

My kill resting in the storage compartment under my chair, I started home. I rolled down the rocky dirt roads of the island, and when I came to a straight path, I switched my chair to automatic. People were out doing their everyday work. Mothers hung out their laundry to dry in the sun and wind. Little children raced around on their hoverboards, sending tinkling laughter through the air. The children too young to fly followed far behind, asking to get a ride.

The men were somewhere out in the forest at the top level of the island, hunting. They could only hunt so much, though. Food was precious. If you didn't hunt, you either had to grow your own food, or barter with others who had grown it in their backyards. The most common meat was poultry, because a lot of birds lived on the island since the earth wasn't suitable...or safe. When they were ready to settle someplace, at twilight they flew up into the air until they came to our island, where they settled in trees until morning.

My father used to tell me that once, common birds were mostly black or brown. He told me that radioactivity on earth had caused mutations, so now they're colors like bright purple or red, with long, reflecting feathers. He also told me that crows, which we now call swoaps weren't always as big as my arm.

"That's better thought," I thought. "More meat."

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"Pip! I'm home!" I yelled, setting my kill on the wooden table in the middle of our small kitchen.

"Hey, wheels! I'm in the garage!" He called. I sighed and shook my head. It's been five years, and he still doesn't get that I hate that pet name. Either that, or he just doesn't care.

"Stop calling me wheels," I grumbled loudly and rolled down the wide hallway. Again, I'm struck by appreciation on how Pip rebuilt the hallways and doors so I can get around. I rolled down the ramp out the back door, and into the fading afternoon.

The garage (which isn't exactly a garage, but more like a workshop) sat at the bottom of the hill draped under branches of trees, about three times as big as our home. It's easily one of the biggest buildings on the island, about 8,000square feet. It makes sense that it would be so big, since that's where Pip works- making all the gadgets and tools used on the island. I went up the ramp Pip made for me and into the front door. I rolled onto the clean tiled floor, and spotted Pip hanging upside down over someone's broken hover board.

“What didja score today? He asked. I leaned back in my chair and smiled proudly.

“Nothing for you,” I joked. Pip chuckled and continued to tinker inside the twinkling white disc.

“Get this, I caught three swoaps and a neekl. The neekl flew higher than usual today, so I was able to shoot it. I paused. “What do ya have to say about that, huh?”

“I say...” Pip turned off the hoverboard, unbuckled his hover belt, and flipped onto the tiles, landing with a solid thud,

“...I taught you well!” he laughed,

“Show-off,” I muttered. He dropped his tools on the smooth wooden counter on the left side of the workroom and started switching off the power. Pip’s one of the select few who can control the power they receive. The only other ones who can do so are the Isla Eope Grand Council. In the house, we have to use candles like everyone else.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said. I nodded in agreement, turned myself around, and rolled outside. Pip following behind me, I pressed the orange button on the side of the door for it to close behind him.

We went up the hill to our home. I pressed the auto drive on my chair and leaned back. It felt good to relax my arms after a long day of moving around. Pip walked alongside me, always ready to help if I needed it. But I don’t need it. The reason he installed auto drive on my chair in the first place is because I kept trying to go up the hill by my own strength.

I can be stubborn sometimes.

I looked over at Pip and smiled. He nodded his head in approval. I was using his technology instead of almost killing myself...

...again.

“So who’s hoverboard was that?” I asked curiously. It’s not every day you see a broken hoverboard. A hoverboard, yes, but not a broken one. Islanders took great care in the technology they received from the Grand Council. Living on the island, everyone only got one hoverboard every ten years, and not all of them could afford to get them fixed if something happened to them.

“Some trainee.”

“Oh.” I paused for a moment. I looked up at him and saw the sudden tension cloud his eyes.

“Well,” I took my voice up a few octaves. “I hope they do well.”

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“Come on, Kimmi,” Ocram said, grabbing a hold of the handles on my wheelchair. “It’s time for the evening broadcast.”

“Ugh,” I complained. “Ocram! I can push myself outside. And I don’t want to see the evening broadcast. It’s all the same crap every time...”

“You are so stubborn,” he grumbled, and let go.

I stopped and turned myself back around to the counter. No way was I going outside while the broadcast was on. All they would talk about is life on Mars, rubbing their wealth in our unlucky faces. Then they would continue on to show the local news...another death, training, and the competition.

