed the shovel from the ground and swung at the figure; breaking the handle over its head. The force of the shovel knocked it down, and it landed with a thud back onto the wet ground.

Zoe was huddled up to Ben. She kept trying to convince herself that this wasn't happening. That all this wasn't real and that she was only having a bad dream. But as she clutched her eyes shut and gripped Ben's shoulders a sudden thought came into her mind. For a brief moment, she saw Dad. She suddenly remembered what had just happened before she and Davey made it into that shack.

“Daddy loves you, my darling girl. Daddy loves you with all his heart.” She heard his voice clearly. As though Ben had just whispered to her. “And, so does mommy. Please, don't be scared. Don't worry anymore.”

“Mom...Dad...” She silently repeated to herself. Suddenly, she opened her eyes fully. The stinging was gone. The rain must have washed away all of the goo. A strange feeling started to stir in her chest. Something she hasn't felt before. She looked back to Davey and saw him looking back to the shadow he had just hit. For that brief second he looked away, David ran into another shadow that had seemed to appear out of thin air in front of him.

“Davey!” Zoe yelled. Ben glanced back to him at the sound of Zoe yelling. He started to wrestle with the shadow trying to break out of its grip. “Hey! Get off him!” Zoe yelled as she jumped out of Ben's arms.

“Zoe! Zoe, stop!” Ben called out to her while she ran at full sprint towards her brother. The shadow was making a strange screeching noise as it started to overpower David. In desperation, David started to punch it in the stomach to try and break free. But the grip that this shadow had on his arms was far too great.

“Get off!” Zoe yelled as she neared the fighting pair. “Davey! No!” Then time slowed to a crawl for her just as the creature and Davey left the ground. Her arm had reached out but had frozen in mid-air.

“I'm sorry, sis.” She heard him say. As if he softly whispered to her. With a banshee-like squeal, the shadow jumped along with David over the edge of the marina walkway. She jumped with outstretched arms trying to catch him. But, she was a second too late.

“NO!” She heard a voice cry out. It sounded like the voice came from Ben but yet she recognized her own voice.

“NO! No! Goddamnit! DAVID!” Ben yelled as he caught up to Zoe, now laying on her stomach looking down into the raging waters beneath them. She was screaming at the top of her lungs. David, along with the shadow that dragged him into the acidic waters, disappeared into the white waves that splashed furiously. She kept hearing his scream in her ears. However, it sounded like her screams. It can't be though. She wasn't screaming. She suddenly felt Ben trying to lift her up from the ground.

“Zoe, we have to go!” He yelled as he struggled to quickly pick her up from the wet ground. The shadows that were chasing them had started to get closer. “Zoe! Get up!” He aggressively yelled as he yanked her from the ground. She didn't realize that she was resisting his pull. She watched as the spot where Davey had fallen became smaller. Ben struggled with Zoe as she squirmed in his arms, trying to break free from his grip. After a moment of running Ben stopped and, without realising it, she immediately jumped out of Ben's grasp and ran as fast as she could back to the spot where he had disappeared. However, she didn't realize how fast she had jumped out of Ben's grip and lost her footing on the wet walkway beneath her. Her foot slipped and she fell, hitting her head on the wet ground beneath her.

Through the high-pitched ringing in her ears, she slowly had started to come back to reality from the adrenaline fuelled dream she was in. Slowly opening her eyes, her vision was blurred even more than it was when they left the shack. She was staring at the open ocean beside Orion. In the unfocused grey

void that hid the rest of Orion from her, she saw slight flashes of orange lights on the water. Bobbing along with the waves that travelled in the white waters, they sparkled like the lights in the sky. Only now, she noticed that the lights that shined from the clouds above were gone. Only the white streaks of the hidden sun shone now.

She then heard Ben mumble something, but his voice was overtaken by low rumblings of engines that accompanied the flickering lights on the water. She heard Ben curse as vinyl finishes of large boats passed by them; fading off into the grey unknown that surrounded them. Many of them had large, orange flames spewing from their decks. Billowing clouds of dark smoke rose into the air as they disappeared into the void.

As the destroyed boats faded off in the distance, the strange quietness of the world around them had become apparent. The same world that seemed to be tearing itself apart just a few moments ago, now stood silent. The rain that fell from the sky was gone, the raging ocean beside them was now calm as can be, and the bell that echoed in the air was silent. She heard the strange sounds coming from the shadows behind them. Looking in the direction of the sounds, she saw those shadows that were chasing them. Like ominous, abstract statues with oddly shaped heads, the shadows stood perfectly still. The fog shrouded parts of their bodies.. But even though she couldn't see their faces, she could feel their gaze on her. She moved her arm slowly while she tried to get up from the ground and it seemed like they reacted to her movement. She saw them twitch; almost like a glitch.

"Zoe..." Ben quietly called to her as he slowly inched his way towards her. Trying not to make any sudden movements, he gently picked up Zoe from the ground, not taking his eyes off the ominous statues that watched them. While he picked her up from the ground, the shadows twitched and seemed to mimic her movements while she struggled to walk along with Ben.

Holding his breath, he listened for their footsteps to see if they were following them after he took Zoe into an alleyway that was near them. The seconds slowly went by as he took a deep breath. Setting Zoe down against the dirty wall beside them, he peered around the corner once again. The shadows that were following them just moments before were gone. Darting his eyes around, he couldn't see anything other than the grey mist.

"Come on, Z. We have to keep moving. Mom's just around the corner from here." David said as he wiped her eyes. "Just don't think about it. We'll be fine. We always are, right?" She couldn't see his face as he spoke those calming words to her. He always had a way of calming her down whenever she would get scared or worried. That's what she liked about him. Sure, being a big brother, he can sometimes be a jerk. Like how he would always try to scare her or how he would randomly flick her on the head when they would pass by each other in the hallway back home.

But he had his moments. Tickling her until tears came from her eyes. Telling her terrible jokes. He always had a way of making her laugh even when she didn't want to. And in times when Mom and Dad would be out scavenging with the others from Orion, he would always give her a hug and make her feel alright whenever she needed it. In a world that seemed like it's mission was to make everything miserable, he was the one thing that she could always count on to make it seem not so...well, miserable.

"Zoe...honey. I'm s-..." Ben struggled to say. He sat on his knees in front of her on the damp, dirty ground with his head down. "I...I'm so sorry." He kept repeating. She stared at him with a blank expression. He was crying. Why was he crying? She put her hand on his and suddenly felt the iciness of his skin on hers. The moment she touched him she felt a muted jolt of electricity rush throughout her entire body. "Listen to me. We're going to have to leave Orion, okay? It's not safe here anymore." Ben said almost in a whisper. She looked down the alleyway at a movement she saw at the corner of her eyes. She couldn't quite see what caught her attention. Her vision had become too blurred to make out anything.

"Zoe. Honey, look at me. Are you okay?" Ben noticed that Zoe's gaze was transfixed on something. He looked in her direction and at the end of the alley stood one of the shadows that had been chasing them. However, with the lights gone from the sky and the heavy rain stopped, the figure stood in perfect clarity.

It looked like a person. It was wearing a torn T-shirt and ripped jeans. However, its head was engulfed in some sort of white sphere. On this sphere that replaced its head, it had two large eyes on it. Underneath the torn clothes on its skin, large black blotches were dotted all over its body. Some of which had streams of black liquid running from them, which trailed down its body and left dark line marks. Just like the one in the shack. The thing growled as it started to walk towards Zoe and Ben with a twitchy sort of movement. Ben got up from the ground and quickly looked around for a weapon. Spotting a chunk of broken concrete on the ground, he picked it up and readied himself.

“You will not touch her.” Ben said, staring down at the approaching creature. Zoe still sat on the ground, looking up at the pair as they both charged at each other. However, just as Ben launched himself towards the creature they both slowed to a stop. Mid swing of the concrete, Ben froze in place just as the concrete touched the creature’s cheek. With a perplexed look, she observed the frozen pair as the world around her turned to a golden tint. She looked back down the alleyway and at the surrounding walls. They all had the same colour to them. Suddenly, her hands became warm as a sense of comfort radiated out from her chest.

“Daddy loves you, my darling girl. Daddy loves you with all his heart.” Dad said one last time in her ear. Ben and the attacker, along with the golden world around her, suddenly became engulfed in an intense gold light.

She then heard a dull knocking from a door.

“Zoe! Time to get up!” She heard Ben’s voice call out. She slowly opened her eyes. The sun beam of the morning sky was hitting her right in the face. She blinked once more and moved her head out of the way. The small supply closet she called her room was dark and blurry like it always was in the morning.

“Come on! You’re going to be late for work, young lady!” Ben called again. She slumped her head back into her pillow and yawned while she lazily reached for her glasses on the desk beside her bed.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m up!” She lazily called out.

“Zoe, come on! Get up!” He called out again knocking on her door.

“Yes! I’m up, I’m up!” She yelled louder. That seemed to stop him. She sat up in her bed and scratched her head while she spit hair out of her mouth.

“Jeez. It’s no wonder I’m tired all the time. Could never get any sleep around here anymore.” She mumbled to herself as she swung her legs out from her blanket.

## Chapter 1: The Flower Girl

*“She was the first thing on my mind when I woke up this morning. I still remember her beautiful face vividly. Her hair, so red. Her eyes, so green. She looked like she was engulfed in fire. I could see it in her eyes; they burned while she stared at me. But, it wasn’t though I was in pain. It was a soothing sort of warmth that I felt in my chest.*

*Then, I could see her speak. I can see her mouth move but it was like she was muted. I couldn’t hear anything. Her gaze flashed in my mind just as soon as I opened my eyes after waking up.*

*That’s the third time this week I saw her in my dreams. I wonder if she’s the one I saw back in Orion. She looks like the woman I saw. I haven’t seen anyone with that hair colour anywhere else.”*

The roar of the world that was trying to consume him was drowned out by a constant high pitched ringing. It clouded his vision. Everything seemed to be out of focus except her. He was entranced by her loving stare that she gave him. Just underneath her gentle smile, he spotted a rose petal slowly flowing by her face in the warm water that they were lying in. She was wearing a red rose on her ear. Her long, red hair was dotted with small rose petals. Some were black while most of them were a vibrant shade of red.

They both called her the Flower Girl. The woman with the roses in her hair that he would see in his dreams every night. While he thought about her, he started to get that cold feeling throughout his body once again. He didn't like the feeling that was trying to creep back into his body. He got up from lying on his arms on the small kitchenette table he sat at every morning and took a sip of the tea from the flower cup he was using. He winced at the taste. The tea bag he was drinking had lost its flavour about 2 cups ago. But it was the only one left and he couldn't function during the day without his morning tea. Hopefully the scavengers would find another one so he can finally throw this one out.

At the corner of his eye, he spotted movement. Setting down the cup and looking out the large window beside him, he spotted the morning shift people heading off to the other parts of the campus to go to work. The fog beneath the second floor that he lived in shrouded them so he couldn't tell who was who. There were less of them now compared to yesterday. Everyday the crowd he watches seems to get smaller. He sighed and looked up at the sunrise that shined just beneath the dark clouds above. The fog beneath the sun reflected its light like water. It sparkled creating a myriad of different colours that swirled in the wind. The particles that escaped the clutches of the fog beneath them sparkled in the air as they rose up in front of the shadows of the distant city. The windows on the tall buildings shone in the orange sun and the white finish of the towering statues of people glowed in the morning air.

