

Artist Statement

What do you expect to get from this? That was the first thing I was asked when I presented my big chunky story to my advisor. I pondered the question and came up short. I didn't have an answer. There I was, with this big story and with no idea why I was so reluctant to do this. To pursue this project. *What did I expect to gain from this?* That question has haunted me through my major. It remains in the back of my mind, repeating itself, over and over. So, I go back to the reason why I started all this.

They say writing is a career for the poor. It's a belief that every writer has ingrained in their mind so profoundly that some don't even dare to try. I must admit, I also believed the same. Being afraid of following a path of writing was one of the main reasons why I never dared to consider myself a writer. Always denying it, always blinding myself, *it's a hobby*, I told myself first, writing little things here and there, filling my phone up with notes. Dreaming about worlds that did not exist while professors gave super long and boring themes that I did not care about. *It's just a hobby*. I can't pinpoint when exactly did I start considering it seriously, when did I dare to tell myself; *and what if I end up poor?* But at some point, maybe after seeing my close friends drop their majors because it was not something they wanted to do, I started to take it seriously. I stopped caring about what others might say and I just did it in silence.

The Train is not my first fiction story, but it's one of the first that popped out of my mind so suddenly and violently that I couldn't do more than write it down. I always gravitated towards fiction, since I was a child, and even when I couldn't read. I picked up books that I couldn't quite read (I was too young) but I always pretended to anyway. Until I was able to read them and then no force could stop me from the ravishing hunger that resided in me. I devoured fiction books as if they were snacks. A little story here, another story there, *Divergent*, *Percy Jackson*, *Harry*

Potter, Shadowhunters, and so on and on. I think I started leaning toward apocalyptic fiction after watching and reading a ton of stories about it; *The 100*, *The Last of Us*, *The Gone Series*. I knew when I started accepting that writing was just something that was part of me that I was meant to write sci-fi and fiction. I gravitated toward these genres, I enjoyed writing fiction, and I enjoyed writing fictional worlds. I wondered what would happen to a person if they found themselves in these worlds. What kind of person would they become? How would that change them? Of course, the epitome of sci-fi is zombies. We have quite a variety of them in the present, so of course, as a sci-fi lover, why not write a zombie story? But I knew that if I wanted to write a story about zombies, I had to deviate from the usual zombies. In that instance, I must admit that the pandemic helped a lot with that. *The Train* is a story that was born in the middle of the pandemic. It's about a world claimed by nature, where zombies are the ghosts of the people who used to roam freely, where the world for once decided to fight us back. Zombies and nature, fusing together. Now let's add a group of friends into that kind of world and see how they would react to these changes. What kind of closeness can blossom from surviving in this world, what kind of choices can strengthen or weaken this kind of bond? Friendship and betrayal go hand in hand, but in a world where nature is trying to kill you there is nothing else but trust. Nathan and Ranger are constantly dancing around this delicate line. *The Train* toys with this idea, it pushes its characters to make hard choices and then endure the consequences of those choices.

I say it so simply, but the truth is that this story had been cooking slowly in the back of my mind for a while now. *The Train* is a set of things and life experiences that just happened to come at the right moment. What I intended was to create a story that dwelled on the concept of what would happen to the world if we weren't here. If nature suddenly decided it was too tired of us. If then, the animals and nature fused and decided for once, to fight back. What kind of

changes would the world go through? How would that affect us? Then, what would happen to a group of friends trying to survive in a world like this? I wanted to indulge in the friendship and belonging of the people who happened to survive in a life like this, in their hopes, in their dreams. I wanted to write about what it means to become part of a family, and what happens when that family is taken away from you. How would the people left behind react to that? What kind of choices would they have to make? How would that change them? What would happen if you had to leave that family behind? *But why?* My advisor asked me the same thing, *why write a story so sad? Why does it end like it does?* I guess because that's what happens in real life, as you grow older you realize that friends are always meant to be left behind, at some point in our lives, that's how it's meant to be, it is just... part of the cycle. You grow up, and you leave things behind. Friends are one of them. The very few that stay all the way to your adulthood will, inevitably, be less than the fingers you have in your hand. *The Train* is a story about what happens to the memories of those who are left behind. A story about maturity, friendship and betrayal. A story that explains what happens when you outgrow those friends.

My odyssey was not writing a 50-page project, it was fitting a long 70-something draft into a 50-page story. Make it interesting enough, understandable enough, and hope it explained all I wanted to say. This version of *The Train* is different from my old one, here we see the conflict between two friends who differ in their ideas, two friends suffering the consequences of their choices, and the endless debate about what is best. Is leaving everything behind the best path? Or the best path is just to ignore all of it, and stay in your comfort zone? Is it really that bad to refuse change? What kind of story and life do we really want?

The Train is a story about a found family that is forced to leave the comfort of their home to try and find a better life. It is a story about the world healing itself, and the sad reality of trying to

survive in a world where the problem is humans themselves. A world where we are forced to make choices we don't want to take, to leave behind our comfort zone with nothing more than hope and a distant dream of finding something, *anything* better. *The Train* is a story for my younger self, it's a story about grief, about friendship, about a found family, and about leaving all of that behind. *The Train* is a story about maturing. It's a story about a sci-fi world with real-life problems that sometimes people don't want to talk about. When I think about it, I think this story is similar to *The Great Gatsby*. Yes, it ends in a tragedy, but the point of that story is not the ending, but the path of the narrator towards that ending. It's been said in scholarly articles that *The Great Gatsby* is an analogy of the American Dream, and how that's a blatant lie told to people so they believe there is a goal to be reached in life. When I think about it, I think *The Train* is very similar. It's about human greed, greed that led the world to rebel against them. But in the story, I give you two mindsets, Ranger's and Nathan's. One that pushes you to get out of your comfort zone, to leave your home, the place you grew up in, and try to achieve something better. And another one that is constantly refusing this change, one that makes you question if leaving everything behind is the best option.

So, I go back to my question, the same question I asked myself over and over as I re-wrote this project which has been with me for years. *What did I expect to gain from this?* And the answer? *I don't know*. I write sci-fi fiction because I believe the world is too rotten to write about it. Because if I wanted to know about the real world, all I had to do was poke my head out the window and there is my real world. *And yet*, said my advisor, *The Train* is about real-life problems. I'm such a hypocrite. I tried to change the concept of the story several times, but the truth is that then there would be no story. *The Train* is a story about a found family, and what it means to leave that family behind. I cannot change that without destroying this story. But that's

not the point of the story, the point is the path, the things they experienced. What it means to be loved, and what it means to let go of that love.

Writing down this story helped me realize a lot of things about myself. It made me realize how hard it can be to put into words such a massive world. It made me realize how all the plans we might have for one story sometimes just don't work and you have to leave them behind. But more importantly, I think writing down this story made me more aware of who I am, and what it means to have a concept in mind, and the true effort it takes to put it into words. I told my advisor I started my major with the idea that I would somehow be taught the secrets of writing. He laughed, I bet you laughed as well, I know I do now. Two years forward I look back and realize how naïve I was. If there was something I learned in these two years, is that there are no secrets. There is no secret formula to produce best-selling works, to write a story. There are steps, yes, there is advice, yes. But in the end, it's just you and a blank page before you. No one can tell you how to write a story, you just do it. You don't need to be talented to do it, it may be a factor but not a need, in the end, the ones who make it are not the most talented, but the ones who like us, in this moment of our paths and despite everything, have persevered all the way to the end. The ones that keep going, that kept pushing, that despite everything kept learning and growing. The ones that, despite everything, kept writing.

Life and writing are just a set of choices to be made. You take them, you repent them, you accept them, and despite everything, you keep going. With the hope that someday in a faraway future, it all may be worth something.

One

“Bones”

In a world of despair, I was not the beacon of hope. I've never been, and I'd never would. But I pretended I was for their sake. For me and our future selves. Not truly knowing how it would all end. I sometimes wonder what would've happened if I only knew the ending. Would I have made different choices? Would I have the courage to change something? Would I still be the same person? I wonder...

For the first time in years, the world was still and silent, expectant under the weight of our grief. Not even the ancient wolves of Exspiravit dared to howl that night. The only sound that filled the air was the soft and steady crackling of the flames beneath our eyes, slowly licking away at the remnants of our old life. Steadily and wildly mocking us in an enticing dance. No one dared to say a word. Not that I expected them to, either. *We*, the survivors of this tragedy, shivered in silence, underneath the dark and spotless starry sky, bathed only by the soft glow of the bonfire. We remained, and like the other times before this, we grieved.

“What does it mean to survive in a world like this?” It was the question I asked my brother a long time ago. In the very beginning of the downfall of this world. *What did he say?* Sparrow looked me deep in the eyes and replied. *“You will understand one day.”* That was six years ago. Now, Sparrow and Elijah are gone, and the answer to that question remained a mystery to me. He never gave me a clear answer. All this time, the question pondered in my mind, whispering softly in my ear. *What does it mean to survive in a world like this?*

“I don't think I understand.” The words blurted from my lips without even wanting them to. The kid looked at me, his pale gray eyes slowly taking me in. I stood from the old log I had

settled in and walked slowly to the bonfire. As if the flames would whisper and answer my questions. *They didn't*, and I just stood there, gazing like I was slowly losing it.

