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Story 1 -- [(The Painting) by Emma and Ashly]

We were the people who walked in darkness. One could barely see fifty feet in front of them because of the dark, polluted air; it was like living deep underwater with only a few rays of sun daring to venture into the depth of the land. The land that I called home.

Great-grandmother had seen the days when the sky wasn't a murky grey, and according to her the sky used to be *blue*. "A bright and laughing cerulean," as she had put it.

Blue seems a rather shocking color to fill such a large expanse of sky, I thought, my cheeks dimpling into a grin, imagining it.

I lifted my gaze to survey the grey, hazy blanket looming over the city. I strained my eyes and managed to catch a glimpse of the sun; a blot of pigmented pink over the horizon. I sighed softly, once again focusing on my path. It had always been like this, at least in my time.

I worked my way home, trying to hum enthusiastically despite everything. Stopping by the door, I glanced downward, studying the ground until I found my sister's precious shoe print half the size of my hand, my mother's right next to hers. I smiled and carefully put my own print down next to theirs.

I ran up the front ramp and closed my eyes as a bright, blue beam of light from the door scanned me. Satisfied, the door's lock clicked free.

"Mom! Are you home?" I yelled as I walked in, craning my neck to see if she was in the kitchen. Silence. She was still at work, apparently. My little sister would be playing in the family room with her babysitter, and great-grandmother would be in the back bedroom. Her caregiver usually

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left about an hour ago, so I could go talk to her. After setting down my things from training on the kitchen table, I padded down the hallway to her room.

Opening her door tentatively, I peeked through the crack to see if she was asleep. She was. I crept in anyway and sat down in her chair. Great-grandmother's eyes were closed, and her breathing was light and shallow. In her right hand she clasped the note I had left for her that morning. I bent over her and kissed her faded cheek, then turned to leave.

I gave a sharp intake of breath when I saw the painting on the opposite side of her room. Mother had been going through great-grandmother's old things, and pulling out old keepsakes to help great-grandmother's memory. A long time ago Mother had told me that great-grandmother painted, but I never thought much of it. In training we had a challenge where we had to make a painting of a story. I had spent hours on mine, trying my best to get the simulation and timing perfect. Painting was an art that required the utmost skill to wield, and this painting was made by a master.

The background was covered with a clear blue. A bright and laughing cerulean. I blinked as I recognized the implication. A sky. The way it was when great-grandmother was young. I felt as if I was standing in of a lush green field gazing upwards toward the expanse. There was no fog to be seen. The sun--the sun was golden! I had never seen so much light at one time, and the brilliance almost hurt me. Our sun now was much larger, darker, and a different color entirely. Snowy, billowing clouds passed by, easily drifting along without a care. The sun began to sink slowly, and the light dimmed. Clouds began to cluster into sparse broken masses. The sun's scattered beams broke through and transformed the sky into a sea of amber, maroon, fuschia, and gold. As the pigments smudged into one another, the lines of white cloud snaked through, gently

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blurring the edges. The hues morphed into an intense blood red and the clouds were rimmed in crimson flame. The sun was being slowly swallowed up by an invisible beast below the horizon. I watched in silence, desperately willing the light to stay, as the sun gave a last burst of light before it disappeared. The remnant of color that still hung in the air faded away.

Darkness.

A sense of loss washed over me. The light was gone. But, as I looked closer, the tiniest of diamonds began to peek out. An enchanting moon was rising, illumined in a soft, winsome glow. At the zenith of its arc, it seemed to look down at me fondly, as a mother to her child. She was beckoning me. Beckoning for me to become part of beauty the way it was created to be.

The scene faded and I stood silently, a tear trickling down my cheek. Fumbling for the chair again, I sat down heavily and lay my head down on great-grandmother's bed, burying my crumpled face into the sheets.

How could we have ruined such a beautiful thing?

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Story 2 // (Jane Maree)

Tiny ice-laced puddles spread across the gravel of the road, filling in the hollows and dips with frozen reflections of the purple sky. I cross the street in a series of bounds, avoiding the icy patches like a game of hopscotch. My breath puffs into my face in a white cloud as I reach the opposite side and dart down a side street.

There's no one around to disturb the stillness—hardly ever is in this sector—but there's a tingling in the air, and it's not just from the cold.

I rub my icicle of a nose and glance upward to the drifting clouds. The writhing mass of purplish-grey drapes down over the tops of the buildings like a blanket. An unfairly *cold* blanket.

Goosebumps trail down my arms, and I look down again just in time to leap another puddle in my path.

As I jump, a flash of brilliance is reflected below me and I flinch mid-air. My feet miss the ground somehow and I hit it with my knees, grinding into the gravel like a cheese grater. *Dang* it. I bite down a curse and shove to my feet again, bending to survey my knees.

Shards of stone speckle my shins but I pick the pieces out carefully. Ha, take that. The cheese grates the grater instead of the grater grating the cheese.

I wipe a trickle of blood off my knee and grimace. Or maybe not.

Stupid metaphor anyway.

I straighten and twist back to the puddle. What *was* that flash of colour? There's no sign of anything now: just the normal clouds. I lean to one side to check from another angle. Yep. Still nothing.