It's odd how some of the most beautiful things in this world are also some of the deadliest. While entranced by the beautiful sight before him, he took another sip from the tea that he was drinking.

Hm...that sip didn't taste as bad as the last one.

He looked down at his watch. It's a little past 8 now. Lauren usually gets up at 8. He put his wrist down and listened. Only the sounds of the air purifiers filled the quiet ambience around him.

No, no. Don't think that. She's fine. She sometimes sleeps in so don't worry. Just give her a few minutes. If 8:30 rolls around then you should check to see if she's still there. But, even then, you're probably just gonna end up waking her up and you know how that turned out last time you woke her up.

Just don't think about it. Lauren's fine. Just focus on something else.

He took a deep breath and looked back out into the dead city. He stared at the statue beside the glass skyscraper in the distance. The one Lauren named Aurelia. Her wings were glowing in the morning sun as she towered above the sea of clouds beneath her. She was staring down at something and holding what looked like a book. He's always wondered what she represented or who she was. The one beside her, then one Robin named Cadmun, had its arms up above the crown he was wearing. His left wing had broken off.

Aurelia and Cadmun were the only ones he knew he would see every morning. They would never vanish in the dead of night. If they did like Jim did a few days ago, then he'd for sure know that everyone in the University is screwed.

He then heard the familiar squeaky door open and the sounds of bare feet walking on the wooden floor. He took her gaze away from Aurelia and Cadmun and looked back to the break room door. He heard someone yawn. That sounds like her, better play it off. He looked back at the statues and put his chin on his hand and waited. She silently walked by him and sat across the small table with her eyes closed. Glancing at her, he couldn't help but let out a sigh.

"Morning, sunshine." He said while she sat still. She grunted with her eyes still closed. She made a face as she wiped the sleep from her blue eyes.

Like mini oceans...waves of blue ridges engulfed in orange flames of the morning sun. The Flower Girl popped into his mind once more. If it wasn't for her blonde hair, he would've thought that Lauren was the Flower Girl. It's not uncommon for him to dream about her once in a while when he would get the elusive full-nights sleep. But the Flower Girl wasn't her. At least, he thinks that anyway.

"So...how'd you sleep?" He asks her while drinking his tea.

"I saw the moon last night. Can you believe it? It actually came out last night. But it was bright as hell...couldn't sleep..." She slumps into her arms on the table. "...Robin. Get me curtains..."

"How about I get you some bread first?"

"Meh...yeah...whatever." Just as he gets up, she immediately wakes up. "Wait, hold on. Bread? Where'd you get bread?!"

"Work finally paid off! They were giving them away yesterday and I managed to snag one." He said, sitting back down and placing a slice of homemade bread in front of her.

"And...butter?"

"Whoa, someone's feeling a little bit greedy this morning." She grimaced slightly.

"Hey, smartass, I deserve to be treated like a princess, you know. And, as such, a princess needs her bread to have butter. Come on, don't you know anything?" She said holding up her plate.

"You know, on second thought, I think I'm just gonna save this loaf for myself." He said, grabbing her plate from her hand. "I mean, after all I—"

"No! I'm sorry!" She yelled, grabbing her plate away from him. He smiled as he looked at her. "...thank you, Robin. It tastes wonderful." She smiled back at him as she took a bite.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." He said, sitting back down and biting into the bread. It was kind of stale since it was the one of the rejected loaves that the bakers were going to throw out but it was better than nothing. "But, yeah...it could use some butter." He stuffed the rest of the slice into his mouth and leaned on his arm. She watched him as he lazily chewed the bread with his eyes closed.

When you spend enough time with someone you tend to pick up on little aspects of body language that can tell you what the other person is thinking. Robin always had this little ritual that she noticed that he always did. It was subtle, but he did it enough times for her to notice. She could see the slight shake in his body while he lazily chewed and swallowed the stale bread.

"Are you okay this morning? I heard you screaming again last night. You dreamt about her again, didn't you?" She asked him as she put her plate onto his.

"I don't get it. When I think about her, I feel good. But...why don't I feel good when I wake up? She looks so familiar. It's bothering the hell out of me." He looked back out into the sun lit ocean of white. Dark clouds started to form overhead and tiny droplets of rain shimmered in the morning air.

"Tell me about her again. You know, talking about it does help." She said, leaning on her hands watching him.

"Well, what else can I say that you haven't heard before?" She doesn't say anything. She only stares and slightly tilts her head. "...well...all I can see is her. She has red hair and the bluest eyes I've ever seen. Like, almost glowing like. She had this...flower or something in her hair. But this time, I don't think it was a rose...it looked...different."

"Like...how...? Like, a new flower or...what?"

"No...I don't think so. It looked like a rose still but just...different. Like, it had...I dunno...it just looked different to me." He wiped his eyes once more and looked back at her. The way the sun hit her face made it look like she was glowing. "It's like a weird movie that keeps playing every night. You ever have dreams like that?"

"Nah, I don't really dream. That's why I love hearing about yours. You know, I've been thinking about this for a while now but have you ever talked to anyone about her?" He doesn't say anything as he looks down into the fog, watching the shadows of the morning shift people walk out into the shrouded world. "Robin...?"

"No. You're the only one that knows about her. Eh, I don't really want to bother anyone else about it. I mean, it's only a dream." He said nonchalantly, stretching his arms.

"Dreams typically don't make people scream, Robin."

"Yeah, I know. But, it's still only a dream. It's not real." He looked back out into the morning air away from her worried gaze. He didn't want to think about the Flower Girl anymore. He finally calmed down enough to keep himself from wanting to throw up the tea. At the corner of his eye, he could see that she was just about to say something. He didn't want to talk about the Flower Girl anymore so he better do something quick.

"Um...hey you want me to braid your hair again? I think I'm getting better at it." Setting down his cup, he playfully rolled his wrists. "Let's see if your teachings paid off. But, if I mess up and you don't like it, it's on you." She kept staring at him with that same worried face. He tried to subvert her anxiety by forcing a smile while he playfully stretched out his fingers.



She could see it. His eyes. They didn't match the smile he was giving her. But, it was obvious he didn't want to talk about his dream anymore. As much as it pained her, she didn't want to force him to relive his terror. Better play into his antics. Maybe it'll help him.

"You dare doubt me? How dare you." She says moving her chair. She sits down in front of him and lets her hair drape down the back of the kitchen chair. "And, it's not me. You're just a bad student."

"Pfft, whatever. A student is only as good as his teach-...wait, you said...three strands, right?" He says as he combs her hair back with his fingers.

"Three strands. Overlap. Over, under, over, under..."

"Ok. Over, under, over, under..."

She could feel him trembling slightly while he gripped her hair. It was subtle. He was trying to hide it in his twitchy movements. But, it was there.

"You know I read something about dreams the other day. How there's always some symbolic meaning behind everything that we dream about. Different colours represent our feelings or whatever." She said.

"Yeah? And?"

"Well for example, blue is all about tranquillity and shit like that. Green is new beginnings or hope or something."

"Yeah? What about-...damnit." The braid came loose. "Um...what about red?"

"Well...that's more...anger." She felt his hands slow as she said that. "Robin...you know that you're my best friend, right? That I'd do anything for you?"

"Heh, anything?" He said with that same little evil cadence he'd always do when he'd get playful.

"Down boy." She said with a hushed smile. "Listen, you're having trouble sleeping, aren't you?" He sighed as her hair became undone again. Silently, he grabbed the undone strand and tried to make it up again. "Robin...do you...wanna talk about your dad?" He doesn't say anything as he holds the strand of her hair gently. She caresses his arm and sits in silence, trying to think of what to say next to comfort him. "I...don't like seeing you like this..."

"Well...that's why I talk to you...I don't have anyone else." The braid is finally holding. Slow and steady is the name of the game now. "And trust me, I'm okay. Really. It's just something that happens nowadays. Might as well get used to it." He places the completed braid on her shoulder. "What do you think?" It was loose. She knew that she'd have to do it over again later on when it eventually comes undone. But it was better than last time.

"...eh, B minus."

"Better than my last score. Hell yeah." She smiled looking at the braid. It might not be perfect but at least he took the time to do it.

"Well done, my student. You know, you may not be as useless as I thought." She says putting the chair back.

"Oh, you're so kind." He gets up, grabbing his cup and walks into the small kitchenette as she follows him. "And, since you complimented me, I think you deserve another slice of bread." He says, taking a couple slices out of the package.

"Princesses always deserve two slices, smartass."

"Or...maybe I-" She quickly snatches it out of his hand and stuffs both of the slices in her mouth.

"Thank you, Robin." She says through her stuffed mouth. "You know, you should grow your hair out. Then, I could braid your hair." She then put her hand on her cheek and flicked her wrist. "Like, oh my god, then we could braid each other's hair." She says with a playful accent.

"Yeah...no. You wouldn't like me with long hair. I'd lose my dashing handsome looks."

"Okay, I wouldn't really call you dashing handsome."

"Really? Gosh, she's so picky, isn't she?"

"I'll have you know my preference is a beautiful, sculpted man with a long, black mane blowing in the wind with a five-o'clock shadow."

"What? My hair not good enough for you, Princess?"

“Ah! You said it! Now come on, your princess needs another slice of bread.” He rolls his eyes and looks away with that same stupid grin he always had. “Come on, don’t be cheap.” She lightly hits him on the arm.

“Fine. Jeez, princesses are so needy.” He said handing her another slice while also taking one for himself.

“You should be used to it by now.” Sadly...he was. His watch beeps once again. 8:45. He sighed as he stuffed the rest of the bread into his mouth.

“That time of the day, huh?” She says.

“That time of the day...” He replied as tied up the rest of the bread and put it into one of the cupboards. “Ed and I have to check the air purifiers in the atrium. Damn things keep dying. The council is starting to complain about it.” She listened for the hum of the purifiers and noticed that they were no longer working. She didn’t even notice.

“Well at least you work in a cool place. Damn generators are hot as hell. Makes the whole warehouse a furnace.” She yawned and stretched her arms up. “God, I hate being sweaty.”

“Yeah. Too bad we can only use the showers once a week.” He said slowly walking away from her towards the hallway as he covered his nose. “...cause that sweat definitely ain’t doing you any good.” She quickly threw her arms down to cover them as he ran away.

“ROBIN!” She yelled at him. He ran away laughing as she threw a rag at him. She grimaced at him as he ran into his room. She hated when he did that but it has been two days...I mean he smells too so he shouldn’t even be talking but...maybe there’s room for improvement. Quickly she walked into the dark hallway and entered her room.

He loved to bug her about things. It made him smile in such a dreary world. The dreary reality they lived in was something he was always reminded of whenever he would enter his room. The small office space turned bedroom was on the dark side of the Science Building so the sun would never shine through his window. Not that sunlight could ever break through the fog anyways. But he couldn’t really complain about it. It was either this or living in the gym with all those other poor souls who arrived at the University too late. Plus, it was nice to have her around so it’s not that bad.