How long and at what cost would we be able to keep doing this? That's difficult to tell. Since we left our home, we've constantly found ourselves at loss, our sense of belonging gone. *Why did we even start this journey? What did we hope to get from this?* We've survived well enough in these six years. *Why only us?* I wondered. We never really got an answer to that question. All we knew was that it was us and only *us*. *Why? How?* We've come to learn that we just didn't know, and we probably never would either. But again, *did it matter?* We were alive and they, the rest of humanity, were not. *What else was there to tell?*

You learn a lot during six years, a lot of things we probably wouldn't be able to. If the world didn't fall apart. If we hadn't made so many mistakes... We truly were the *only* survivors in Exspiravit. The virus claimed all human beings except us. And here we were, the remnants of this tragedy. *Why?* Exspiravit was the city of change, it was supposed to change the whole world. And it did change it, just... not in the way we all expected it. Instead of becoming an example of human-nature harmony, Exspiravit turned against us and claimed the lives of the humans meant to keep safe; the wild nature the founders of the city worked so hard to preserve betrayed us. And despite the raging chaos, *we remained*, untouched in our crystal ball, pristine and pure to the horrors of this brand-new world... for six long years.

In the middle of this chaos... we lost it all, our *friends*, our *names*, our *family*, our *home*. And over and over again, I kept wondering, *why are we still here? What sort of story am I supposed to tell?* Six years we have survived; we've looked up at the stars and marveled at their renewed beauty, free of pollution, clear and plain like the forests of Exspiravit. Because purging

us (the *humans*) did that, renew the world to its pristine beauty, changed Exspiravit for the better. *How are we supposed to deal with that?*

We, the survivors of this fate, explored the abandoned ruins of a ghost city that didn't *want* us here, with curiosity and marvel. Now that we could do was look at it all with a sense of melancholy and grief. Lost and scared. But it wasn't always like this. For a few decades after its founding, Exspiravit worked as the first self-sustainable city in the world. The perfect evidence that humanity and nature could co-exist in harmony. A perfect example of a perfect utopia. *Did that matter now?* No, it didn't. What did we have in a world like this? Nothing. Just us and a dream. But isn't that always the objective? A dream, a goal. Something that showed the perfect accomplishment of all our efforts.

Taking the Kid to the Train fulfilled that goal. But to do that we had to leave *everything* behind. Exspiravit wasn't our home anymore, and our dream was broken. Without Paris and Aurora, without Sparrow and Elijah. *Did it even matter without them?* There was nothing left of the old vestiges of humanity; all that was left was only... *us*.

Now, instead of cars and the soft murmur of people in the background, all that filled the cold night air was the low tempo of growls and snarls roaming the darkness of the empty streets. The faraway telltale of dragging feet and shrugging vegetation. The soft and steady, *tack, tack, tack* of a Nightmare making its way through the city. Because that's all that was left of humanity now. *The Nightmares*, the monsters that roamed this world. The humans we once were, now the monsters that rose in the Awakening. We kept asking ourselves, *could it be?* That the human that once was, could still be hiding somewhere inside their unfocused white eyes? Beneath their bloody teeth and tethered bodies? The monsters that dominated the empty streets of Exspiravit,

that roamed the new wildland. And *we*, the humans, the survivors, *what made us different from them? What was our purpose in all of this?*

Under the gloom of the moon, we did not sleep. The Nightmares roamed and *we*, the parasites of this new world, remained awake and alert, shifting uneasily in place, grief-stricken and shocked, looking carefully and nervously at the close woods that now surrounded the whole city. Shivering every time, the wolves lurking in the shadows of the forest howled. Staring but never showing themselves. In this cluster of space we found, on this grieving night, we remained alert. Afraid but alive, broken but breathing, wondering. *How had our choices led us to this moment?*

“Ranger?” The kid’s curious voice asked.

I hesitated, wondering if I should reply to him or ignore him. Everyone was asleep in their tents, and I was there. With the poor excuse of keeping guard, when the truth was that no one would be able to sleep at all. Not after what happened to Paris and Aurora, not after our hopes and dreams had been just shattered in front of our eyes. Placing the blame on an innocent child was easier than having to assume the consequences of our choices. But... *could we really be blamed?* When this child appeared out of the woods like a reenacted messiah, professing sweet words that promised a far away and dreamful future –something that in this world is a lot to ask— in exchange for one simple favor. *How could we resist such temptation?*

As far as we knew, we were the only survivors in Exspiravit, how did we expect to react to the sudden realization that there were other survivors out there? And we, like the stupid humans we were, fell for his lies faster than Goliath did with David's rock. That fateful day, still and frozen under the kid’s cold gray eyes and clutching an old radio with the kid’s father’s words

resonating like a faraway echo over the static noise –promising a life that would never be— still and uneasy at the new proposition still lingering in the tense air between us. Because yes, leaving Exspiravit was part of our plan. *Yes*, leaving Exspiravit was always our goal, the true purpose of leaving behind our home and everything we knew. This new opportunity that dangled in the air in front of us like a juicy steak was not what we were expecting, and yet we couldn't help but jump greedily after it. *It's all part of growing up, isn't it?*

“What?” I ended up replying.

“Is Ranger your real name?” he asked with curiosity.

My body tensed at his question, clenching my fist at my sides, I answered, “If you don't tell us your name, I don't trust you with mine.” He seemed confused by the bitterness in my tone.

“You are angry.”

“Why don't you tell us your name?” I sneered. In the darkness the flames cracked, spurting sparks of light in the air. I didn't reply to him, and he didn't either. *So, what else is there to say?* Through the crackling of the flames, I recalled Thess gaze that afternoon, she had taken my hand between hers, pushed my head on her shoulder and whispered, *“It's not your fault.”* But I didn't believe her, she kept looking at me, with sad and melancholic eyes, desperately trying to reach the person within me that she loved. I hoped she found her, but I knew deep inside of me, that a part of that person died with Paris and Aurora. A part of the old Ranger laid drowned at the bottom of the lake, along with the Nightmares that had claimed their lives.

“I'm not angry,” I blurted, feeling the tears fall from my eyes. There, under the stars, with the kid's eyes looking at me closely. I wondered. *How much more of myself would be left*

behind? And how much more of us would remain at the end of this trip? Under the glow of the moon, I cried silent tears. To my old self and to what was to come. “I’m grieving.”

We did not speak anymore. There was no need to. Our silence cried a faraway song. The Song of Exspiravit. And this, to whoever is reading this. *This* is the song of our survival.

Because we all have one. And this... this was ours.

Two

“Take Me Down”

We stood in place, transfixed as the flames licked away the remnants of our beloved old car. My grandfather’s old 98 Toyota Land Cruiser, burning to ashes in front of my eyes. And with it, all the remnants of my past. At some point we all had to let the past go, isn't it? Giving this part of ourselves to Paris and Aurora as a last goodbye was the least we could do, after all we didn’t have anything else to bury. *They left nothing else behind.* The sooner we overcame this the easier it would be to move on. This... this was only another vestige of our old selves. And just like our names, it will, sooner or later, become nothing more than a distant memory.

“Ranger?”

“What?” I blinked, suddenly coming back into the present, though my mind still felt far away. Thess looked at me, a look that conveyed sorrow and empathy, her hand clutching mine. I didn’t even notice when she took it.

“This is for them.”

I looked up at the flames. There were no bodies to bury, just their backpacks ripped apart, and the traces of their bloody footsteps on the thin black gravel of the lake. *Did they suffer? Did they scream for us? Did they blame me?* Her touch snapped me back to the present and I saw in her sad green eyes that she was trying to keep the tears from falling. This was their funeral. A funeral without a body, but this was the best we could give them.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, my words fell, getting lost in the crackle of the flames, but I said them nevertheless, with the hope that somewhere wherever they were, they’ll be able to hear them, and with the hope that once they did, they’ll forgive me for making this choice.

The green vegetation around the flames bristled and chirped, sizzling slowly with an almost imperceptible whine, a low far cry. Perhaps it was the earth way of shedding the tears we refused to shed. Across from us, I could see the flames reflected in Nathan’s eyes and his seething anger as he gazed at the car with crossed arms and clenched jaw. Mattias stood beside him, eyebrows furrowed, hands clenched in tight fists, but after a moment his eyes looked away from the wreckage, away from the raw reality before our eyes. Thess and the kid stood beside me, still and silent, and Marylin... she didn’t even spare me a glance. We had always been so close... Despite everything we lost, despite everything we have done... I wondered how would we bounce back from this. Exspiravit might be claimed by nature, the old streets so moss-covered it was hard to see the dark telltale of pavement beneath. But we refused to become part of it. We refused to become part of the Nightmares, part of this new self-proclaimed world.

Maybe, that's the reason why we were still fighting. *Maybe...*

There was a tense silence lingering in the air. We slowly made our way through the empty streets, scared by vegetation. The abandoned city was filled with foliage and overgrown grass, everywhere you looked showed hints of the new reign that dominated this world. Green covered everything... blooming between the cracks on the pavement, claiming the unclaimed. Exspiravit became the host of nature and we the uninvited guests.