The back of my neck prickles and I narrow my eyes. There *was* something there. I look upward, but there's nothing unusual there either.

Just some clouds. A bit of cloud. And...maybe even a couple of clouds. Who would've guessed.

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I rub my palms down my goose-bumped arms and keep staring upward. The clouds swirl like they're in the middle of one of those weird dances that involve a lot of awkward swaying. Pretty much exactly what I was doing at my school dance that one time I actually went.

I clear my throat and firmly move my thoughts onto a different topic. Right. Colourful flash. Gotcha.

Maybe there's something above the clouds, peeking through the dirty mass of candy floss. My brow furrows, and a quiver goes down my spine.

The clouds are low today. Low enough that maybe, just *maybe*, I could see over the tops if I can just get high enough. Another flash of colour twinkles in the corner of my eye, reflecting off the mirror puddles. But still no sign of anything but clouds overhead when I check.

I steps sideways, and my bare foot lands with an icy splash; tingles scrape up my leg like needles and I jerk away. Clouds take me, but I've had it with this city and all its deceptive frozen puddles.

I'm going to find out what's above these clouds, and a frozen foot isn't going to stop me. I wriggle my toes just to be sure that they're still in working order before bounding down the street again in a more careful hopscotch pattern.

Left, right, dodge that evil looking puddle, and—score! I make a wobbling landing on the far side of a puddle beside a rust bitten fire escape. It screams like a demented goose when I test the first step, but it doesn't collapse right away.

Always look for the perks.

I brave the next step and it squawks back at me like an even bigger goose. As I mount the stairs, the clouds' dance seems to pick up. Adding a bit of enthusiastic hip wiggling in with the swaying. The grey-purple deepens into a blotchy bruise.

Five steps later, my head is in the clouds. Literally. The bruise oozes into a dirty yellow colour as I fumble my way up the screaming-goose stairs.

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On second thoughts, they sound more like cats. Screaming cats. That I'm walking on. I wince in sympathy for the metaphorical cats, and then stumble onto the open rooftop.

I don't get a chance to catch my breath in awe or anything so dramatically dramatic before I'm blinded by a red explosion across my vision. I reel backward, miss the step, and fall down the stairs.

I get to the first turn-back before my graceful tumble is brought to an abrupt and literal *screeching* halt. I groan almost as loudly as the stairs as I haul myself to my feet. A glowing red spot hovers in front of me, and I scrub my hand over my eyes.

Oh-kay. I think my retinas are on fire.

My fingers clench around the handrail and I glare upward through the clouds. Either something is burning up there, or else...something is burning. Either way, I'm going to find out what it is.

I stomp my way back up the stairs—carefully, so I don't stomp my foot through one of the rusted steps—but pause just beneath the surface of the clouds. I take a deep breath, choke on the clouds, almost fall down the stairs again, then step forward into the brilliant red furnace.

The sky is red, the tops of the clouds are red, and I'm probably an artwork of the exact same colour, too. I don't even like red. I shield my face with my hands, squinting against the piercing rays of scarlet that are trying to roast my eyeballs like frog eggs. Not that I've ever eaten roasted frog eggs myself, but I imagine they'd be kind of like my eyes are right now.

The glow seems to fade a little, and I peek out between my fingers, finally making out the source of the light.

There's a beetroot in the sky.

A tiny, red-and-purple, *flaming* beetroot.

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I blink, stare, and blink again. The tops of the clouds spread out in front of me like a second storey earth, glowing with red all the way to the horizon. Strands of gold spread out from the beetroot sun, like melted cheese on a pizza, stretching all the way around the horizon.

Wowzers. This is cool.

I shuffle forward a few steps, the clouds swirling about my ankles in rippling red folds. Patterns of the deep purple drift up and curl through the red, highlighting the dips and folds in the surface of the cloud land.

The burning beetroot dips closer to the edge of the world, as if it's getting tired of flying. Honestly, I don't blame it. I'd get tired of flying pretty quickly too. Particularly if I was a beetroot.

Another blink, and the red deepens, merging with purple and gold in a fruit salad of colour. Cold tingles in my fingertips, yet it's warmer here than I've ever felt beneath the lousy 'blanket' of cloud. Guess that happens when there's a flaming beetroot about to crash-land into some unfortunate city out of sight.

The lower it sags, the faster it seems to go. Half the beetroot crashes beneath the clouds and the remaining half flares a brighter gold.

I'm ninety-nine percent sure that my eyes are fried. I squeeze them shut for a moment and massage my fingers into them. Ye-ouch.

When I look back again, the rim of the beetroot is glowing with a last explosion of flames. Then in a breath, it's gone. Kaboom. Squashed a city. Poor them.

I kick a swirling piece of cloud and it twirls away from me, sinking into the flat expanse of bleeding orange and red. The red fades into maroon, then purple, then slowly toward grey and I let out a long breath.

The familiar white mist drifts out in front of my face, and a hoard of goosebumps take up residence on my arms. I turn my back and feel my way toward the stairs again.

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A flaming beetroot crashing into the earth. Now, *that's* something you don't see every day.