After throwing on a sweater and packing his things into his backpack, he walked out into the dark hallway. The people living in the other offices were slowly leaving their rooms and heading off to work like he was. They all had the same expression on their faces. Tiredness was a common ailment for everyone in the University. He slowly made his way through the steady flow of people towards her door and waited for her. He watched the people as they slowly shuffled by him. Most of them were coughing, had their heads down, or were yawning. The ones that he would make eye contact with had dark circles under their eyes. Up the stream of people he spotted a girl, her name is...Kenzie? Something with a K. She was knocking on a door; Ethan’s door it looked like. She was waiting for him, just like Robin was. But she looked more worried than he was.

“Ethan, come on, Mr. Sleepy pants! You better not be still sleeping!” She said in front of his door. The steady stream of people slowly shuffled by her. She stood in silence at his door and just stared, waiting for a response. As the silence pervaded over her, it seemed to emit some sort of aura that caused more people to look at her. “Ethan. Come on, get up!” She knocked once more. Even Robin seemed to be transfixed on her. He watched as her face slowly changed as the scary thoughts started to enter her mind.

“So, you ready?” Lauren said as she locked her door. He didn’t even notice that she came out of her room. He immediately smelled the sweet scent of her perfume that should wear occasionally.

“Ethan...?” Kenzie said one more time. He nodded towards Kenzie. “Ethan? Are you still...?” Everyone in the hallway slowed as they all turned towards Kenzie who looked more scared than ever.

“Oh no...” Lauren said as she covered her mouth and grabbed onto Robin’s sweater.

“No...Ethan. Please tell me you’re still there...” Kenzie said, jiggling his door. The seconds slowed as they passed by. Everyone seemed to stop as they all watched Kenzie freeze.

“Ethan...please...we’re going to be late for work...” She continued, knocking once more on his door softly and leaning up against it. It looked like it was going to be one of those days again. He didn’t know Ethan that well other than the small talk they would have sometimes but...it always caused him pain

whenever anyone would go missing in the night. He could only imagine the day Kenzie would have after this. After all, they just became official a few days ago and... it just wasn't right.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm up. Geez Louise-" Ethan said as he opened the door. Just as he opened the door to the worried Kenzie you could hear the audible sigh of everyone in the hallway. "Whoa, you okay?" He said as Kenzie grabbed him before he could finish his sentence. She didn't respond as she hugged him. The stream of people started up once again as Robin noticed the sweet smell of Lauren's perfume.

"You know, I was just joking when I said you smelled. You smell fine." He chuckled. Her grip on his sweater lightened as she came back down. She hit him in the arm lightly.

"Oh shut up, you." He laughed as they both followed the shuffling residents towards the elevator. "I just felt like wearing this. Not because you... I just..." He kept smiling at her and looking at her from the side. "Shut up. You're so bad."

"But, it smells nice." He said as they both smiled and lightly laughed. While they both followed the tired masses to the elevator at the end of the hall, he glanced back at Kenzie and Ethan. Ethan was hugging her back now; it looked like Kenzie was crying a bit. "Man, I got scared there for a second."

"Me too. I thought Ethan was gone for good. I can't imagine what Kenzie was thinking when he didn't answer."

"I'm just relieved that he answered. I can't go through seeing another person go through that. There's just been too much of that lately." Robin remarked as he watched Ethan and Kenzie walk into his room.

"Makes me wonder where all those missing people went off to. You know? Maybe they just left the University or something. I mean, there's got to be more places out there than just here, right?" She said looking back at them as well.

"I suppose." That's something he's wondered about for a long time. Maybe the missing people did just leave in the middle of the night to find greener pastures. There's got to be more than just the University left in the world, right? Surely the fog couldn't have gotten everything. But, people like Ethan, who seemed to have the world going for him with the recent promotion to workshop manager and the new relationship with Kenzie seemed to be the ones who would go missing in the middle of the night. Surely people like Ethan wouldn't want to leave. Especially not without someone like Kenzie. It makes you wonder what's really happening to people. It's got everyone scared to go to sleep at night thinking that they might not wake up in the morning..

After Kenzie and Ethan went into his room, he looked at Lauren. Sometimes, he wonders if it would be safer to sleep in the same room with someone. Safety in numbers and all that. She gave him a subtle smile as their gaze met with each other.

Suddenly, they both heard that familiar ding of the elevator opening up for the next group.

"I wish the stairs were fixed. I always hate riding this thing." She quietly said as they both entered the squeaking elevator along with a few others. One of the other residents silently pushed the button for the lobby causing the elevator door to close with a quiet squeak. As the aging elevator started to move they both noticed that everything was silent. Despite being surrounded by people, no one was talking.

Looking around at the people that surrounded him he could see that most, if not all of them, were staring into nothing. The air in the small elevator was thick and felt dreary. Maybe it was the fog leaking through the air purifiers or maybe it was the dull blue-greenish tinge of the light above them. But the elevator just seemed bland and devoid of any colour besides the putrid tinge from the light above. But, it was nothing new. Some people called the University a paradise. A place where people can live without having to worry about suffocating. A place where they have food, water, a nice place to sleep, and most importantly, safety. But, on days like this where he's surrounded by the walking dead, he wonders if it's better to just be alone out in the fog. It can't be as bad as people say it is. Right? Maybe the people that went missing had the same thoughts as he did.

"Oh, hey, I forgot to ask you what'chu doing tonight?" She said, breaking the silence. But, saying it in a hushed tone. The people around him didn't acknowledge either of them.

"I dunno, probably gonna sleep more. Well, try too anyway. Why?" He replied, trying to be just as quiet.

“Erin asked me if I wanted to go with her to see a movie tonight. Some of the scavs found some videos in one of the other buildings and they’re going to be doing a screening in the Law Building. Wanna join us? Be our date?” Just then the elevator came to a halt and the doors slowly creaked open to the lobby of the Science Building.

“...and so the gates of hell opened up and brought damnation upon a world full of sin and greed! The world was cast into darkness and we have been punished! You all knew this was coming! All you had to do, my brothers and sisters, was believe in our saviours and we could’ve been saved!” The same loud voice shrieked over the noise of the morning crowd of people. He could hear the collective sigh of everyone in the elevator. “But take heed and hear my voice, it is not too late for you to change your minds. The Angels are not your enemies, as some of you may think. They can save us from the hell that surrounds us. Brothers and sisters, rethink your ways! See the light for all it has to offer! Believe that beings of light shall return to bring us to the paradise that lies just above our heads!” That nut Jeffrey yelled just as he did every morning to the tired masses.

“You ever think this dude gets tired of hearing his own voice?” Robin says as they follow the crowd into the lobby.

“Bro, this dude must love his own voice.” She replied as they both headed towards the mask rental kiosk.

“The Angels shall return, brothers and sisters! Once again, just as they did in the past, the chariots of light shall once again descend from the heavens above and ascend all of us to the paradise that we all crave! Even now, brothers and sisters, the mass exodus of the worthy has started. Do not worry for those who have ascended for they are the lucky ones!”

“So, am I going alone and making myself look like a loser in front of Erin or are you coming with me?” She said, grabbing her mask from the distributor worker. He had the same vacant look as everyone on the elevator did.

“They going to be serving popcorn?” He said unstrapping the aging gas mask.

“What? I’m offended!” She said, throwing her arms down.

“What? Why?”

“Why? You have a beautiful, young woman asking you to accompany her with her equally beautiful friend to see a movie and all you can think about is if they’re serving popcorn?” He rolls his eyes and looks away with a smirk. “Why, you should be glad that you even have a beautiful young lady asking you at all, you poophead.”

“So...no popcorn?” He said, strapping the mask on.

“Yeah, probably not.” She says returning to unstrapping the mask. The way she can change her style of voice is impeccable.

“Do not worry for Jim, for Anna, for Elizabeth, and for the rest that have disappeared into the darkness of night! They have gone ahead to pave the way for the rest of-” Just then a mask hit Jeff in the head.

“Shut up! Don’t you dare talk about them, you piece of shit!” A yell came from the crowd of people.

“You see, my brothers and sisters?! You’re all full of hatred and darkness!” Jeff said, disregarding the red mark on his face. “That is why the Angels have left us! They do not want-”

“I said shut up! Don’t you ever say her name!” The same voice said. Robin caught a glimpse of a person running towards Jeff on the table. The person was tackled by another resident as everyone started yelling and dogpiling into a flurry of bodies. He rolled his eyes and went back to putting on his mask.

“Well, that’s disappointing. But, fine. Twist my arm about it.” He playfully sighed while he watched her put on her mask. She was having trouble snapping the strap in above her head. She must have gotten the broken one. “I guess I could accompany you and your beautiful friend or whatever. Don’t want you looking like a loser now do we?”

“Yeah, you better not. Don’t forget you...owe...me.” She started to make that face that he liked whenever she would get a little frustrated. She only made that face when she was in a playful mood but

something slightly inconvenienced her. “Ah...you sonofa...come on.” After snapping his own latch closed, he took hold of her strap.

“What would you do without me?” He asked, snapping the latch. She looked at him through the glass visor of the gas mask with that tired but playful look he loved. For that second the dim light of the orange morning sun shone through the windows of the Science Building lobby. It hit her face just as it did earlier. Her blue eyes once again seemed to catch fire in that glance that she gave him. A small smile came over her face as they both stared at each other.

“I guess you’re good for something.”

“You know. When you talk like that, I sometimes think we're friends.”

“Ok, don't get ahead of yourself there.” They both chuckled as he let her go.

“Well, then I guess I’ll see you both tonight. The Law Building you said?”

“At 6, we’ll wait for you in the lobby. And you better not be late or I'm gonna kick your ass again.”

“Hey, don't threaten me with a good time.” He said backing away to join the shuffling residents that were leaving the building. She watched him slowly walk away and waved at him with him waving back awkwardly.

He’s such a dork. Even the way he walked looked stupid. But he had a sort of stride. A stride that made him look cool in a dorkish sort way. Soon, he was lost in the crowd as they all poured out of the Science Building into the morning, orange mist. She glanced back at the commotion as the man from before was being escorted away by some of the other residents while Jeff had that same smug look on his face. The visor of the gas mask was already fogging up from her breath. Soon, the latch came undone once again.

“Son of a...” She sighed.

## **Chapter 2: The Twilight Hall**

*“For the past few days, those thoughts have been trying to enter my mind once again. The memories that I have spent my whole life trying to forget. The memory of my parents from when I was still young and naive. I was such an idiot back then thinking that nothing bad would ever happen. That we would be like that for the rest of our lives.*

*At night it’s worse for me. I keep trying to think of something else but those memories keep coming up. I wish I had something to read.*

*At times like this, I’m tempted to just go and knock on the door that I’m so scared of. Ask to just stay in the room with him and just talk like we always do. At least then I know I would be able to sleep.*

*But, would I want to sleep? I don’t think I could do such a thing if I were to ever overcome my fear by knocking on the door. I’m such an idiot.”*

“I’m sorry honey, I forgot what I was saying.” The old woman said while she folded the cloth after a coughing fit. Zoe noticed the little specks of blood on the white handkerchief before Mrs. Kettridge quickly hid it underneath the blanket she was lying underneath. She must have noticed it too since she hid it so quickly.

“You were talking about the internet.” Zoe said while trying to ignore the thoughts in her mind at the sight of Mrs. Kettridge’s blood. She finished folding the last of the washed sheets on the cart beside the old woman’s bed.