It was so easy to tell that this world did not *want* us here. The telltales of rejection were plain as the day, in the way the plants recoiled as we walked through the streets. In the way the animals gazed upon us –from between the thick grass and new small trees that invaded the city— with recoil and revulsion. Away from our path, but gazing upon us with silent exasperation, wishing us to be gone, *gone, gone...*

“Good thing its daytime,” Thess whispered close to my side. Beside her the kid looked at everything and everywhere with a spark of wonder. How this world could spark his curiosity was something I didn’t understand. For us, all that remained was a sense of relief when no Nightmares stirred, they remained asleep at this time of the day, and for that we were thankful.

Nathan’s steps faltered, his back tense with a loud sigh and we all stopped our silent procession. “We should go back,” he stated, his voice filled with annoyance and exasperation. His words were directed at all of us, but his eyes couldn't help but linger on the kid’s, impassive and burning with deep hatred. Thess let out a low tired sigh. My chest burned, my hands clenched. I looked away, mulling the words over. My nails dug into my skin.

“We agreed to reach the Train,” I replied coldly, my heart hammered in my chest. My eyes burned as I stared at Nate. “That's the plan we had; that's the plan we settled in.”

“Is that so?” Nathan's eyes sparkled, stepping towards me, closing the space between us, face paused in front of mine. His blue eyes sparkling with rage. “After everything that happened, you still want to help him?” his finger pointed to the kid, jaw clenched in fury. “They died because of this, and you still want to take him to the train?” he paused. “Why not go back?”

“There is nothing else to do now!” I sneered, pushing him away. “Can't you see? There is nothing else for us here,” My words echoed through the air, reverberating in the emptiness.

Around us, Mattias and Thess stared with sad looks. I couldn't blame them. We were falling apart. It's hard to keep going when the world around you is falling apart. Marilyn looked at me over Nathan's shoulders. Disappointed and angry at the same time.

“How can you be so crude about this?” Nathan stilled, his jaw clenched tightly.

“They would want us to keep going.” I growled, because inside his words hurt. Inside, I refused to accept the reality of our situation. *What else is there but to keep going?* “I'm only trying to do that.”

“For what purpose?” He challenged. “What is the point if they aren't here anymore! If the plans we had are no longer viable!”

“But we are!” I took a step closer, putting a palm on his chest. “We are still alive Nathan. We are still alive. Can't you see?” It was meant to convey my feelings, to show how much I truly meant this, but...

His eyes stared down at my hand, with a clench of his jaw he stepped away. “You are the one who cannot see,” he snarled. “You are so blinded by his lies that you cannot see that things will never be the same. We *should* go back.”

My attempt failed. I was unable to reach my old friend. To point out what should've been the obvious. "There is nothing for us here," I repeated in a helpless pleading tone. "Nate..."

"Don't," he denied, to my dismay, increasing the space between us. "We should have never left our home in the first place," he paused, eyes lost at some point down the street. A nightmare awoke there—probably stirred from its slumber by our screams—growling softly, and snarling hungrily at us as it slowly limped over. "This is your fault."

"*Nathan.*" I tried to say, but the words remained stuck in my throat, before I could regain my courage, he walked away. Marilyn paused, throwing a grieving look at me before she walked away as well, following close behind Nate, and blatantly ignoring the snarling Nightmare.

I let them go. Because he was right. There was no coming back from this. Nothing we could do would bring them back. Reaching the Train was only an excuse, an *empty* purpose.

The Nightmare walked closer, Mattias let out a low sigh, unsheathing his long knife, "We should find a refugee to spend the night," he said, eyes looking up at the sun peaking between buildings. "It's getting dark," he stated, silently walking towards the Nightmare. The kid rushed after him. I stared in silence as The Nightmare snarled with bloody teeth, malnourished hands reaching out, but the kid remained out of reach, sidestepping with ease and easily attracting its attention. Mattias seized the opportunity, driving his knife into the back of their neck. Just like that, the Nightmare fell, writhing in place with silent cries that were more snarls than cries, because that's not how you kill a Nightmare. After all the nervous impulses were still active, but the body, the body remained human under the virus that emptied its mind and allowed nature to claim it. But the hidden humanity beneath the *beautiful* monster. That was still *human* and humans in the end are such frail creatures.

“You know none of this was your fault,” Thess said.

“I took the choice to leave,” I replied.

“We all took it together,” she defended.

“I asked them to stay,” tears filled my eyes. “I asked them to stay.”

She said nothing. Mattias approached the creature. A couple of meters in front of us, he raised his knife over his head, letting it fall with a loud growl. The Nightmare stopped squirming, its void less eyes for some reason froze on me—white empty eyes— And I couldn't help but see myself reflected there. Somewhere in the background of the city, I could've sworn I heard the distant sound of wolves howling. Distant, and very, very far away.

“It's all my fault.”

Three

“Almost Nothing”

The city looked different from above. But I guess everything looks different from above, doesn't it? But in this new world, there just was a different feeling about it. There, settled on top of the abandoned building that once honed rows upon rows of desks, cramped in little offices and overexploited workers... it just looked so... *different now*.

The empty streets were now filled with overgrown lumps of herbage, whom once years ago were abandoned cars. There was an absence of noise too, the hum of a once-active world was now gone, leaving behind a deep silence only interrupted by the faraway cry of a crow or the

vivid chirp of a bird, or occasionally the distant howl of the wolves. *Yeah*, now the only sounds that reigned over the growls of the Nightmares were those of the wilderness. Yet another reminder that we had no place in this world.

As the sunset started, the chirping of birds settling down for the night became constant and louder, breaking the stillness of the eerie silence. A conjoined chorus of chirps and crawls, flying in flocks over the city. The abandoned buildings were their new home. They fled through the cracked windows, through the thick rifts between the concrete walls, where thick roots had broken through, evolving the buildings in ropes of foliage, a strange hug of wilderness. A bright patch of green against dull gray. *Yeah, the wilderness had truly claimed every aspect of our lives.*

“I thought I would find you here.” Over the noise of the noisy flocks, I flinched. Turning around so suddenly I almost toppled over the railing. “Oh, sorry.” Mattias whispered. “I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine,” I cut him off. I didn’t even hear him coming. A sigh left my lips, silently resettling over the security railing of the rooftop. The cold metal bit my skin and despite almost falling over, the excitement of the height pumped through my veins. “I just needed a moment away...” *from them, from everything.* My words hung in the air, heavy and unsaid. Behind me, Mattias edged closer, his boots crunching the pebbles that littered the rooftop with each step. *How many people come here to run away from the rush of daily life?*

“You don’t need to explain it to me,” he sighed, copying me and leaning over the railing as well, his shoulder touched mine and it’s not until I perceived his warmth that I noticed how cold I was. His gaze –like mine— fell to the streets below, a gush of cold wind blew and curls of

hair fell over his eyebrows, prickling his eyes. He huffed in frustration, blowing them off in vain. Shoulders slumping in defeat. “I understand the feeling.”

We settled in a long stretch of silence. Our eyes fixed upon the scenery beneath us. The sun was slowly dipping into the horizon, the chirps and crawls fading away, and slowly, the Nightmares arose from their dreamless sleep. I frowned at that, *do they even sleep?* “It's not how I remember it.”

“No, it's nothing like it used to be at all.” Mattias nodded, taking a deep breath. “But I guess... nothing is the same anymore.”

I looked at him, raising an eyebrow in curiosity. “Do you dislike it?”

“I think it looks better like this,” he shrugged. “This world is more peaceful than before.”

“Nathan says it has taken a lot from us.” The mention of his name made us fall into an uncomfortable silence. I sighed. “He resents me.”

“He is angry,” he confirmed, looking down at his fidgeting hands.

“Do you think... this was the right choice?” There was hesitance in my tone, and for a moment I wished it was not there, I wished I could be stronger, that my choices could be firmer. But I couldn't help but the tinge of guilt in my chest. Mattias paused at my words. His eyes fell to the city instead. He didn't answer my question, instead, he remained silent, hands still. His lips pulled in a displeased gesture. “Mattias...”

“I think there was nothing left for us there,” he blurted, there was a heaviness in his tone that told me this is was a delicate moment, that he was not completely sure of his answer as well.

His words made me pause. “You are not answering my question.”

“It's just...” he cuts himself off, a pained look overtaking his features. His eyes rose to meet mine and his posture straightened. “I think there was nothing for us there,” he repeated.

His words offered no comfort for the heaviness in my chest, but I accepted them nevertheless. “I guess there wasn't.”

Mattias turned to me, brown eyes looking intently into mine. “Does it matter?”

I looked away from his inquisitive eyes. “I guess not.”

He nodded, more a gesture of settlement than a statement. I knew he was just agreeing with my words. “I'm gonna go back, check on the others.” he said.

I nodded absently. Not really finding my voice to reply.

Mattias paused in place, hesitant. “It just... it's never good to dwell in the past, you know?”

“Yeah,” After all, at this point all it does is hurt. “I understand.”

He patted my head, ruffling my hair like he used to do when we were younger. “Of course you do,” he whispered with a cheerful tone, “Don't stay out too late, alright?” he asked, throwing one last smile at me before his hand fell and he walked away.