The Competition.

I grabbed my glass and shook my head at it. It’s enough that I have to be in this wheelchair, but I won’t let what could have been hurt me any longer.

I listened for Ocram. I listened for the sound of a door closing, or footsteps coming closer, anything. The sounds of the empty bar echoed in my ears. Everyone else is outside, looking up at the sky with hopeful eyes. I kept my eyes on my glass, now empty. I listened.

Ocram placed his gloved hand on my shoulder. How did he get over here so quietly?

“Kimmi,” he said softly, “You won’t make me watch them alone, will you?”

I opened my mouth to say yes, I would, when I looked into his pleading eyes. He gazed down at me with hope. His grey eyes told me that I was his only friend, his only family, and the only one he had. His eyes told me that he cared about me, and that even though half of the things he said he did for himself, he really did for them for me.

I sighed. No, I couldn’t let him watch them alone. That’s the thing about Ocram, he never stopped dreaming.

I nodded. Wordlessly defeated, I turned myself around and let him push me outside the bar into the cold night. It’s always freezing at night, being so high up in the air. I pulled my coat tighter around me as Ocram pushed me steadily down the road that led to the center of the island.

We went along, him pushing, and our breath trailing behind us like smoke. He noticed and we both laughed. I started making train sounds and made him laugh harder.

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The square came into view a few minutes later. Our laughter died, and we stood on the hill overlooking it. Hundreds of people crowded onto huge metal plate that was the ground. Nervous chatter and forced excitement buzzed through the air. Mothers and children warmed themselves by burning trash against the small wooden houses circling the gathering, and men held shot-slings over their shoulders, bragging about some mutant creature they killed.

“Thanks for coming,” Ocram breathed. He tightened his grip on my wheelchair, and slowly pushed me forward.

I said nothing. I kept my eyes on the sky above us, deep purple. Longing (something familiar) pinched at my heart, but I shoved it away.

“Let’s do this,” I whispered. I pulled my ecofur jacket tighter around me, coaxing it to hold in more of my body heat. I never come to the broadcasts.

He pushed me down the hill, and as we accelerated the cold wind slapped me in the face. Ocram groaned and held onto his hat, which the wind tried to snatch from his head.

When we came into view in the square, conversations began to die down. Curious and pitiful looks rained on me. Ocram laid a sympathetic hand on my shoulder and let go of my handles. He knows that I hate to be pushed around while others are watching. It makes me look helpless.

My face burning with embarrassment and anger at myself for showing up, I stuck my chin in the air and pushed myself forward. As we entered the crowd, people stepped aside until there was a clear pathway for us to get through. Little children gaped at me in wonder, grown men who had known my father shook their heads at me in pity, and the women wouldn’t look me in the eyes.

I snuck a peek at Ocram. He walked right beside me, hand clenched, chin stuck high like mine. He’s such a good friend. Anyone else would meet up with me when the broadcast is over, but not Ocram. His loyalty was refreshing. If he could do it, so could I.

“Hello everyone!” I said with fake cheer. Surprised, Ocram looked at me out of the corner of his eyes, questioning me, I winked at him. A small smile fought its way onto his face.

When we got to the edge of the square, the metal under our feet softly vibrated.

The broadcast was about to begin.

Everyone turned to face the middle of the square. After a few moments, out of an opening in the metal floor a small robotic projector came out and lit up the night sky. I breathed in wonder. I don't usually see the broadcast, but when I do, I have to admit that they're beautiful.

All eyes stayed locked on the screen. It began to play music, a weird sound that reminded me of metal plates scraping together at different amplitudes. I frowned in disgust. Did they really listen to this on earth? When the introduction was over, a loud, cheerful voice pounded our ears. A fair skinned woman with long, bouncy black hair and a wide smile came onto the screen. She wore weird clothing: An orange jacket-like thing that fit snugly on her breast with a blue flower over her heart. Her nails were painted blue with white tips, and she wore rainbow colored contacts.

"Hello citizens of Isla Eope! I am Norema Colbert and I'm here to bring you your evening broadcast all the way from Eden."

They renamed a planet? First it was Mars, and now it's Eden? What kind of name is that?

"Constructors have now developed new luxury living units on the Copolian Ocean. Citizens of Eden can now vacation in true a paradise because of our manipulated temperatures and sandy beaches.