“Oh yes, sorry, I must have lost my train of thought. Old age, you know how it is.” She forced a frail laugh. Zoe looked at her from behind her smudged glasses. Mrs. Kettridge’s eyes were getting red. Maybe she was tired or maybe it was from the force of her cough? By this time she is usually sleeping so it’s unusual for her to be so active at this time. “There was a thing back then that I used to watch all the time. Do you know what a cat is, dear?”

“Yes, Mrs. Kettridge. I know what a cat is.” She calmly said, pushing the cart back into place beside the large window. She sat in the chair beside her hospital bed and checked on the IV needle in her arm to make sure it wasn’t causing any bleeding.

“I used to love watching videos of them. My favourite was watching them eat. It was a special type of soothing sound that I could listen to all day.”

“That was called ASMR, right?” Zoe said as she looked at her arm. It’s so wrinkly. How can skin be so wrinkly?

“Yes, actually. Did I tell you about that already?”

“No, actually Ben told me. It sounded like a thing everyone loved back then.” It looked like the needle went clean in. It made her feel relieved knowing that she did it right for once.

“Well, we did. That’s one thing I miss about the old days. Well, that and coffee.” Mrs. Kettridge laid back on her pillow and looked up at the ceiling above her. Zoe watched as her red eyes glistened while she went back into the times when she was young. “You know, honey, sometimes I can still smell the coffee. I can still see the cats in my dreams. I remember on sunny days, when there wasn’t a single cloud in the sky, I’d sit on the grass and let the sun warm me up and I’d just daydream. Lost in my own little world.”

“That sounds wonderful. I’ve always wanted to hold a cat and see the sky. It sounded so peaceful back then.” Zoe said as she watched Mrs. Kettridge’s eyes glisten.

Sometimes, when she would sit with the old woman, she wondered what it must be like to have her memories. Mrs. Kettridge was one of those rare people that lived before the mist. In a world that was completely foreign to the dreary, fog covered world that Zoe was used to. A world of blue skies, freedom, and most of all, safety.

“I think you’d love them. I had a cat once. Did I ever tell you that? Her name was Kitty. Oh, I loved her so much. She was the cutest cat, my Kitty.” Mrs. Kettridge seemed to be sinking lower into her pillow. When she mentioned her cat, it looked like some colour came to her cheeks. Just seeing her go back into a happier time would always bring a smile to Zoe’s face. “She was so soft, so fluffy...so- oh.” Mrs. Kettridge suddenly looked down and raised her arms. “Hi, my Kitty. Do you want cuddles again, baby?”

The smile on Zoe’s face faded as she watched Mrs. Kettridge pet the air in front of her. This was the part that she always hated to see whenever Mrs. Kettridge would revisit the past.

“Mrs. Kettridge, Kitty isn’t here.” Zoe said in a subtly pained voice. Mrs. Kettridge looked up at Zoe with a confused look and then looked down back to her lap. The old woman raised her hands and searched the room for the imaginary cat.

“Oh, she must have run off. She must be hungry. Honey, do you think you could feed Kitty for me, please?” Zoe tried to force a reassuring smile and nodded her head.

“Sure. I’ll go feed Kitty for you. But, try to get some sleep now, okay?” Mrs. Kettridge smiled and leaned back into her pillow once more. Zoe then got up from her chair and pulled up her blanket.

“Ok, thank you Annie. Make sure you eat too, okay?” Zoe felt a lump in her throat form as she said that.

“I will. Get some sleep now, I’ll see you later, okay?” She said trying to force the lump in her throat back down and to prevent her voice from shaking. Before Zoe got up from her bedside, Mrs. Kettridge grabbed her hand and gave her a sincere smile.

“I love you.” Mrs. Kettridge said quietly. Zoe could feel tears form in her eyes the moment she heard the old woman utter those words. She tried to force a smile but it was becoming too hard. She pursed her lips together and looked away from the old woman. She could see Mrs. Kettridge waiting but

she couldn't do it. She couldn't say it. Zoe got up from her bedside and started walking towards the door for the hospital room.

As soon as she exited the room and closed the door, she leaned up against the wall and closed her eyes while she clenched her hand in a fist.

*No, no. Now's not the time. She was just- It was just the fog talking. If you said anything, you'd probably regret it. It would've been too painful. Forget it. Just think about what you have to do now. Stop and think.*

That was it. She had finished her tasks for the morning. She has nothing to do right now.

The thoughts she had of Mrs. Kettridge was replaced by the fear that she got from her new found freedom. Free time is a rare thing for a nurse to have, especially in a place like Eden, and she knows that some of the other nurses would kill for a few hours of extra time to talk, relax, and maybe have some sleep. But, for Zoe, it's not something that she particularly likes doing. Rest only meant that she'd have another nightmare; something that she's been suffering from for a while. And, the thought of having a conversation with someone terrified her just as much as the nightmares did. Maybe she should go see if Ben needs anything. Hopefully he can give her something to do.

Walking down the candle lit hallways of the makeshift hospital had a weird effect on her. A mix of a tense atmosphere but somehow soothing at the same time. Each room that she passed had the same sound coming from it. Every day it seems like more and more people are suffering from the same lung condition. Or, some sort of lacerations on their face or some respiratory problem. Some blame the integrity of the windows in Eden. Some blame the fact that people are just sneaking out more. The sneaking out reason was popular amongst her coworkers judging from the conversations she overhears.

The people that Zoe worked with were an odd bunch. Most of them were alright from what she could tell. However, some of them gave off a weird, almost aloof sort of vibe that rubbed her the wrong way. She didn't know too much about any of her co-workers as she kept to herself. The other nurses were just as much of a mystery to her as she was to everyone around her. She didn't even know any of their names.

"M-morning." Zoe said with a breath of relief the moment she walked into Ben's small office. He was sitting at that same desk he did everyday, writing with the same pen that he has been using for what seems like ages.

"Ah, good morning, kiddo. How are you today? Did you get enough sleep?" Ben said with the same smile he always gave her. Strange thing to ask since he's the one who woke her up that morning.

"I'm alright, I guess. How are you feeling today? Did you take your medicine?" She responded quietly.

"Yes, I did. And, I feel fine. Just getting old, you know how it is."

"Well, no. Not yet anyway. I don't think anyone knows how it feels to be old, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I guess you have a point there." He motioned for her to sit in front of his desk as he massaged his hands. "How's Mrs. Kettridge this morning?" She hesitated in answering as she looked down at her fidgeting hands.

"It happened again. She saw Kitty...and she called me by her daughter's name again. Ben, I can't do it anymore. I'm so worried about her and I can't do anything about it."

"Mrs. Kettridge is an old woman, honey. She's seen things that many of us will never be able to see again. Kitty and Annie are just ways of her body and mind to cope with the fact that her world no longer exists. It's just her way of living the life that she lost."

"Yeah, I guess so. But that doesn't make it any easier to handle."

"I know. But, it's just the reality that we live in now. We can't change the world no more than we can change the fog."

"I guess...anyway, I-I have some free time so I was wondering if y-you n-needed anything done?" She stuttered.

*Why can't you just speak normally, you idiot? It's not that hard.*

"Well actually, I wanted to know if you've been okay? I noticed you've been kind of acting strange lately."

“Uh, i-it’s just...umm...I guess...” She tried to deflect his question but the words weren’t appearing to her. She just stumbled on her words, just as she always did when she spoke. “I’ve just been tired. I haven’t been sleeping too well lately.” Should she tell him about her dream last night? That’s the fourth time this week she’s dreamt about Orion and David. It’s getting harder to see David’s face.

“Has your condition been keeping you up?”

“Uh, n-no. I’ve just been...I don’t know. Just haven’t really been tired at night.” She lied. She couldn’t help it. It’s not her fault that her mind keeps dwelling on her stupidity. She wished she at least had something to read at night to keep her mind off of her own mistakes.

“Have you been doing your exercises?”

“I’ve been trying but...I just have been s-so busy. You know...it’s just been-”

“Being a nurse is a big responsibility.” Ben said after Zoe trailed off. “But remember that you’re doing good for these people. There are worse places to be besides Eden. We both know that.”

“I suppose.”

“Well, I’m actually glad you’re here. Would you be a dear and deliver this manifest to the pharmacy? We’re getting low on some medications and I just want to make sure that the scavengers can get we what we need.”

*Really? Of all the things you could’ve asked her to do, you had to ask her that? It’s like you’re trying to torture her.*

“Oh, well, I-I don’t know, Ben. There has to be something in the hospital I could-”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. We have plenty of others who can take care of those things. Plus, you haven’t eaten this morning, have you? Why don’t you grab some breakfast on your way to the pharmacy and practice what I taught you.” She grimaced the moment he said that.

“Uh...I-I suppose I can then...” She stammered. He let out that same smile that he only had and handed her a folder. When she grabbed it he put his other hand on hers before letting go of the folder.

“I know how you feel, kiddo. Believe me. It still bothers me too.” His perpetually glossy eyes stared at her with the same expression that David would give her. The same way he looked at her whenever she was scared or lonely. Ben had that same sort of expression. “But, just keep at it, okay? Eden might not be Orion but as long as we’re safe here. As long as you’re safe. That’s all that matters to me.” Zoe looked away from him as he held her hand. She sighed as she looked up at the ceiling, trying to avoid his gaze. “You look so much like your mother.” Her gaze went back to Ben as he tapped her hand and let it go. “Now go. I’ll be here when you get back, okay?” Her gaze lingered for a moment before she turned away from Ben and quickly exited his office.

She could feel it in her chest. That sinking feeling. That feeling that has persevered since they left Orion. While she walked down the candle-lit hallways of the backrooms in Eden that the hospital was built into, she took a deep breath in to try to assuage that feeling. She wished Ben hadn’t said that. She tried for a long time to forget the last moment she had with mom. But the moment Ben said that, she could feel the pain slowly creep up on her.

*Try to focus on something else. Remember what Ben said to do when you start to feel that feeling. Ground yourself. Think about where you are.*

She looked down at the candles that lined the hallway. It created an otherworldly glow in the dimly lit hall. While walking towards the entrance to the main part of the mall, she kept glancing into the hospital rooms she passed. Most of them had people lying in beds either sleeping or reading a book. None of them made eye contact with her as she passed them by. No one except one.

This room had the man with curly hair. That same woman she saw everyday at his bedside was sitting on the chair next to the window. She was looking at the other doctor who was holding a stethoscope to the man’s chest. The woman made eye contact with Zoe. It was like being struck by ice. The pain she saw in that woman’s eyes made her immediately look away and hurry past the man’s room.

That man has been in the hospital for about a week now and it doesn’t look like he’s getting any better. She didn’t hear it directly, but from the gossip that she would overhear from some of the other nurses, it sounded like this man was beyond saving. She doesn’t know if the woman knows. She didn’t want to think about how she would react. She couldn’t imagine the pain she would experience. That was a



feeling she's all too familiar with. Sometimes, she wonders if it's just best to run away from everything. Escape the sorrow she experiences every day in the hospital.

When she walked out into the main halls of the mall from the candle-lit corridors, the eerie silence that prevailed over the back halls were now filled with the distant chatter of the other people that called Eden home. The twilight light that surrounded her was changed out for the grey light of the poisonous air that fell from the sky lights above her. Taking a deep breath to try to calm her shaking hands and the feeling of the cold sweat starting to form on her head.