I stood there, looking as he walked away towards the stairs. The uneasiness inside of me did not fade. For some reason, his words felt empty. I wondered if Elijah and Sparrow would be disappointed in me. In the span of a month, we left our beloved home behind, lost Paris and Aurora, and burned their beloved car. Mistake upon mistake. When they kept us safe and alive

for six years after the outbreak. I couldn't help but wonder *how?* Our makeshift family was falling apart, just like the world we used to know did all those years ago. Nathan wanted to go back, I didn't, *how could we?* Our house was full of ghosts, our city was nothing more than empty streets full of monsters. *How could we?*

"I'm not wrong here. Isn't it?" My words echoed in the night, never meant to be answered, and I just... *remained*, staring silently as the darkness slowly claimed the city. The stars popped one by one in the clear sky. Ancient galaxies appeared, bright and vivid without pollution. The stars were as shiny as they never were this deep into the city. "Yeah," It was impressive to see how much the earth had claimed back and how freer it all looked compared to the past, but it made me wonder. *How long did we have, until it claimed us too?*

I sighed, suddenly tired. "I guess it does look better like this."

"You don't have to be so nervous about this, you know?" Sparrow whispered beside me. Holding my arm still. "You are not doing anything wrong."

"It feels like I am doing something wrong."

Sparrow took a step back. "The Nightmares doesn't feel anything, Ranger."

"Are you sure about that?"

Sparrow sighed, dropping his arm. "We do this to survive, you know this, right?"

I looked down at the knife in my hands, then up to the Nightmare growling down the street, slowly creeping closer and closer. "Why did we change our names?"

Sparrow seemed taken aback by my question, perhaps because it was out of topic, but I couldn't help it. His eyebrows furrowed in that manner they did when he was analyzing what to say. Then, "Because this way we can keep the person we once were intact."

"Would we ever be the same?"

"In this world?" Sparrow asked, then, when the Nightmare was close enough, he turned and shot it. "No, I don't think so. But... it doesn't mean we cannot dream."

"I miss our old names." I sighed.

"We are still the same people, just... different. Like this world." Sparrow looked at me.

"This world is different."

"It sure is, but in some way, it's still the same, isn't it?" He crouched beside me, his brownish eyes looking into mine. "What do you dream of, Ranger?"

I pondered the question, and... "A life, where we all can be happy together."

"How would that look?" Sparrow asked, slowly re-loading his rifle.

"I don't know," I laughed. "A farm, maybe? We could certainly grow our own crops and raise our own animals."

"You could sure do that." Sparrow smiled, placing the rifle in my hands and crouching beside me. "Now, pay attention, keep your arm firm and..."

"Hey," Thess whispered with a worried frown. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I shook my head, and with it, the heavy memories away. "What did you say?"

Thess pursed her lips, giving me a long look that made me shift in place. “I asked if you were still hungry?”

“I don't think I can stomach more chickpeas,” I said absently, my eyes wandering to the closed space. The dusty rows of desks were pushed aside, a low fire burning in a pathetic metal metal bucket, doing little to ward off the cold. The cracked windows reflecting the starry sky and full moon. *When did I get here?*

“We are not having chickpeas,” A deep frown overtook Thess' features. “We finished them yesterday, remember?”

“Oh?” I looked down at my can, noticing the label and realizing that she was right, we were not eating chickpeas, but chili. Nervously, I let out a low chuckle. “Sorry. I'm just tired.”

“Are you okay?” Thess eyes remained on me, staring intently. “Is something wrong?”

“What happened to the beans?” I asked instead, looking over at the bag of canned food we had. The kid stood over it, guarding it like some kind of dog.

“We only have this, the rest of the food was...” Thess shifted in place, her eyes avoiding mine. “We don't have much left now...” her words drifted off, not brave enough to highlight our precarious situation. *The rest of the food was in Paris and Aurora's backpacks.* Between the remnants of their massacre were the scattered and ravaged remains of our food. I clenched my hands, my stomach coiled in grief. *How could I forget that?*

“I'm sorry,” I whispered, looking down at my food, no longer hungry. My words cut off when I noticed the pair of blue eyes looking at me.

“Don’t be sorry,” Marylin’s sharp voice cut in. She looked at me with a deep frown on her features, her jaw tight. Nathan was not with her anymore. *I wondered where he is.* “Is not like there is anything to be sorry about, is it?”

A sigh left my lips, fingers digging into the cold metal. But I ignored her jab, despite the cold dread that it left behind. “Where is Mattias and Nathan?” I asked instead.

Marylin looked away. “Gone.”

Gone where? I wanted to ask. I didn’t.

“Is something wrong?” Thess whispered to me.

“No,” I rushed, throwing a look at the kid. He leaned back against his sleeping bag with a silent huff. His sleeping bag was not the only one out, I noticed a pair of them. Four in total, and in the far corner of the room, I noticed a little tent raised. *For Marylin and Nathan?*

“Are you sure you are, okay?” Thess pressed.

”Everything’s fine.” I sighed, “I’m just not hungry anymore.”

Thess shifted closer, silently raising the edge of the thick blanket she was using and placing it over my shoulders with ease, burrowing us together. “You should try to eat more,” she whispered lowly, loud enough only for us to hear, leaning her head on my shoulder.

“It’s okay,” I said in a whisper. Looking down at my half-empty can. “I’ll eat it in the morning.”

Four

“Lost In a Bad Way”

I wondered if the founders thought about the outcome of building Exspiravit in the middle of nowhere. Fusing a city with nature was no joke, but sometimes when I laid awake at night, unable to sleep, I wondered if they ever thought about the consequences of this.

I had dreams about it. In them I looked from the depths of the forest, like an omnipotent being. I watched Exspiravit being birthed from nothing, I watched each ring and plot of land blossom like weed, I watched each bridge that connected each ring, fuse with the rivers that surrounded Exspiravit. The buildings slowly being built in the middle, the houses in the outer rings, the plots of land that would later become crops in the far outer rings. I watched it all with a sense of grief I couldn't understand. Because somehow, I knew I paid a price for this, I knew something was taken from me. The wolves howled, Exspiravit was born. *And I...*

“I don't understand how it came to this.”

“We are not even that close to the city,” Thess whispered, low and careful to keep the snoozing Nightmares that way, and to not disturb the lingering tension hovering around us.

“The inner ring was always peaceful, not as chaotic as the city,” Mattias replied.

“Not as chaotic as this world.” The kid grumbled, walking past us. Of all of us, he was the one who has acted least affected by this world. I wondered if it was because, after all, this was all he knew. A child born from the tragedy of a fallen society.

“This world is not chaotic,” I said, my tone coming firmer than intended.

Thess looked up at me. “Ranger?”

I looked away from her, focusing on the abandoned building around us. “It is oddly... harmonious... in some sense.”

“I just... thought it would be different,” Thess whispered sadly, signaling to the space around us. “I thought it would feel different.”

“You mean the city?”

“There is so much wilderness now,” she nodded, sidestepping a thick root blooming between a crack on the pavement. “Almost no trace of humanity.”

“That’s because this world isn’t meant for us anymore.” Marilyn supplied, looking at us with an uncharacteristic frown. Her hair was pulled in a ponytail, the pink tips were so decolorated they look more like a silky pale pink than violet. She painted it before leaving our home, so inadvertently, her hair became a timeline of our journey. The paler it got, the longer we been away from home. “We are the sickness here, not them,” to highlight her point, she nodded to a sleeping Nightmare, curled down in a comfortable crouch, deeply asleep. There were a couple of them littering the street. Crouched in a deep slumber. Recharging for the night to come.

The kid marched closer, pausing before one, and staring intently at the alluring monster. “Don’t get too close,” I warned, giving him a cold look that clearly said. *You hear me?*

“This world’s aversion to us is not a secret,” Thess replied, giving a wry look to the Nightmare, and a disapproval eye at the kid. As long as we didn’t disturb them, we would be fine, but he was young, and being naïve was part of youth.

“But...” The kid looked up at us as we approached him. His eyes narrowed in curiosity. “If we are the sickness, why are we still alive?”

“That’s the question, right?” Marilyn scoffed, walking ahead with purposeful steps. Pausing briefly beside the kid, and looking him deeply in the eyes. “How is it that you always ask the right questions?”

Ahead, Nathan paused, raising his rifle in alert. We froze, Mattias' shoulders tensed, raising a hand in the air, signaling us to be quiet. We stopped, tense but alert. My hand hovered over my long knife at my hip. We waited for one second, two seconds, in the distance, the sound of a flock of ravens croaking between the tall buildings echoed. Nathan’s body relaxed, and his rifle fell back to his side. “We are good,” his eyes narrowed up at the blue sky. “If we keep this pace, we will reach the bridge to the library by nightfall. We can camp in another building before crossing the bridge.”

The library, our last stop. In a perfect show from this paradigmatic utopian city, the train station was built on top of it. It was in the very center of Exspiravit, deep in the bowels of the city. And all the efforts and sacrifices of this odyssey blossomed there. My eyes wandered up to the bright sun. “Shouldn't we stop?”