The camera then switches to a tan-skinned man in a thick white suit holding an orange helmet. He smiles broadly and starts speaking.

"The crew and I really had a blast working on these new living units. With hard work and dedication, anything can get done!"

Norema returned, stared right into the lens, and continued speaking.

"The Edian economy continues to thrive as more and more jobs are being created. More young men are coming to age and going out into the world building their own businesses and raising happy, healthy families.

In other news, the latest Edian styles have hit the shopping centers, and what a wonderful response they've gotten!"

The woman goes on to talk about all the stuff teenagers are wearing. We're shown some clips of wild acting kids my age wearing these outrageous, colorful things with strange patterns. This is what Ocrum wanted me to see so badly?

I tuned out and took a look around me. Every face stared up at the screen. I looked into some of their eyes. Most were hopeful- either for their children or for themselves. They hoped that they could somehow make it with the few chances they had left.

Some were hopeless. They looked on with bitter resentment as well as sadness that they couldn't do anything special with their lives.

And a select few were filled with longing, hoping to see a glimpse of their loved one that had made it.

I looked down at my lap. I hated to think what Ogram might see in my eyes. Which was I? Hopeful, hopeless, or desperate?

"The constructors here on Eden are now preparing another living unit for the winter of Isla Eope's yearly competition."

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I sat on the edge of a cliff, watching the waves and stars. The deep purple water pulsed beneath me with life and secrets. The wind carefully pulled my long, dark hair back from my face and held it. I thought of my father, and what he was doing at that moment. I thought of where he was, who he was with...

..and if he was thinking of me.

I closed my eyes and tried to picture him. His strong, broad shoulders, and his bulging, thick arms and neck. Through my lids I saw the short black ponytail he always wore at the base of his neck, and the lines around his eyes when he smiled.

I remember the long days he would spend training me. Other people were being trained by the professional trainers sent from Eden, but my father insisted that he train me himself. And every day, when he put me to bed, he would tell me the same thing.

"You did good today," he said softly, pushing a strand of hair from my face and tucking it behind my ear. My father smiled at me and I smiled back.

"Will you be leaving tomorrow?" I asked. He shook his head and grabbed my hands in his.

"Not yet, but soon." He looked at me and saw the tears well up in my eyes.

"You'll go when you're ready. Only when you're ready. You'll win and you'll meet me there, and we'll be together again" He looked at me steadily.

"How do you know?" I asked, the tears spilling over. I didn't want him to leave.

“Don’t cry.” He paused. “Crying shows weakness. You are not weak, you are strong. Like a warrior. You are my little warrior.” He brushed the tears from my cheeks and held his hands over mine.

“You know how I know you’ll win?” He asked. I waited.

“Because you are meant for more than this dead planet, and you’re meant for more than this island.”

A confused look came over my face.

“So, where do I belong?”

My father let go of my hands, and pointed out at the window by my bedside at the twinkling night sky.

“On nights when I’m not here, and you ask yourself that question, look up at the sky, find the dimmest star, and know that that’s where you are supposed to be.”

“But father, why the dimmest?”

“Because, the dimmest are the ones that are the farthest away, and the most rewarding to get to.” He answered. He then leaned down and kissed me on the forehead. I closed my eyes and savored this moment. He smelled like fresh-cut grass and the salt of the ocean.

“Never be afraid to go beyond what you can’t see,” he whispered. “and never be afraid to trust something you don’t understand.”

“Yes, father.” I said obediently. He kissed me on the forehead, and blew out the candle giving light to the room.

The salty tears rolled down my cheeks like waves, crashing at the base of my neck where my locket sat. The locket that my father gave me before he left of the ship, which said “Never keep fighting.”

I let him down. I didn’t listen to the most important rule he taught me: Only compete when I’m ready. I was in such a rush to get to him that I competed the year after he left. During the first stage, I fell off my hoverboard.

With blurry eyes I looked down at my dead legs, and a sob finally fought its way out of me. I held my head in my hands, and my spirit slowly and painfully broke to pieces. I let him down.

My chest heaved like the ocean, finally pushing out all the guilt and shame, all the loneliness and disappointment.

Hopeless.

All I could see was my father millions of miles away, looking up at the sky, and wondering where I am.

I let him down.

The tears dried by the wind were quickly replaced, because when I somehow found the dimmest star in the sky, I knew that I would never be able to reach it.