As she walked through the lonely halls towards the chatter, she peered into the various stores that she passed by. One of the things she liked about Eden was how people customized their living spaces. Since almost everyone shared a store with others, sometimes up to 10 or 15 people, it's interesting to see how they all opted to set up their living space. Some of them opted to just leave things as is with blank walls, for sale signs, and shelves that were neatly arranged in ways to give people privacy. Others opted for large murals painted on their walls and large sculptures built out of old clothes racks. Some even built elaborate apartment-like contraptions. Individual living pods separated by large structures built out of wood. Her favourite place was the one she would always pass on her way to the food court. The store was actually the one that the mall was named after. The Garden of Eden was some sort of food store that the people inside turned into some sort of mini art museum.

The closer she got to the food court the more she could feel her hands shaking but as soon as she saw that large sign that had Eden printed on it, she could feel that anxiety slowly slip away. The Garden was just as beautiful as the last time she saw it. A large sculpture of a wooden man and woman stood proudly in the centre. Looking over all the other smaller paintings, sculptures, and all the artists that took the time out of their day to perfect their passions. The small candle lights that people used to look at the paintings, drawings, and other art pieces created a type of light that she liked. The warm light stood in contrast to the cold air behind her.

While she stood at the entrance, she kept looking at the large statue in the middle of the room. The woman looked so beautiful and the man so handsome. The woman looked like she was wearing some sort of tiara. That was new. It's fascinating how people can create such beautiful things in a world that doesn't have beauty. At times like this, when she stares at stuff like this, she forgets the world. The images of the curly haired man in the hospital bed faded from her mind while she became enchanted by the beauty of the two people in front of her.

"Amazing, isn't it?" A voice startled her. Looking at the source was that girl that she's seen around the mall. The girl that always wore a beanie. Beside her was that tall, buff guy that she was always hanging around with.

"Meh, I never really got the point of making this stuff. I mean, why not get a real job and go build something that we could actually use." The man responded.

"You're such an uncultured swine, you know that? You need to learn to appreciate the prettier things in life, you charlatan." Zoe's hands were suddenly getting sweaty again and that same feeling in her chest started to rise once again. She better escape quickly before they notice her.

"What about you? Do you like the arts?" The girl said just as Zoe was about to turn away. "I see you here a lot so you must like the prettier things in life, right?" She looked down at her feet and clutched the manifest tightly in her arms.

Okay. Just like how Ben showed her. *Force it out. Make sure not to stutter.*

"Uh... Y-yeah..." Zoe quietly choked out. She didn't dare look up at these two strangers. Before they could respond Zoe turned around and quickly walked away. Her muscles in her entire body were shaking violently. She could feel her breathing start to speed up and the sweat that tried to form on her head finally dripped down. Maybe those two could hear her teeth chattering? Maybe they saw her shaking? She didn't dare look back. As she walked scared out of her wits, she slowly came to realize something monumental had just happened.

Yes. YES! She said something! She actually spoke to someone other than Ben or Mrs. Kettridge! But, did they actually hear her? Did she even speak loud enough for them to hear? Who cares?! She spoke!

A loud scraping sound scared her out of her adrenaline fuelled silent celebration. The table she bumped into seemed to come out of nowhere. Looking around, the food court was a lot busier than she thought it was going to be. Suddenly, she felt everyone's gaze on her. Everyone, at least to her, stopped what they were doing and all looked at the clumsy girl falling over her own feet. Clutching the manifest ever more tightly in her arms, she put her head down and then proceeded to walk towards the pharmacy.

Damn this stupid condition. Damn it all! Why can't you people just look somewhere else?

As she walked through the busy cafeteria while trying to avoid looking at anyone, an intoxicating smell hit her. Her stomach rumbled at the smell of that heavenly aroma. She hadn't eaten that morning. From the time that Ben woke her to him sending her on this errand was spent with Mrs. Kettridge. That food stall she visited the one time she gathered enough courage pulled her gaze towards it. The woman with the large hair behind the counter was cooking something on the fire that filled the air with smoke. Maybe she could continue with the small victory she had with that couple back at the Garden and have a bite to eat. Surely just getting some food by herself couldn't kill her, right?

"Hi, just be with you a sec- oh, good morning, hon. Surprised to see you here." The woman said as Zoe walked up to the counter. The woman wiped her hands on the apron she was wearing then placed the cooked piece of food on the plate beside her. "Haven't seen you 'round here in a while. Good timing, by the way. I just finished cooking a steak. Want some?"

Zoe silently nodded without looking up at her.

"So, how's work been at the hospital, Zoe? Sure you doctors have been busy over there taking care of all those poor idjuts, huh? I gotta say, I dun understand why people even bother to try to go outside. It's just plain foolish if you ask me." The woman wasn't looking at Zoe as she prepared the steak. The way she skillfully cut it up into portions and added a bunch of seasonings to it entranced Zoe. Suddenly, she realized the woman called her by her name. Did she know this woman? Was she here the last time she visited this food stall?

"Yeah, I know. People should stay inside." Another voice said beside Zoe. Startled once again she looked at the voice and immediately recognized that same buzzed hairstyle. "Morning, beautiful." He said with that same stupid grin he would always have whenever he would see her.

"Ah, morning Cole. How's my favourite boy doing today? You hungry?" The woman said.

"Starving. What have you got there, Myrna?"

"Mushroom steaks, just finished cooking one up. Want a piece?"

"Of course! You'd think I'd ever say no to one of your steaks?"

Myrna...Myrna. No, that name doesn't sound familiar. Or maybe she just forgot this woman's name. She's so bad with names.

While she was lost in her mind, she could see Cole lean up against the counter facing Zoe. She hated it when he stared at her with that look. "So, how's- ugh!" He leaned on the greasy part of the counter. Serves him right. "H-how's the prettiest girl in all of Eden doing today?" Cole said, wiping his dirty, button up shirt.

She clutched the manifest harder and looked away from him.

"Hm. Still having trouble talking, huh? I hear you've been working at the hospital. I guess even with all their fancy gadgets over there they can't really treat mutism." Even though she wasn't looking at him she could feel his gaze wandering. She should've put on a coat or something. Why does this damn shirt that the nurse's wear have to be so tight in the places that matter?

"Alright, you two. Knock it off." Myrna said, placing two plates on the counter. The smell of the steak made Zoe's mouth water.

"Thanks, Myrna." Cole grabbed the plates and handed one to Zoe with a smile. "Where you headed, beautiful? Wanna join me for breakfast? Come on, I'll find us a seat." He grabbed his plate and turned towards the seating area.

Just like that he expects her to join him for breakfast? Even without her answering? She wished she never had this damn condition. Could've told him to buzz off.

As soon as his back was turned, she grabbed her plate and walked quickly away towards the food court exit. The crowd around her started to grow in numbers. Maybe she can lose him in this crowd so she

doesn't have to suffer through the pain she's been going through. She could feel her hands shaking and for sure both Myrna and Cole must have seen the sweat on her face.

Wait, she forgot a fork. But Cole is still there. Myrna saw her leave without a fork. There's no way she could go back and grab something to eat the steak with now. Maybe she could just eat with her hands.

As the noise of the busy food court started to die down the further away she walked, she could feel the anxiety in her chest start to recede. Maybe it would've been easier if Ben didn't bring them to Eden. Living out in the fog sucked, mind you, but at least she didn't have to talk to anyone other than Ben. All that time spent living in the fog took their toll on Ben's health however. So, they had no choice but to move into Eden. It's a nice enough place, but no matter where she goes she always has this feeling that people are always looking at her. Like, there was something that they could see that she couldn't see.

Maybe it's the way the glasses she wears now look on her? It has to be that. Or, maybe it's the fringe on her hair. It's got to be the fringe. She should've just tied her back like usual. Regardless, sometimes she longs for the days in the fog and isolation.

"Hey! You forgot your fork, you silly goose!" She heard Cole's voice call out. He caught up to her and held out a fork.

*Damnit Cole! Take a hint!*

"Oh, right. I guess I should've asked if you're busy. You must be off to the pharmacy. Linda said Ben was asking about our stock so I should've guessed he would've sent you." She could feel her cheeks burning. She glanced away looking at one of the empty stores that they passed.

The store she was looking at was shrouded in a thick, grey veil. Behind the plastic covered gate, the fog was leaking in from a large hole. She never knew why there were giant holes in some parts of the mall. Maybe it was from some kind of explosion? Or maybe they just gave away? From what Ben told her, before the fog there was some sort of war or something that took place all over Tarterus. So, maybe the holes in the mall were caused by that? But, then again everyone seems to have their own theory of what really happened before the fog.

"...I mean, I don't really mind working at the pharmacy but she always gives me the creeps. She looks alright, but she always has this sort of...vibe to her. Know what I mean?"

"Huh? Sorry, what?" Zoe said coming back to reality.

"Linda, my boss." He said with his mouth full of mushroom steak. "I swear she has to be a robot or something. She just has this— Wait, did you just say something?"

She forgot he was there. Ah...damnit. She looked away from him as she cut a piece of the steak with her fork and put it in her mouth. She could see Cole looking at her and waiting for her response. After a moment, he pursed his lips and went back to talking. "Well, I shouldn't bad mouth her behind her back. Anyways, you're delivering a manifest, right?" He said finishing the steak. She didn't respond as she took a bite from her own steak. They just passed the large window finally making it to the small pharmacy. Cole then grabbed the entrance to the pharmacy and opened it. "Ladies first."

The pharmacy was a small room that was painted a faded blue colour. The way the dull, fluorescent lights reflected off the walls and the white, stand-up shelves that lined the floor gave the room a sombre sort of look. There wasn't a lot of foot traffic here since the pharmacy was pretty isolated from everything else. So once the door was closed, the only noise one could hear was the gentle hum of the air purifiers and constant buzz of the fluorescent lights above them.

"I'll go get Linda." Cole said, going behind the counter at the back of the room. While she waited for him to return, she tried to eat the overcooked mushroom steak while she nonchalantly looked around. The mushroom was tough, but that woman...what was her name again? She always puts some kind of seasoning on it that makes it taste good. One could forget that they're even eating a mushroom.

She looked at some of the things that they had on the walls. Various refurbished respirators, empty pill bottles, surgical masks, and empty boxes lined the shelves. Looks like the scavengers would need to make another run soon.

Being a scavenger was something that she's been considering lately. She has the experience of living out in the fog and the medical practices she's learned as a nurse would do good for being a

scavenger. If it hadn't been for Ben and Mrs. Kettridge, she probably would've made the change a long time ago. The thoughts of the curly haired man and the woman entered her mind once again. The pain that she saw in that woman's gaze was a look she always sees in the hospital and it always made the hopeless feeling she had in her body rise.

But, she had to endure it. For Ben and Mrs. Kettridge. They're the only family she has.

"Ms. Mjalland?" A voice said behind Zoe. Mid chewing the mushroom in her mouth, she glanced back and saw a strange looking woman dressed in a long, white coat. "You have a manifest for me, correct?"