“We’ll stop when we reach the bridge,” Nathan called back, mostly ignoring me.

“If we keep this pace, we will be too tired when we reach it,” I protested, the sun was at its peak, shining bright and intense over our heated heads. If we kept this pace all we were doing was instigating heatstroke. We were so close now, there was no rush. “Nathan, the inner ring bridge is the entrance to the center of Exspiravit, once we reach that, you and I know we won't be able to let our guards down.”

“We wouldn't be worried about that if Aurora and Paris were still here,” he sneered, not even sparing a look at me. Beside him, Mattias tensed, Marilyn looked at Nathan with a sad look, shaking her head before resuming her pace.

What did he meant by that?

“Don't listen to him,” Thess whispered in my ear. “He is just...”

“Grieving.” I finished it for her. “I know.” *Everyone is grieving these days...*

The raven stood still on top of the green mound. Dark impassive eyes staring deeply at us. Despite our impeding closeness, it did not fly away. *What is the saying? Stare into the abys and the abyss shall stare back?* “Don't get too close,” I called coldly, noticing the kid approaching the big mound of moss. “It has the shape of a Light Pole Nightmare.”

The kid turned to me, a deep angry frown on his young features. “That’s not a Nightmare.”

“A Light Pole Nightmare,” I clarified, “The ones that rot in place? Big chunks of foliage in strange bulky shapes? I told you about this before,” I sighed tiredly.

“I know what a Light Pole Nightmare is.” He sneered. “But that’s not one.”

“Is it now? And how, may I ask, can you be so sure?” I raised an eyebrow at that, crossing my arms over my chest. *Such a witty prick this one...*

“It doesn’t feel like one.” He shrugged simply.

I frowned at that. Thess stopped in place as well. A dumbfounded look on her face. If I was to look at a mirror, I guess our expressions were the same. “Do you see the raven on top of it?” I asked and waited patiently for the kid to turn to look at it. “That’s an indicator that underneath that mass of moss, there *is* a Light Pole Nightmare.”

“That’s a stupid name.”

Thess chuckled. I threw her a dirty look. Rolling my eyes in annoyance. “You told me that before, and I told you I didn’t care what you thought.”

The kid returned my impassive gaze. “It does not feel like it.” He stubbornly repeated.

“I don’t care what you feel.” I growled, “Just don’t get close to it.”

The brown-haired boy rolled his eyes at me, and even though he looked utterly ridiculous to me, he trotted away happily, like he was taking a stroll in the park and not in a street filled with abandoned cars and sleeping Nightmares. Beside me, Thess laughed. I threw her a dirty side glance. “Do you still think maternity is cool?”

“He is way too smart for his age,” she contended, walking ahead of me. “You cannot blame him for thinking he knows it all.”

For some reason her words made me stop in place. “He knows nothing of this world.”

Thess paused at the sharpness of my words, looking back at me with a frown. “You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Then what did you mean?”

Thess sighed. “Maybe he knows more than he is letting on.”

“Thess...” she looked back at me, her eyes kind and patient as she waited for me to formulate my words. My lips pursed together. “Nothing... just... never mind.”

She looked away in disappointment. The others walked ahead, keeping a generous distance from us. “You can speak to me, you know?”

I looked up to her. To her kind eyes and gentle smile. Wondering why she wasn't angry at me too. *Why didn't she blame me?* It would be easier that way. Everything would be easier.

“Yes, I know.” It all would be easier if she hated me.

We were panting and drenched in sweat when we reached the outskirts of the city, which was the first telltale sign of us going out of the outer ring and nearing the bridge. From this close, I could almost picture the peak of the library's building. Exspiravit was composed of several rings connecting sections of the city, the closer to the center of Exspiravit, the smaller the rings and at the very center of them all... *The Library*.

Thess edged close, offering a metallic flask, “Water?” Her brownish strands of hair were stuck to her forehead, and I felt angry that Nate made us walk all the way here without a pause.

“No thanks, but maybe the kid wants... Hey!” I screamed, turning my eyes to him and noticing how close he was to a sleeping Nightmare, his hand hovering in the air centimeters away from the dozing body. My blood froze, a shiver running down my spine, my body tensed as adrenaline pumped through my veins, ready to rush to him and snap him back, but before I could do anything, a hand closed around his arm, pulling him back abruptly.

Nathan seized him back. His eyes narrowed in a deep, furious frown. “What the hell do you think you are doing?” he snapped.

The kid sputtered at the outburst. “It's just...”

“Just what? You were curious? Is that so? We have enough problems trying to reach the train. Now we have worry about you doing stupid things?”

“That's enough, Nate,” I said, rushing to their side. “Don't make things bigger, please.”

His eyes snapped up to mine. A deep fire burning behind them. “Is that so? You know what? I should've let him touch the Nightmare, if you ask me, we should all just leave him be.”

“Nathan, please.”

“Please what?” He sneered, crossing the space between us. “Please what, Ranger?” I didn't reply and I couldn't help but look away from his inquisitive eyes. “Everything is his fault. They all died because of this... this *dream*, this fucking lie.” Nathan stepped back.

“We all agreed on this,” I defended. *Because that's all I could do.*

“Because this was supposed to be our way out!” His scream reverberated all over the empty streets. “This was supposed to be their dream too, Ranger!” His words opened a hole in my chest, to remember that the dream we used to have will never be true hurt more than the spite of his words. And to deliver the jab properly, he closed the space between us, pushing a finger deep in my chest, “Now it's nothing more than a fucking Nightmare.”

“That's enough,” Thess intervened, standing between us. “That's enough, Nathan.”

I looked away, eyes lost in the foliage surrounding us. To the thick woods and sparse abandoned land. To the litter of mounds waiting for the night to set to wake up and tear us apart.

“I miss them as well.”

Nathan stared right at me, his eyes seething in rage. His lips pulled in a snarl, “You don't understand anything,” he spat the words with hatred and hurt, giving me one long-burning look of disappointment, “You would never understand.”

We know when nightfall is about to fall when we hear them. Distant and faint at first. But it was undeniable *there*. A *howl*. It always starts with one, but if you wait a bit... *there*, another one, and then another, until they all became a chorus echoing in the night. We have heard them before. In the distance and very, very far away. But as we left our home and approached the city, they were becoming clearer and louder. We paused in the middle of the street. Because we have heard them before, but never this *close*.

“The howling's are getting deeper,” I whispered.

“The deeper we go the closer they'll get.” The kid replied, his eyes lost in the foliage around us. “They don't like that we are going deep into their home.”

“The wolves?” Marilyn wondered with a confused frown.

The kid shrugged, walking ahead without saying any word. “Hey!” His words for some reason unsettled me. I tried to reach out to him but Thess placed her hand on my shoulder stopping me in place. Shaking her head slightly, eyes conveying a clear, “*Leave him be.*”

“It's getting darker.” Mattias noticed, eyeing the surrounding cluster of forest with unease. “We should find a refugee to spend the night.” The streets were bathed in a low orangish glow, and as if on cue, we all turned to look at a stirring Nightmare down the way we came, growling softly as they came to their senses. *If they ever have them.*

“There is an old arcade down this street,” Nathan added, nodding towards the path ahead of us. The road seemed to be clearer than before, the rotten cars more sporadic and not as cramped as before. Though their state was just the same as the ones we saw earlier. After all, it was all claimed by nature at this point, fused with intricate roots and patches of moss and herbs. A shiver of recognition ran down my spine as I processed Nathan’s words. My eyes widened as I looked around. Understanding settling in. It seems we all remembered the same thing. If their wide eyes and tight jaws were any sign. “You mean *The Arcade.*”

Nathan turned to me. “Any other idea of where to stay?”

I looked away, the sun was going down and the city was getting darker. “No.”

“Then it seems we have no other choice.”

We all exchanged sorrowful gazes. We haven't been at The Arcade in years. Going back with them... We couldn't do anything more than just keep going. And as if protesting our choice, the howls in the background only seemed to get louder.

Five

“Lost”

The howls increased as the night settled, but they fell into background noise once we entered the surprisingly well-kept Arcade, the place where we used to waste summers together. For more than I tried to ignore it, the feeling that something was about to happen lingered in the air. A suffocating tension, unspoken but undeniably *there*, and I wondered if that feeling was only in my mind, result of the stress and losing so much in so little time. I tried to convince myself of it. But for some reason I felt it every time Nathan looked at me, every time Marylin looked over her shoulder, catching my gaze for a second only to turn away as fast as possible, as if burned by my own gaze. I saw it in the distance Mattias kept from me, in the silence that used to be filled by Paris chirpy chit chat. The only ones I seemed to be in good terms with were Thess and the kid. *How long? I wondered.*

“At least the street seems clear enough.” The sun dipped into the horizon with haste, or at least that's how I felt. All around the empty street the sound of soft growls from the freshly roused Nightmares crept close to us, echoing in the empty city. My eyes went down the street, thankful that they seemed to be a bit far from the building we picked.

“Nathan cleaned it earlier,” Thess whispered, her body creeping closer as we waited for Nathan to open the front gate of the Arcade. “It seems he planned it all ahead of time.”

“Surprising.”