She quickly scrambled to put the plate on the shelf in front of her and swallow the mushroom. In her haste she dropped the fork...damnit. Why does she have to be such a klutz. Zoe held the folder out to her. She immediately noticed Linda's hand and how her skin looked incredibly pale. Glancing up at her face she also noticed that her eyes were incredibly glossy too. Maybe it was the light glare from the ceiling lights that were hitting Zoe's glasses or Linda's thick glasses that created this illusion. But she looked like she had just finished crying.

Without a word, Linda took the manifest with a smile and turned away towards Cole who was standing behind the main counter. "Mr. Watson, would you please start on inventory? We would need a report to pass on to the scavengers of what the doctor would need for the hospital."

"Sure, I can start immediately." Again, without a word, Linda then walked into the back behind Cole, disappearing into the darkness.

Zoe suddenly felt slightly dizzy. She leaned up against the shelf behind her and held her head. What was that feeling that she just got? It felt like it crept up on her the moment she made eye contact with Linda.

"You okay, gorgeous?" Cole asked, noticing Zoe leaning up against the shelf. Maybe she's just tired and it's finally hitting her. Ben should just let her sleep more then she wouldn't have this problem. "Do you want some water or something?" Cole said, running up to Zoe gently caressing her arm. Instinctively, Zoe lurched away from his touch.

"N-no." She said leaning away from him. The feeling of being touched scared her. She quickly grabbed the plate on the shelf and made her way to the entrance of the pharmacy.

"Oh, ok. Uh, before you go are you...busy later on?" She stopped in her tracks just before reaching for the door handle. "I was hoping if you'd like to meet up after work? Maybe...have some food together or something? I-I know you have trouble talking and I want to help with that. So I was thinking that maybe having a one on one with someone might be easier? And, you know, maybe we can get to know each other a bit better?"

Damn it Cole! Damn you! All she wanted to do was just say no and walk out. *Just a simple no would solve everything! Just say no and walk out! Just say no!*

"What do you think?" Cole said. Her heart was beating so loud that she could hear it in her ears.

*Damn it! Just say no!*

"If only you're free though. I know you must be busy at the hospital so only if you can."

"Mr. Watson, the inventory?" Linda said from behind the counter. It looked like she just appeared out of nowhere.

Oh, thank goodness for her.

"Oh, yes. Of course, I was just saying goodbye to Zoe." He stammered. She glanced back at Linda. She was standing underneath one of the lights that dangled from the ceiling. She looked even more menacing than before.

"Guess I better get back to work. I'll drop by the hospital after my shift? If you're not busy maybe we can get some food together? I promise it'll help a lot."

So, wait, she's meeting him regardless? But she didn't say anything. She silently looked at him as he waited for a response. Then proceeded to walk out without saying a word. She didn't look back as the pharmacy door closed. The distant chatter of the food court immediately filled the halls once again but it fell on deaf ears as Zoe was lost in her own mind.

“Really? Just like that? Why didn’t you say no, you idiot?! You moronic, stupid, idiot! Now what are you going to do?!” Zoe silently cursed to herself.

The scenarios of what was going to happen were buzzing around in her head. Her hands were shaking horribly and she could feel the sweat running down the back of her neck. Hopefully Ben would need her to stay late again. She then proceeded to quickly walk away from the pharmacy and make her way back to the hospital on the other side of the mall. She didn’t notice that she had forgotten the fork on the shelf.

Oh well.

### Chapter 3: A Flickering Candle

*“Last night I had the craziest dream that I’ve had in my entire life. The sky was lit up; like a raging fire was burning above the clouds. That intense orange light that shined above me turned the fog a golden colour. It was like I was floating in a golden void. I remember seeing the distant city on fire.*

*Now that I see it in writing it sounded like I had a nightmare. But, that couldn’t have been farther from the truth.*

*While I floated in this void, I felt warm. Like I was being held by the softest, warmest blanket I’ve ever felt. I remember feeling his arms holding me tightly as I looked out into the burning world. I felt so safe despite the world destroying itself. I couldn’t do anything other than float in his arms and watch the flames above us burn up the world. I didn’t feel scared because he said something that I’ve always wanted to hear. It was like he whispered in my ear. Even as I write this I get the shivers just thinking about it.*

*‘Don’t worry. I got you.’”*

“Ow, dammit...” Eddie growled, pulling away his finger from the fan blade he was cleaning. He shook his gloved hand in pain. “Ah, stupid gloves. Can you pass me the duct tape?”

“I told you. You’ve got to use thicker gloves like mine. This stuff rips through those cheap gloves like paper.” Robin said as he handed Eddie a roll of tape. Eddie took the roll and wrapped the silver mesh around his thinly gloved hand. Those gloves he was wearing had more duct tape on it than fabric.

“Yeah, I know. But it’s all I could find. Claire lost my work gloves when she borrowed them for her work so this is all I have.” After he finished taping up the hole in the glove, he took it off and wiped his finger on the cloth beside him. It looked like the fine, grey dust from these blades leaked into his glove had turned a patch of his skin red. “Wish the scavs would find another one of those plastic gloves again. That thing worked like a charm.”

Robin noticed that the metal wool he was using to clean the blades were already getting corroded from the dust. Just like the fan blade he was cleaning. If whatever this dust was had the power to corrode metal, it’s no wonder Eddie got hurt. But, it’s not like he hasn’t felt the same sting from the dust. His hands were covered in scars.

“Have you heard anything from the science guy that was looking into this?” Robin carefully tried to scrub the fan blade. But, no matter how much pressure he put on the one spot he was cleaning, that grey patch didn’t seem to want to let go.

“What guy?” Eddie asked, throwing the blade he was cleaning on the pile beside him.

“That guy who was looking into this. The one that everyone was talking about.”

“Oh, I heard he’s...uh...he’s gone now.” Robin stopped and looked up to Eddie.

“Gone?”

Eddie sighed and nodded his head without looking up to Robin. "Yesterday in the admin building. Looks like he was in the middle of writing a report. Chair was turned over and his pen was still on his desk."

"Man, that's happening too much..." Robin sighed in disbelief and shook his head.

"Yeah...I know." Eddie nonchalantly said while inspecting the fan blade in his hand.

"How many people is it up to now?"

"Four this week not including this guy. Two of them were from the gym. Think their names were Anna and Elizabeth..." Eddie wasn't looking at him as he talked. Robin noticed that his movements were stiff as he concentrated on the blade.

"Damn. Good thing you and Claire moved out of there then."

"Yeah, I know." He noticed a slight shake in his voice when he said that. He must be scared. Better change the subject.

"Speaking of which, how is Claire? Haven't seen her for a while." Finally, that damn spot came off. He compared his pile of cleaned fan blades to Eddie and it looked like he was falling way behind.

"She's been good. Getting these weird cravings now but she's been alright. The midwife says she wants to keep her until it happens."

Was that why he looked rigid? Ever since Claire was moved to the midwife's chambers, Robin couldn't help but feel that there was something wrong with Eddie. Maybe he's just worried about Claire.

"How've you been, man? You're alright?" Robin asked. He felt the steel wool crumble underneath his hands as it dissolved onto the metal table he and Eddie were sitting at. Ah dammit.

"Yeah, I'm alright." Eddie quietly responded. He wasn't looking at Robin while he spoke. Yet, Robin could plainly see that odd expression on his face. "What about Lauren? You make a move on her yet?"

"Dude, stop."

"Stop what? It's obvious she's into you so why not? Or, why not Erin? Everyone definitely knows she's into you." Robin silently shook his head while he tried to scrub the fan blades with the worn out brush he had as backup. This was doing worse than the steel wool was. In his peripheral vision, he could see Eddie tilting his head slightly as he waited for him to speak. "What's the problem? I mean..." Eddie looked around as he leaned in closer to Robin. "They're both pretty hot, so why not?"

Robin smiled and wiped his nose as he looked away from Eddie out at the rest of the workers in the workshop. "Yeah, I know they are. I just don't...I just don't think I could make either of them happy right now." He spotted Kenzie from this morning. Looks like she's alright knowing that Ethan was still around.

"Ok, well at least tell me this. Who would you go for?"

"I dunno, man." He finally scrubbed the last bit of the fan blade off. Looks like he's almost done. He didn't notice that Eddie was helping him clean his blades after he had finished his. "I just...I just can't think about it right now." That same expression he saw on Lauren's face this morning was on Eddie's face. At the corner of his eye, he could almost trick himself into thinking that Eddie was Lauren. Especially with that slicked back hairstyle of his that kind of resembled Lauren's on the rare occasion she would put her hair in a ponytail.

"Look man, um...I know what happened recently and, you know, I'm sorry for you. I really am. But, being with someone does help. Honestly, if I hadn't met Claire, I probably would've left this hell hole a long time ago. She's the one holding me together, you know? Maybe Lauren or Erin can do the same for you. Or, even if you just need a friend, man, I'm also here." Robin wasn't really paying attention to Eddie. He just kept watching Kenzie while she held the ladder for another worker who was installing one of the cleaned air purifiers near the workshop's ceiling. The way she did her hair reminded him of the one time Lauren did her hair that way. He doesn't remember how long ago that was but he remembered that was the day he heard Lauren sing for the first time.

"And don't tell me you don't feel anything for either of them. Especially Lauren after what you two did on her birthday." Robin's attention quickly went back to Eddie the moment he said that. "Oh yeah, I saw you two slobbering over each other." He set down the fan blade and put both of his hands

together. *"Oh, Robin. Oh, Robin. Yes, please give it to me. Plea-"* Robin quickly shushed his high-pitched voice and quickly glanced around at the other workers in the workshop.

"I thought you were sleeping!" He said in a hushed voice.

"Claire was, I was just keeping her company." Eddie had a big smile on his face as he picked up the fan blade once again. "Oh yeah, I heard everything that night. And you're just gonna look at me and tell me that I'm wrong? Am I wrong? You both were slobbering over each other, man. Surprised you didn't slip and fall."

Robin grimaced as he went back to that night in his mind. Eddie could see a smile slowly form on Robin's face. It looks like his strategy of making him smile is working.

Late in the night on Lauren's birthday, Robin and Lauren were the only ones up after everyone had fallen asleep from the long boardgame session. Claire had fallen asleep on the couch and Eddie had joined her to keep her company. While Claire slept in Eddie's arms on the small couch, he laid beside her and listened to her breathing. Slowly opening his eyes, he moved Claire's curly hair out of his face to look at Robin and Lauren who were sitting under a lone light and drinking tea.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Robin said as he put down his drink on the small table. "Now that everyone is asleep, I can finally give you your birthday gift." She looked at him with a suspicious look.

"Why did you have to wait for everyone to fall asleep? I swear, if it's another bug, Robin, I'm gonna kick your ass." Eddie saw Robin laugh when she said that. Everyone in the Science Building, no, the University heard Lauren's screams that night.

"No, trust me. You'll like it." He pulled something out of his pocket and hid it behind the chair he was sitting in. "Now, close your eyes."

"Robin, I swear to the divine if it-"

"Shush, close them. Come on, where's the trust?" Sighing, she set down her drink while closing her eyes. He took the necklace out from behind his back and put his arms around her to fasten it on her neck. She was grimacing and twitching as she felt the chain on her neck.

"Hey, what the-? Robin, I can feel it moving! You better not be putting-"

"Just don't move. It's probably going to bite you."

"ROBIN! Get it off me! Get! IT! OFF!"

"Oh, just open your eyes!"

She clenched her teeth in both fear and disgust as she quickly opened her eyes and made contact with Robin who had the biggest smile on his face. "Robin, I'm going to kill-" She suddenly stopped talking the moment she looked down at her chest. At that moment, Eddie couldn't help but feel envious. That same look that Claire gave him the moment he told her he loved her was the same way Lauren looked. The little heart on the gold chain was glimmering in the dim light of the flickering candle lights that surrounded them. She stared in awe as she lifted the charm.

"See, you need to learn to trust people more. I figured you'd like it. When I went back to the dorms a while ago, I remember my dad had that charm tucked away in a box he always kept on the dresser. I used the chain from the necklace I was wearing when my dad found me so...you know...happy birthday and...stuff." He said, grabbing his drink from the table.

After a moment of staring at the little heart, she looked at Robin who was looking away while he sipped on his drink. She put her hands on his shoulders and leaned her head in to hug him. Looking back to see if she liked his gift, he turned back towards her just as her head was close to his. Eddie smiled as soon as they both jerked back from one another from kissing. The wind that they both created from their sudden movements made some candles go out beside them.

"Am I wrong?!" Eddie said as Robin vacantly stared at the fan blade he kept scrubbing despite it being cleaned. She was still wearing that necklace this morning. Come to think of it, there hasn't been a day that he didn't see that tiny heart around her neck. "Do you think Lauren feels the same way about you not being good enough? I mean, you're a good guy and you're always together so..." Eddie was already screwing in the fan blades into the base.

"I don't know." He said, throwing the brittle brush on the table. He could see tiny fragments of metal fall off as it slid across the wooden table. "Look, if I'm being honest with you, man. If it was under different circumstances, sure. I would go for one of them. But, I dunno, it's like there's a piece of me missing. I dunno. But, I'll think about what you said though."

"Yeah, that's all I ask. Hate seeing you like this, man." There it is. That smile that he liked seeing on his friends face. Looks like Eddie's strategy worked.

"Whatever. Just screw this in so we can get this shit done."

While Eddie screwed in the rest of the blades, Robin stared at the workshop around him. Kenzie and that other guy finished installing the refurbished air purifier and were packing away the ladder. Another group of workers were welding a new brace to repair the ceiling that almost came down a couple days ago. Others were cleaning the walls or sweeping the floor. They all seemed to have the same expression. Most days it seemed like the only people to have any sort of emotion is Lauren, Erin, and Eddie. Sometimes Claire, but he rarely sees her around nowadays since the pregnancy so he's going off of memory. He looked at Kenzie and just thought of that night.

Every day since that night he's been thinking about it. The accidental kiss they shared was unexpected; what Eddie said was true. After that kiss he did see Lauren in a different light despite it being an accident. He only wanted to give his best friend something she'd probably like. Why are emotions so complicated? He wished he was a zombie like everyone else.

Robin and Eddie were one of the first to punch out that night. While they took off their coveralls in the change room, Robin noticed that Eddie still retained that perfect, slicked back hairstyle. He was sweating just like he was. He must have used a lot of grease or something to keep it looking the same. Robin could only imagine what he looked like. He knew what Lauren was going to say when they met later on tonight. Wait, today is shower day. Maybe he should see if the lineup is short enough.

"So, have you picked out a name yet?" Robin said after they left the workshop into the cemented hallway of the University.

"We were thinking James if it's a boy after Claire's uncle. But, I don't know if it's a girl. Never really thought about a girl's name. I'm gonna go see her after I grab her something to eat from the cafeteria. She's been getting these weird cravings. Bread and ketchup with celery is what she ate last night for dinner."

"Sounds delicious."

"If you're into that sort of thing. You wanna grab some food or something before I see her?" Eddie said.

"I would but I have to meet Lauren and Erin. Scavs found some old videos in the other parts of the campus so Lauren asked me to join her and Erin to watch them."

"So, planning to go after both of them, huh? You dog."

"Man, shut up. I was invited." Robin laughed and shook his head.

"You're lucky. If Claire wasn't busy, I would've said we would've gone with but--"

"Yeah, I know, bro. Don't worry about it." They both finally reached the exit of the building. "Just make sure that Claire doesn't boss you around too much." Robin said as he slipped off his backpack and took out his respirator.

"There's nothing more I'd like. I'll catch you around, my guy."

"See ya." Robin said as Eddie slapped him on his back. Soon, Eddie was lost in the crowds that flowed down the entrance foyer. Lost in a sea of grey looking people. While he unwrapped the nearly ruined respirator, he glanced at his watch. 5:48. Ah, damn. Well, maybe the shower line will be shorter after the movie. The scavs probably found another infomercial or a tv episode again so he shouldn't be there too long. Let's just hope Lauren doesn't say anything.



Slipping on his respirator, Robin turned and walked out into the sunlit fog along with all the others leaving the building. As he walked towards the law building, he could hear everyone coughing in their own masks. The fog wasn't as thick as it was this morning so he could make out the other people walking in the courtyard. Some had gas masks, some had simple respirators like him, and some of the more unfortunate either had a flimsy surgical mask on or nothing at all. The population of the University may have dwindled since the disappearances started happening but that didn't mean that supplies could keep up with the demand.

Suddenly, he then heard a woman yelling. He looked back to the source just as two guys ran past him towards the woman who was leaning down beside someone. The two men had leaned down beside this shadow the woman was crying over and quickly picked it up. They rushed it away into the fog back towards the atrium building he had just left. Another resident who was walking in the fog came up to the crying woman and grabbed her by the shoulders, pushing her along with the two men and the shadow. As they faded into the grey void, it sounded like her cries were bouncing off the campus walls around him. Echoing and filling his body with her pain.

He sighed and looked back to the direction he was walking.

That was a major reason why he didn't want to become too attached to either Lauren or Erin. What if that happens to them? He's seen too many people suddenly collapse in the fog and it only added to his fears that he already has about them disappearing. He couldn't think about it. He didn't want to think about it. But, at the back of his mind, Eddie's words kept bouncing around. Would being with someone actually help? Eddie seems to be doing alright. He didn't know him before he got with Claire so he couldn't quite compare his emotional state but he seems to be doing fine. Maybe he is right about Lauren or Erin. Who knows.

The moment he stepped in the lobby of the law building, he immediately spotted Erin through the small crowd. She was leaning up against a wall reading a small book. He recognized that short hairstyle of hers that's always slicked upwards. While he reached up to take off his mask, he quickly smelled his arm. Smells like sweat. Gross. He stared at Erin and studied her while he put his mask into his backpack. It looks like she had time to hit the showers. Lucky. Good thing Erin isn't as brash as Lauren is so he felt safe being around her in his gross state knowing she wouldn't say anything.

"Well, well, well. Looks like my prayers have been answered because the Angel of the University shows up. Did it hurt when you fell from the heavens, Loverboy?" Erin said just as she looked up from her book and spotted him walking towards her. She had that same, warm smile on her face while she put her book down. It looked like one of those small comic book things she's been reading as of late. He could tell by that stylized person on the front. That... Anna May person or whatever she called it.

"Loverboy? So, I'm Loverboy now, huh?" Robin responded.

"Well, why not? The Angel just doesn't cut it anymore and I think you need something more suited to you, don't you think?"

"Ah, well I dunno about that. I mean, I know I'm dashingy handsome but Loverboy handsome? I dunno about that." The moment he got close to her, he took off his backpack and set it on the ground and leaned up against the wall beside her.

"So, what he lacks in subtlety he makes up in confidence. Tell me, Loverboy, when you fell from the sky did it hurt?"

"Eh, I wouldn't believe what people say. I never actually fell from the sky, you know."

"That's not what I've been hearing. Come on, what was it like?"

"It's just rumours, Erin. But I'm not opposed to you thinking I'm some sort of divine being. Instead of Loverboy, I think 'Lord' or 'Master' would fit better."

"Oh my divine..." Erin scoffed as she leaned against the wall again and touched her shoulder against his.

"Or divine works, I'm alright with that." She laughed as she looked at him.

"So, Ren tells me you haven't told her about how you got to the university. So, what's the secret? You some kind of alien like Rampant or something?"

"Rampant? Who's that?"

“Some superhero from this manga I’ve been reading. She came from the sky like you.” She showed him the book she’s been reading. It had an Anna May girl wearing some kind of long cloak and a Teddy Bear mask. “So, Loverboy, are you an alien like Rampant?”

“Erin, they’re just rumours. I’m just a regular guy like everyone else. I don’t know where people got the idea that I fell from the sky.” He could feel her leaning into him more while she put the book into her jacket pocket.

“I dunno, Robin. I still think it’s an interesting story. I mean, think about it. The man that fell from the sky that made everyone fall in love with him. Sounds like a great plot for a story to me.”

“In a way, I guess. But, I don’t know about the loving part.”

“Well, it’s still going into the story.”

“Are you writing another story?” Robin asked, intrigued.

“I’m working on something. I’m thinking of basing it on my muse.”

“Muse? What’s that?” She gave a devilish look to him as she looked at him from her side. She almost looked like Lauren with that look.

“You’ll find out once I’m done.” He could feel himself blushing. In his peripheral vision, he saw her look at him after watching the people in the lobby. It looked like she was smelling him. He couldn’t help but feel subconscious so he tucked his hand in his pocket and slightly moved away from her. “You smell good. Are you wearing anything?”

“Really? Uh, no?”

“Oh. You just smell good.” She tilted her head towards him as they both waited. Strange. He thought she would’ve been repulsed by it.

“Where’s Lauren anyway? And here she gets mad at me for not being on time. Huh, just like-”

“Just like, what? Huh?” Lauren said, suddenly popping up beside Robin. “You got something to say, Loverboy?” As soon as Lauren came into view, Erin immediately pulled away from him.

“Oh, there you are.” Robin replied. “Yeah, I do. What’s with the Loverboy thing? Is that a thing now?”

“What? I can’t call you Loverboy? Is that it? Erin can call you that but I can’t?”

“No, I mean, you two never called me that before. What is this? What’s going on?”

“What am I supposed to call you then, huh? Erin calls you Loverboy. What do you call me? Lauren.” She said in a low voice.

“Yeah, so? You just call me Robin. You don’t bother to call me Rob or something fun like other people do. And that’s boring!”

“W-what? I just called you Loverboy!”

“No, Erin called me Loverboy! You just stole what she said!” His voice started to get louder.

“I told her to call you that! Right? I told you to call him that?” Her voice started to louder as well. “Yeah, see?! I told her to call you that!” Lauren said before Erin could rebuttal.

“She didn’t even say anything! Why you gotta lie like that to-”

“Alright! Lovebirds, knock it off!” Erin said, holding out her hands in between both of them. “Oh, you two. You’re so cute.”

“Hear that? She called you cute. You like being called cute, don’t you, Loverboy? Isn’t he just cute?” Lauren said with that devilish grin.

“Oh, so cute. Look at him, getting all flustered.” Erin said joining in with Lauren.

“Can we just go inside?” Robin sighed, putting his hands on his head. “What are they even playing? Is it some kind of infomercial or something like last time?”

“I think it’s an actual movie. An action movie or something.” Erin said as they all followed the rest of the small crowd towards the lecture halls. There must be a lot of people since the chatter was getting louder.