She leaned in, “Don't take it personally, Ranger”

I didn't, but the idea of Nathan roaming the city by himself didn't sit well either.

“I never thought I would be returning to this place,” she whispered, breaking my worries away. “It’s been so long,” her eyes turned to Nathan, holding the door open with an expression of deep exasperation. “How did you remember this was here?”

“Does it matter?” Nathan shrugged, waiting just until we crossed the threshold before walking deeper into the empty space. “We are here now,” he said distantly. “Not like that’s gonna change anytime soon either.”

I wondered what he meant by that. “At least we have a place to spend the night.”

He scoffed, turning his back on us, walking deeper into the arcade. “Not thanks to you.”

I watched him go, a bitter feeling in my chest. But I looked ahead instead of dwelling in his words. The old machines lay abandoned, my eyes fell in the white sheets of plastic covering them from the dust that settled all over the abandoned space. The smell of moist wafted in the air, but beyond that, the distinctive smell of Arcade still lingered behind. I shivered, a rush of memories jumping in my mind. All the moments Sparrow and Elijah brought us here, every time something important happened, our birthdays, our graduation. I turned to the others, standing with sad smiles on their faces. *Why did Nate choose to come here now?*

“You have been oddly quiet,” Thess murmured in my ear. In the darkness of the untidy place, she leaned her chin on my shoulder. Just existing there. I couldn’t comply with her observations. I was distracted.

“I’m sorry,” I sighed tiredly, leaning back against her. “I don’t mean to be so gloomy.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” she whispered, “We all have our gloomy moments.”

“I have a lot of those lately.”

“Don’t we all?” she chuckled, pressing a kiss to my hair. “You don’t have to do this alone, Ranger, we are a family, and we have each other.” She hesitated, her body shifting in place. “You have me.” I froze. “You know that don’t you?”

How could I reply to that? Her affections... were not a secret... but for her to say them so openly... “Thess I...”

“Look at that,” She laughed, pointing out. “Pretty pathetic, isn’t it?”

My eyes followed her finger, where Mattias and the kid were entertaining themselves. I chuckled. The kid held a plastic air rifle in his arms, standing uneasily in front of a big machine. The Ducks danced in the scenario with a crappy sticky song. Mattias stood behind, doing his best to imitate the bothersome tone of the old melody at the same time he moved the levers that controlled the ducks’ movements. He was doing a pretty crappy job. But despite that, all the ducks were still standing. *The things we did to keep him happy.*

Thess leaned away with a laugh. “Ranger?” I paused in place. Turning around to meet her eyes. A pink blush adorned the tip of her ears. And before I could ask if she was fine... “I love you.” I felt my heart jump a beat. My own blush overtaking my features. *This woman!*

“You don’t have to say it back,” she chuckled. “I like seeing your startled face.”

So mean. “Say what back? I couldn’t hear what you said.”

“What?” Thess gasped, a look of dismay quickly overtaking her features. “You did hear me.” I only offered her a smile, slowly walking away from her. “You did, isn’t it? Ranger!”

“I can’t land any shot, Mattias is playing dirty.” The kid complained when I approached.

“I’m not!” he defended.

“Well, first of all, that’s not how you hold a gun,” I said, frowning at his clumsy stance.

The kid looked back at me with confusion. “No? Then how should I hold it?”

The edge on his words took me back for a moment, but I remembered that after all, he was just that, a kid. If anything, I should relish that this world had not taken his edge away yet.

“You have to place the butthead on your shoulder, like this.” I took the rifle from him, showcasing my posture so he could copy me, then pushing the gun to him. “Got it?”

The kid nodded, silently maneuvering the gun, to my surprise, imitating me perfectly. His gray eyes looked up at me with excitement. “Like this?”

I nodded, shaking my head in the direction of the little dancing ducks. “Now try it.”

He nodded eagerly. I stared as he braced his body. The rifle shot twice and at the same time, two plastic ducks fell. Gray eyes turned to me with a big smile. “It worked.”

“Of course it would, what do you take me for? A liar?” I scoffed, pushing him playfully. “Still, the real thing is heavier than this, so in real life you need to steady your body to hold the recoil of the shot, yes?”

The kid raised face to me, a curious glimmer in his eyes. “Who though you how to hold a gun?”

“My brother,” I said simply.

He paused, the gun lowering to his side. “You used to have a brother?”

“Yes,” I said a bit hesitant, looking up at the empty space. “I...” A heavy weight settled in my chest, and I found the space suddenly suffocating. Calmly I stood from the stool, ruffling the kid’s hair. “Don’t take your eyes off the objective.”

He looked after me. “Ranger?”

“I’m going to check the place. You keep practicing alright?”

“But...”

“Come on, I’ll help you beating this asshole.” Thess laughed.

“Hey!” Mattias snapped.

I was thankful for their intervention. Slowly their laughs died off as I always away.

I used to have a brother, I used to have a family. But where are they now? Why am I still here? Why me and not them? That's the question, right? Why me, and not them?

“Why me?” I asked wearily, “And not them?”

“We are teaching them too,” Elijah held the gun out to me, a plain M14. “But it’s important you know these things first.” He replied, waiting until I had my hands around the cold metal before letting go. I understood why he looked expectantly the moment he let go and my arms lowered under the unexpected heaviness.

“It’s heavy,” I whined pathetically, scrambling to hold the gun.

“It should be heavy,” Sparrow nudged me, giving me a small smile, “Now pay attention here,” gently, he pushed me to stand in front of the makeshift targets. “Stand still and straight your back.”

“Straight my back?”

“You don't want the recoil to send you flying, do you?” Elijah chirped from behind.

“It can do that!?”

“It can, and it will if you don't pay attention. Now...”

“Is it really that important, that I learn how to do all this stuff?” I knew it was a dumb question, Sparrow and Elijah had been teaching us all kinds of useful and important skills to survive in this new reality, still it was obvious that when it came to me, their efforts doubled.

“Very important.”

“You are taking this too seriously,” I joked, “I don't understand why are you teaching me this while Mattias is out with the others, couldn't you wait until we were all together? Now you'll have to teach this lesson twice.”

Sparrow pursed his lips, looking away from me. “Sometimes it's good to know things the others don't know.”

I frowned at the omniety of his words. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Sparrow and Elijah exchanged looks, “You will understand one day that there are choices you must take for you and for the others, and you have to be ready to take them.”

“You are saying these things as if you are going to disappear.”

Both paused in place, exchanging silent looks between them. Sparrow kneeled in front of me. His brownish eyes were looking at me with determination. “You cannot ignore the reality of this world. Ranger...” He placed a finger on my chin. “Listen to me, things change fast. Some things can change how people think and what they believe, and when they happen you have to be ready to make choices.”

“I don't understand.”

Sparrow sighed, “I don't expect you to do it now, but one day you will.”

“How long are you planning to ignore me?”

Nathan stood on the edge of the rooftop. Watching him there made me remember where I got the habit of looking at the city from above. After all it had been him who taught me how peaceful it could be in the first place.

“How long will it take you to get back to your senses?” Nathan snapped back, not even turning around. I sighed, slowly breaking the distance between us and pausing beside him. Two lonely figures under the light of the moon. Staring down at the remnants of a ghost city. “What do you *want*, Ranger?”

I hesitated for a moment. “I want you to stop being angry.”

He turned to me then, his eyes full of anger. “Why are you acting like everything is okay? You act like their deaths don't matter, like taking this random kid to the Train will solve anything,” He frowned. “We should go back, toss this kid off and go back *home*.”

Ahh, there it is. The true root of his indignation. “Going back will not solve anything either,” I mumbled, and I knew he didn't like my words when he flinched back. I wasn't done though, “Going back will not bring Paris and Aurora back, it will not resurrect Elijah and Sparrow. Going back will not make the world go back to what it used to be. Reaching the train will not solve anything either,” I whispered, looking down at the space between us. “But that's all we have now. Don't you see? We can move forward to—”

“We used to have something,” he growled.

Yes. “Not anymore, Nate. And no matter how much we try it will never be the same, we will never be able to go back to that life.”

“And whose fault is that!” He snapped. “Every choice we have taken has been wrong! Why keep going at this point? Why keep trying?”

His swords sent cold shivers down my spine. I looked away, up to the full moon blooming there, trying to hold the tears at bay. “Because trying is all we have left.”

Nathan did not waver, and if anything, the look in his eyes deepened. “Do you even remember what you told me that night?”

I looked back at him, understanding filling my mind. “You promised we would never speak of that day again.”

“Do you remember?” when I didn't reply he crossed the space between us. “Do you?”

“I asked you, what does it mean to survive in a world like this.”

“I told you, *this, this* family, *this* is what it means to survive in a world like this.”

“You did.”

“Paris and Aurora are gone,” he said, resolute, his words leaving no room to argue.

“They are.”

“You made us leave our home. You decided to change our plan and take a random kid to the Train. *You* decided to leave everything behind,” he sneered, his eyes red.

I looked away, trying to hide the tears that threatened to escape my eyes. “You promised me you would always stand by my side. No matter what.”

“We promised a lot of things.” He scoffed. “I can no longer keep that promise, Ranger.” He stood tall then, looking me straight in the eye. “I’m done.”

I wish I could’ve asked him what he meant by that, but his eyes gave me one last fiery look, and before I could even try to ask, he was gone. Leaving me alone in the cold night. Somewhere in the distance, the wolves howled the grief I didn’t dare to admit.

We were having dinner, six months after Sparrow and Elijah’s death, the fear and anger at what happened to them was still present, avoiding the topic any further was no helping.

“We need to leave Exspiravit.” I said, setting my fork down. Everyone gazes turned to me. For some reason, Nathan and I always took the heads of the table. It used to be Elijah and

Sparrow, but keeping their places empty only created a strange feeling of loss. And for some reason the role they played in our family fell to us.

“Why?” Nathan asked. Frowning. “We are okay here.”

“We are.” I agreed. “But how long Nate?”

Paris put his glass down. “Why now Ranger? What changed?”

“We changed,” Marilyn replied. “Since Elijah and Sparrow...” her eyes filled with tears.

“I want to leave too; I don’t want to just survive anymore.”

“But we are living.” Nathan pressed, “We have a life here,” his eyes looked at each one of us. “We are a family, we have each other, that is enough.”

Aurora frowned. “I like it here.” She muttered. “I don’t want to leave either,”

“It’s not about leaving.” I said, “It’s about what comes next.”

“And what comes next?” Mattias asked this time. His amber eyes staring at mine.

“A place for all of us, a place that isn’t only a house, a place where we can grow crops, raise livestock, a place where we can grow old together. A home.”

“I agree with Ranger,” Thess said at last. Her green eyes looked at me with a spark of determination. “We all deserve a home. Together,” her eyes fixed on Nathan, then on all of us.

“As a family.”

Her words went deep, and everyone nodded in contentment. We deserved it after all.

We took six months gathering enough provisions, each raid more dangerous than the last, snatching precious gasoline from other cars, until we had enough to make a whole trip through the country. I didn't know if my choice of leaving was the right one, I gave the idea, it was my responsibility, but I knew, I didn't want to keep surviving in a city forgotten by the gods.

I wanted to live, and I knew, the only way to live a life worth living was leaving behind Exspiravit and the ghosts of the past that hovered in each corner.

Six

"It's Called: Freefall"

The Nightmare snarled at me, its face pressed against the thick glass of the library's front window. Arriving at the Library was supposed to feel like an accomplishment, the very center of Exspiravit and the last point in our journey. But it didn't feel like that at all. All I felt was emptiness. Through its white eyes the Nightmare snarled and bit the air, and I just stared back, I couldn't be sure if it could sense me or see me through the dirt-stained glass. The bitterness of Nathan's words lingered in my mouth like sour medicine.

"You shouldn't stand so close to it," The kid whispered, calmly taking a seat on one of the empty plastic chairs scattered around. The library was full of them.

For a moment I turned to look at him, then back at the Nightmare. "Can it see me?"

The kid turned away from the book in his lap, an eyebrow raised, "Can *you* see it?"

“I can.” I was not sure what he wanted me to grasp here, but whatever it was, fell through my fingers. My eyes wandered to the glass again. “I can see it.”

I could see the black veins and empty white eyes. I could see its malnourished skin and bloody teeth. I could see the Nightmare clearly. And if I tried really hard, I think I could see the human beyond this monster. But no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t see any trace of humanity left behind in those white eyes. I placed my hand on the glass and the cold seeped into my skin, the Nightmare snarled back clawing hungrily at the crystal. “Nathan is angry with me.”

“I thought he was always like that,” the kid shrugged. “Bitterness seemed to be his natural state.”

I chuckled. In his eyes it sure must be that way. “He wasn't always like that. We have gone through a lot. But losing Paris and Aurora just... was too much for him.”

“You lost them too, but I don't see you acting all bitter and gloomy,”

I smiled at his remark. “Perhaps I know how to hide it better than him.”

The kid leaned in; his head tilted to the side. Gray eyes burning into mine. “Do you?”

Did I? I glanced back at the Nightmare outside the glass, and despite the danger of it, I placed my forehead there, silently closing my eyes. “How do you know so much about them?”

The kid pursed his lips. “I just do.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“What makes Nightmares different than us?” he asked instead.

“You mean, aside from acting, you know, like *that* and lacking all sense of humanity?”

“Yes. Normal Nightmares lack all the things that make us human, and yet, they are different from each other. The Light Pole Nightmares stay in place, they do not walk or roam like the other Nightmares. The Trackers can track smells... he paused. “And then there is us.”

“Us?”

“You hear them too, don’t you? The howls.”

I frowned. “We all hear them. The wolves—”

“No Ranger,” he whispered, “We are the only ones who can hear them.”

His words made my blood freeze. My hand stilled over the glass, and as if sensing my unease, the Nightmare snarled at me again. “What will happen to us if we get bitten?”

The kid frowned at my question. “Don’t you see?” His bright *gray* eyes looked at the nightmare’s pale ones, then at me. “We *are* already infected. That’s why we can hear the wolves, that’s why we can hear the whispers of Exspiravit. Because *we* are different.”

Seven

“Train Wreck”

We reached the bridge faster than we expected. At that point, we were tired and hungry. Food ran thin two days ago, and we had to reduce our meals to one per day. At that point, we were tired and defeated. But seeing the railroad ahead perked our spirits. One last step to our objective. One more stop before we could leave it all behind.

The window was approaching, in a couple of hours the Train would come. After so long... there we were, right in front of railroad, the way out of Exspiravit. We paid our price before, and the last time we crossed a bridge we lost Paris and Aurora. It was like Exspiravit wanted us to pay our toll for trying to escape it. *What would our toll be now?*

“This is it.” Thess whispered in bewilderment.

“Thess...” I stopped her, my hand grasping hers. Her green eyes looked at me, a hint of excitement mingled there. “We did it.”

She smiled back at me. “We really did.” She took a step close, breaking the distance between us and grasping my hand between hers. “When all of this is over, we can start over and try again. What do you say?”

I wondered if she referred to us, and the unsaid feelings that lingered in the air. I couldn't help but return her smile. “I would like that.” Just as I said those words an uneasiness filled my body. For some reason I felt the world pause. A deafening silence made me freeze in place. *This feeling...*

“Ranger?” Thess asked.

I recognize this feeling...

“Hey! What are you doing!”

There was a loud smacking sound, followed by a grunt and a deft *slump*.

“Nathan?” Marilyn's voice gasped.

Thess and I turned around in a flash, and the scene in front shocked us. There we were, panting, covered in sweat, we had just reached the Train, we were about finally make it out of the city and yet. “Nathan.”

“Don’t move!” he screamed. Between his arms, he held the kid in place, the tip of his old Glock pressed tightly into the kid’s temple.

“Why?” I asked.

“I said don’t move!”

“What are you doing!?” Mattias snarled, his hand pressed to his temple, a stream of blood seeping between his fingers. Nathan must have kicked him.

“What none of you had the guts to do!” Nathan snapped, “This is a mistake! I’m only turning things back to how they used to be. Can’t you see?”

“What?” Mattias snapped, taking a step close to him. “What are you talking about?” Nathan ignored him, his gaze burning into mine. I knew what was going on the moment his eyes fixed on mine. I could see the betrayal in his gaze.

“Why?” I asked in a low whisper. “Why are you doing this now?”

“It’s the only way,” Nathan looked at me for the first time since the Arcade, and in his eyes, I could see the absolute resolve. For a moment, I thought, I could understand what he meant back there. “I warned you.”

“You planned this.” The spark in his eyes answered for him. Behind me, Thess and Mattias gasped. I felt bad for them, *did they even see it coming?* “How long?”

Nathan paused. Jaw tight. “Since Paris and Aurora.”

All this time... and he never told me a single word. I narrowed my eyes, hurt, betrayed.
“How could you?”

“No!” he snapped, pointing the gun at me. “How could *you*? How could you make us do this trip, how could you agree to take some random kid whose name we don’t even know to the train? How could you make us leave our home behind!”

“I thought we were doing this for *us*. For a life together, for our dream!”

“The whole world is like this!” He sneered. “Don’t tell me, that after all this time you still believed in that fantasy? Don’t tell me you really believed in that dream?”

“Didn’t you?”

Nathan closed his eyes. “It was only a child’s play.”

“And yet, it kept us alive up until this moment,” Thess replied for me.

Nathan’s eyes narrowed on her. “This is how we survive!”

“There is no we!” Thess screamed, standing in front of me. I tried to pull her back, but she pulled away from me. “Not anymore, why can’t you see it!”

“You are still alive!” Nathan snapped. “Mattias and Marylin are still alive! *We* are still alive! We can still make it back to the house, we can still live the life we used to have,” he pointed his gun back at the kid. “If we get rid of him... everything will go back. We can still survive here. Together.” *Together. What would it even mean?* “Do you see now?”

I stared for a long moment into his deep blue eyes. But for more than I tried, I couldn't see my friend anymore. His betrayal felt like a knife in my chest. "I would rather die."

He shrieked as if I just slapped him. His mouth fell open. "How can you say that?"