The lecture room they walked into was already full of people. The front of the room had a large sheet hanging from the ceiling with one of those old projectors sitting in the middle of the room. Looks like the movie was already running.

"I see a couple seats over there." Erin said, pointing towards an empty desk near the middle of the hall.

"All this...and still no popcorn. I'm still mad at you about that..." Robin said quietly as he followed the group towards their seat.

"Oh, just shut up, you." Lauren said.

He could still feel the pain in his hand long after they had said goodnight to Erin. He sat at his desk in his room and rubbed the part of his hand that Lauren squeezed. Holding the pen in his hand was kind of hard. The middle of his hand was red long after Lauren finally let go. Or maybe it was from the hot water. It was a nice surprise to shower in hot water for a change but not that hot.

Looking up from her book she saw that Robin kept rubbing his hand. "What's up with your hand?"

"You know, you've got one helluva grip for someone so tiny."

"Hey, it's not my fault. I didn't know that movie was going to be scary. Why do you think I'm in your room?" She did have a point. He would never admit it but he was happy that she was with him.

"Meh, it wasn't that bad." He nonchalantly said.

"Yeah, ok. So, that shaking I felt in your hand while that guy was chasing that girl with a chainsaw at the end of the movie was you not being scared?"

"Nah, you must be thinking of Erin. I was...it was cold, alright?"

"Yeah, cold my ass. Bet you'd be jumping at every noise if I wasn't here." She went back to reading her book.

"Yeah, says the girl who scared everyone in the hall by screaming."

"Hey, just trying to liven up the movie." She retorted as he went back to working on his writing. She could see it in his body language. He was avoiding eye contact with her and was fidgeting a bit. He was scared but he'd never admit that he was. What is up with guys and that whole macho persona they put on? It'd be easier for everyone if they were just to say what they're feeling. "I feel bad for Erin though. She's probably wiggling out right now."

"Well, why didn't she join us?"

"She has to get up in the morning for work. She's been late four times this week so her boss isn't too happy with her right now. Plus, she's surrounded by people in the gym so she's gonna be fine. She's a lot braver than I- I mean, she'll be fine."

He glanced back at her and smiled while he worked on his writing lesson. He caught her smiling at him over the book she was reading.

"Did you know that space starts at around 100 kilometres above the ground?" Lauren said as she lay in Robin's bed with a science book in her hand. "And that they call it the Von Karman line. I wonder what it's like up there? I wonder what Tarterus looks like?"

"Probably just a giant, grey ball."

"Oh, I envy you, Robin. Getting to see space with your very own eyes."

"I wouldn't believe what everyone says. People's imaginations are far too active here."

"Speaking of which, I'm still waiting for you to tell me how you actually got to the University. I told you how I got here so why don't you tell me?"

"Got here? You were born here so I wouldn't really count that as you getting here."

"Yeah, and you know that because I told you how I got here. This is a give and receive situation here." He sighed and kept rubbing his hand. Maybe he should give up trying to work on his writing since his hand was bothering him. "Come on, spill it."

He turned in his chair and looked at her. The candle beside her made it look like her golden hair was glowing. Maybe the fog was leaking in somewhere. Or, maybe he was just tired. It is getting pretty late since that movie did run for quite a while. She swung her legs from his bed and stared at him.

"Why this sudden interest?" He asked as they both stared at each other

“What? I can’t be interested in my friend? Ooh, the mysterious stranger from space. Don’t want to spill the secrets of the galactic federation? Is that it?”

“No, it’s not that. I just...it’s just old news. I can’t tell you how many times I had to tell people I’m not some angel that fell from the heavens.”

“Well, come on then. You already know about my family. Hell, you even know what part of the university I was born in. So come on. Why the secrecy? I thought we told each other everything?” He set down the pen and closed the notebook he was practicing writing in. “Unless what Erin said is true and that you are some kind of alien.”

“Ok, fine. But I don’t know what to tell you. Honestly, I don’t remember much.” He got up and looked out the small office window he had beside his bed. He looked up into the sky but couldn’t see anything. The black void that was on the other side of the small window only reflected himself in the light of the dim candle. “I’m sure you heard how I was the only one to ever be found out there, right?”

“How could I not? You were the talk of the University back then. The person who fell from the sky; the Angel of the University.”

“Well, I don’t know about the falling from the sky and angel part. But, that’s basically it.” She furrowed her brows in confusion. “I don’t know where I came from.”

“What do you mean that’s it? Did you fall from the sky or not?”

“I mean, maybe I did. I don’t know.” He sighed and leaned against the small dresser beside him and stared at the candle burning beside Lauren. “All I remember is looking up at a clear patch in the sky whenever I was conscious. I kept blacking out. During all that time I kept hearing someone. A woman. It sounded like the ocean was talking to me. I remember turning my head and looking out into the waves.”

The distant clouds near the water were dark and slight flashes of thunder travelled through the darkness like a strobe light. The clouds above were orange and bright from the setting sun. The ocean was calm; only slight waves moved up and down and created strips of light from the clouds above. He could hear it in the water. The woman's voice was quiet; almost inaudible. While he laid on his back, he heard the woman speak directly into his ear. He swore he could feel the breath from her mouth tickle his ear.

“Awaken...” She spoke. He moved his head slowly to the direction of the voice and saw an intense white light shining on him. Like someone was shining a flashlight on his face. He closed his eyes at the sudden burst of light and slowly opened them back up again. Only, the light had disappeared the moment he shut his eyes. He then saw the person who would become his dad staring at him. He couldn’t quite see what he looked like due to his fading vision. All he saw was a silhouette of a man with long hair.

“Then, my dad picked me up from the ground and carried me to his room in the dorms. I don’t remember much other than that. My dad said he found me with a giant cut on my head but I don’t think that’s true.”

“What do you mean? You might’ve been out for a while so it could have healed in the meantime.”

“No, I don’t think so. I remember my dad telling me I woke up exactly one day later. My head was fine so he might’ve made that part up to. He liked to lie a lot.”

“You know, I think I remember seeing you. You were in the dorms, right? Close to the end of Sun’s Dawn if I remember correctly. That was when you literally fell for me, right?” Lauren said with a sly smile and slight chuckle.

“Ah well...maybe. I was pretty out of it for a while. Guess you were giving me headaches even back then.” Robin said with a laugh.

“Rude! I prefer to think of it as making your head spin.” They both laughed as Robin looked away from her to the floor.

“Sure. Whatever you say.”

“Well, what about before that? You don’t remember anything? Like falling or something?”

“I dunno, I couldn’t tell you. My dad never really did tell me how he found me exactly. I don’t know if he made up the part about me falling from the sky and having a cut on my head. The only thing I had that told him who I was that necklace I was holding.” He said pointing to his locket on a shelf beside his bed. “It had the name ‘Robin’ on it, so I guess that was my name before whatever happened to me.”

Curious, Lauren set down the science book beside her and picked up the necklace. It was a small locket that was missing a chain. Guess this is where the chain for her necklace that he gave her was from. It was oval shaped with the name ‘Robin’ inscribed on the back. There was faded text underneath it but it was hard to see what it said.

“Why don’t you wear this? It looks nice.” She asked him while she ran her fingers the locket.

“I’m not really one for jewellery. Plus, if anyone saw it at work, they’d probably melt it down to make a fan blade or something.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. Hm, well your story is a lot better than mine. I guess you’re not an alien, huh? Damn, I guess I owe Erin my...manga...” She slowly trailed off as she watched him. She saw something in him change. He could feel that same heartache slowly rise in his chest.

“The only guy who could tell you who I am is lying out there. Buried underneath a pile of dirt.” He got up from the desk and looked back out into the void. In the darkness, he could see a small group of people walking and carrying torches. They were holding what looked like a big box followed by a person who looked like they were being comforted by others. He’s seen that before. That same box was what he was carrying the day he had to bury him.

“You’ve got to think. Even if I didn’t fall from the sky that would mean that I was just left there. Alone. What kind of bastard must I have been to just be...dumped like that.” It’s as if though the more she stared at him, the more she could feel the way he was feeling at that moment.

“I know Keith wasn’t my real dad but...he brought me in. Accepted me. He made me feel like I wasn’t just tossed garbage. How bad could I have been back then for someone to just...leave me there.” His voice was cracking and he kept clearing his throat. His hands were shaking and he kept wiping his face while he watched the burial session walk into the darkness. “Keith was...you know, he was a good guy and...he-...”

She gently grabbed his shaking hand and caressed his shoulder. Throughout her body she felt a shiver run through her the moment she touched him. Her entire body told her to let him go, but she couldn’t help but hold on to him. Fighting against her instincts, she gently put her head on his back and listened to his breathing.

“Robin. This has been bothering you for a while, hasn’t it?” He didn’t respond. Soon, the torches faded off into the darkness and disappeared. “I’m truly sorry for you. I know how deep it hurts. But you’ve got to know that you have people here now who care about you. Care about you a lot.” She moved her hand down to his arm and gently squeezed him. She could feel him shaking. “Eddie. Claire. Erin. Especially Erin. You should hear the things she says about you whenever we talk about you. There’s a reason why she called you Loverboy.” She laughed slightly trying to make him feel a bit better. Yet, she could still feel that pain radiating from him. “And...I care about you. I care about you a lot. Truth be told, you’re the only reason why I bother getting up in the morning. The only person I look forward to seeing every day. If it hadn’t been for you...I think I would’ve broken a long time ago when I lost my family.” She gently moved her hands down to his sides and hugged him from behind. “Robin, please don’t cry...I’m here for you.”

The candle beside them started to flicker as the wax was slowly becoming a stump. He could see tiny droplets of water on the glass he was staring at. He didn’t notice it was raining until now. At that moment, the world around him just became clear. As though a filter just lifted from everything clearing the way for all these sights, sounds, and smells. He could smell the shampoo that she uses from her shower.

“I love you.” She softly said in a barely audible whisper. He cupped her hand on his chest. Her hands felt warmer than usual.

The thoughts of his dad; Of the sky that he saw that day and the sounds of the ocean beside him filled his mind. He could still remember the smell of the ocean. Moist, yet fresh and clear. He could still hear his voice as he carried him towards the University in his arms.

“Just hold on, son. It’s going to be okay. I got you...I got you...” His voice was calming and smooth. He heard that same tone of voice in Lauren’s. Her arms around him felt like a warm embrace that finally told him that things were going to be alright. That things are not as bad as they seem. That there was still some good in this world. There were people that cared for him like Eddie, Claire, and Erin.

And Lauren.

He turned around and looked down at her. She never let him go. He put his hand on her cheek and gently lifted her head. She had tears in her eyes. The tears in her blue eyes made the flickering candle beside them dance among the mini oceans he stared into. Her lips were soft. He could taste the perfume she put on afterwards. A nice, sweet blend of berries. It was his favourite scent that she had. As they both let each other go he could feel his cheeks burning, just as it did the night he gave her that charm. She moved her hands from his sides to his cheeks. He noticed the glint of the golden heart still on her chest.

The bed felt softer than it ever did before. The wind from the movement they made caused the candle to flicker one last time before it finally blew out. The silence in the room overcame both of them as the air purifier finally gave out.

“I got you...I got you...” Her voice was smooth.