"How could you betray us like this?" I snarled, crossing the space between us. Nathan's eyes widened, quickly pointing his gun at me. I chuckled in understanding. *This feels just like standing over the edge of a tall building.* "Paris and Aurora are dead." His face fell at the mention of her name. He always had feelings for her, and she for him, but they never dared to act on them, now they would never get the chance. *Like staring into the abyss.*

"I am only trying to help! Don't you see? All I did, all I ever did was to help the family! To help get us back to what we used to be!"

"You tell that to yourself. History will look down on us and judge our choices."

"They will look at me and say I was a hero."

"They will look at you and say you were a coward."

"And how will they judge you, Ranger?" he sneered. "What will history say of you? When they write down the history of Exspiravit and its survivors, what will they say about you?"

"That's not for me to decide." I said, looking away. "That's for history to judge."

"I won't let you take away this chance Ranger, not after everything I have done."

"And what would it even mean?"

"It will mean we are still alive!" Nathan snapped. "Why can't you see it?"

I stood there. Powerless. *Nathan, my friend, my brother...* I could only look down in defeat, shaking my head. “You are as gone as the Nightmares.”

Nathan froze in place. His eyes wide. All around us the world froze. His jaw tightened as he looked away for a moment, then he looked back, past me. “Aren't you coming or what?”

My heart fell. Behind me, Marilyn walked close. “Things weren't supposed to be like this, Nathan.”

He chuckled darkly. “You are too naive, Marilyn, don't you see?” he opened his arms, facing the sky. “This is the only way.”

Marilyn started crying then, shaking her head. “I never agreed to this.” Her words felt like lead in my stomach. All our eyes snapped at her then.

“What do you mean?” Mattias growled.

“You always planned this,” Thess concluded, “This was the plan all along, that's why you took us to the Arcade. To keep us distracted. That's why you kept disappearing.” Her eyes fell on Marilyn, “That's why you couldn't look at us in the eye.”

Marilyn's eyes widened, tears pouring down her face. “I never agreed to this,” she said, shaking her head. “Please, you have to understand.”

“Stop trying to explain things, just come with me and everything will be fine!”

“No!” Marilyn snapped at Nathan. “I won't agree to this madness.”

“You are giving up then!?” Nathan exploded. I never saw him so angry. “You are picking their side!? After everything they have done to us!”

“There weren't supposed to be sides!” Marylin screamed. “This was supposed to be—” Her words hung in the air. We all froze in place. The echo of the shotgun reached us a second later. Marylin’s body slumped over. Nathan lowered the gun with cold eyes.

“I knew you were weak.” He turned to us, “I don’t expect you to understand, but...”

The ground shook beneath our feet, a low rumble at first, growing into a steady *thack, thack, thack, thack*. “The train...” *It was coming...* Thess looked at me then, her eyes burning into mine with unspoken words. Before I could react, she pulled my gun from my holster, Nathan turned just when she raised the barrel to him. His eyes widening his gun raising as well. I felt a hard shove, my body pushed aside with brutal strength. There was a loud *bang!* And the world froze. All I could hear was the loud statical noise ringing in my ears. In front of me, chaos. Mattias had Nathan pined to the ground, loud growls could be heard from them as both wrestled against each other.

“Thess! Ranger!” the kid whimpered, rushing to our side.

My heart fell. “Thess?” She looked at me with fear, tears of pain rining her eyes. A red stain slowly blooming on her stomach. “You can’t... you can’t do this to me.”

Slowly, she raised a trembling hand to me, softly caressing my cheek, staining the skin there with her blood. “Yo-you ha-have to go,” she gasped. “Ta-take the kid... and go.”

“No,” I denied, trying to push my hand against her wound. “Not without you.”

“Y-you have to,” she sneered, pushing me off weakly.

“Not without you.”

Thess denied, licking her lips. A little trail of blood pooled there. “Oh Ra-ranger... this... th-this is fi-fine.” *It's not fine. It's not fine at all.* “Hey, hey... I...” she gulped, taking a shaky breath that came out more like a wheeze. Her eyes slowly glozing over. “I... I love you.”

“I love you too,” I whispered, but I knew it was too late... *I was too late.*

“This is your fault,” Nathan sneered, pushing off Mattia’s hold. “This is your...”

“Shut up!” I screamed, seizing Thess gun and turning to him. “Shut the fuck up!” the kid cowered behind me. “You did this. You fucked everything over, and for what!?”

Nathan smiled. “What are you going to do?” he chuckled. “Shot me?”

My finger hovered over the trigger. Nathan’s smile faltered. “You wouldn’t.”

Beside him, Mattias threw me a worried look. “Ranger, please.”

“It didn’t have to end like this.” I cried. “We were supposed to be different.”

Nathan face became serious. “No, Ranger. This is exactly how it was going to end. You don’t even have the nerve to—” his words lingered off.

I pressed the trigger. The gun cracked.

“Ranger...” Mattias whispered in shock.

My eyes filled with tears, a feeling of nausea settled in my stomach. Nathan's eyes looked at me, for a moment he remained frozen like that, silently staring at me. In his chest, a red blossom spurted. "Ha..." he chuckled, a trail of blood slipping past the edge of his lips. "I knew you had it in you." His legs gave up beneath him. His body slumping over. I knew he was dead the moment his body touched the ground.

All the energy was sucked from my body, and I fell to my knees as well, defeated. The gun slipped past my grasp. In the middle of the chaos I looked up at the sky and screamed. "Why?" I cried. "Why did you have to do this? We were so close..."

"We have to go..." the kid hurried "Please..."

We were so close... There was no time. Not anymore. This, this was all we had, and somehow, it'll have to do. Mattias looked over Marylin's and Nathan's body. "Go," he cried. "Just... go."

"Mattias..." I denied. Understanding pooling in me. "No..."

"Just go!"

"Come on," the kid pressed, pushing me with all his strength. *I'm not ready. Not like this.* "We have to hurry!" The powerful wave of air snapped me back to the present. My eyes lingering on Thess's body one last time. Before I could process it, we were running. I felt my heart beating hard, my lungs burning, my legs felt on fire as we tried to reach the window on time. There was a loud chirring as the wheels stopped. I couldn't help but cringe at the noise, but we did not stop. Just like the kid's dad promised. The train slowed, in front of us, a wagon with the door open appeared. *Our window.*

“There!” The kid gasped, running as fast as his tiny legs allowed. “It's closing! The window, Ranger!” He was right. Steadily, the Train was gaining speed again. “Come on!”

Without thinking I took his body in my arms, ignoring the squeal of surprise he let out, and throwing him inside the wagon. There was a long moment of silence as I kept running to catch up. A second later his head poked out. “Ranger!”

“Stay!” I screamed over the noise, trying to run faster and snatch the handle.

“Ranger run!” The kid screamed as I ran beside the train. I could barely keep up with each minute going faster and faster. “Ranger!” I pressed harder, until I could barely keep up with the edge of the open wagon. The kid standing over its side, hand outstretched. “Ranger! Hurry!”

I jumped, my hand barely closed around the door when the train accelerated again, my body was thrown back by the fierce force of the speed. My back slammed hard, but I held tight, pushing myself inside the wagon. The kid pulled at the collar of my shirt, helping to pull me inside. I braced myself, pushing with all I had. There was a loud gasp when I fell on my back, and the kid rushed to my side, eyes looking at me with tears. I scrambled to my knees.

When I looked from the edge of the wagon one more time, I did it just in time to see Mattias eyes staring back at me. Nathan's Glock on his grasp. “Mattias!” His eyes looked into mine for a minute, his mouth moving in a silent whisper, then he pressed the gun to his temple. *‘Do not forget us.’*

My fingers spread, reaching, even though I knew he would never be able to take them. “Never,” I promised back in a whisper he never heard. Tears fell down my cheeks. “I'll never forget you.” I didn't hear the gun going off, nor did I see his body fall.

I turned away, my back slamming against the cold metal of the wagon. For a moment, I just... laid there. Staring at the wagon's roof until the darkness came, the night sky, a blur of blue and white dots. "Ranger?" The kid whispered after a while, bringing me back to the present. I didn't reply. Silently dragging myself to the edge of the wagon, the world went by in a fast blur, the wind blowing violently against my face. My eyes lost themselves on the horizon. The trees blurred away in a big green mass. The emptiness in my chest echoed like the faint howls of Exspiravit, singing a low goodbye. Singing a song of grief.

"It was always about us, isn't it? In this world, they never stood a chance."

"Ranger?" the kid asked, confused.

"I understand," I whispered with conviction, and finally, the tears gathered in my eyes fell, getting lost in the wind and scattering like my heart, somewhere far away in the remains of the ancient city. Leaving traces of me behind in Exspiravit. "I understand now."

"Stephen." The kid suddenly blurted.

I looked up with tears in my eyes, he was a blurry mass in the darkness. "What?"

"My name," he whispered, looking away. "My name is Stephen."

I looked away as well, out to the blurring green landscape. A cold shiver settling in my chest. One I wasn't sure would ever leave. Another life, another chance, another path away from the family I left behind. There might be new friends, new beginnings. But deep inside me, I knew I would remain the same, always the same. *For them. For us. No more running away.*

"Rue," I whispered to the sky, looking away from my old life. "My name is Rue."