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An Underground World: Creative Writing in the Dystopian Genre

by

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ABSTRACT

Despite its importance for the creation of a compelling story, world-building is often overlooked in literary studies due to its complexity, with studies instead favoring analysis of plot, character, or situation. The dystopian genre dictates why world-building is a crucial element for fictional writing because it showcases a manipulated relationship between writer and reader. Using the overlap in possible worlds and actual worlds, this paper explores how world-building incites change in the actual world due to a reader correlating the possible world with their own. By way of example, my paper features the first three chapters of my dystopian novel, The Cleaners, where humanity has fled underground to escape climate change. World-building is featured heavily in these chapters to describe not only the physical setting, as well as the social structure and class system, in an attempt to persuade readers to acknowledge and then incite change towards global warming/ climate change.
INTRODUCTION

From the imagination of a child, to table-top gaming, to the newest best-selling novel or on-screen blockbuster, world-building is a pivotal process to the success of any form of entertainment. Imaginary worlds, which can range from the size of a single narrative to entire franchises, are often overlooked in literary studies. As Mark J. P. Wolf states in his book, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, imaginary worlds are often only considered tangentially. Rather than a subject of study, they are merely a place where a story appears and are only seen as background noise to literary studies. Wolf argues that the reason imaginary worlds are overlooked is because they are complex and difficult to describe. Instead, it is easier to base an analysis around a story, character, or situation (2). However, despite their complexity, worlds are important elements that exist in both fictional and nonfictional stories and work to connect authors and readers together. Using concepts such as possible worlds theory (and its connection to Actual world), as well as immersion, absorption, saturation, and overflow I will showcase why imaginary worlds and the process to create them should take more precedent in literary studies. In addition, I will explore dystopian world-building as it relates to my own writing as well as the popularization of the genre in recent major novels/films. I also believe that the dystopian genre best exemplifies the relationship forged through world-building because it incites change. Unlike the fantasy genre, the dystopia manipulates the shared space between possible world and Actual world to portray a message that will resonate with the reader.

In my novel, the underground society of *The Cleaners* features a community set hundreds of years into the future. Due to climate change and Global Warming, humans have fled to underground caverns to escape the uninhabitable heat occurring on the Earth’s surface. The story
follows the main protagonist, Sky Hawkins, a character shaped by the inescapable and enclosed environment he has lived his entire life. He is forced to endure class stigma and political corruptness in an isolationist society separated from other human communities.

The first three chapters have been included for the creative writing portion of my thesis. These chapters were selected because they heavily focus on the initial world-building, including not only the physical setting, but also the class structure, the community’s history, the main character’s personal history, and how the society functions as a whole. As such, the chapters make up roughly the first quarter of the novel. Chapter four will include the death of Sky’s mother. Without the codependency they have placed upon each other, Sky will be able to reflect on his life living in the community and ultimately decide to leave. This feat will not be easy, however, because of the power that the governing figures, the Knowers, hold over the rest of the community. Their watch dogs, the titular Cleaners, act as the enforcement group and show little restraint when it comes to keeping the working force, the Mud-shackers, in their place as the lowest members in the society. In addition, Sky will need to find a way out of his underground home, secure enough provisions, and learn to navigate the treacherous features of the post-apocalyptic above ground world. Sky will overcome these difficulties by banding together with a small group of other young adults who share his belief that the community has become a place with no future. In the end, the group will be able to escape, with the unfortunate sacrifice of Sky’s best friend, Leon.

My writing was influenced on the growing concern of climate change. While humans have not been forced underground by these environmental factors, climate change has already caused damage to the Earth. Ice caps are melting, sea-levels are rising, and animals are migrating north to cooler temperatures and are fighting for survival. Humans are the ultimate cause of these
changes. In their study, La Fuente, Rojas, and MacLean states, “that engagement in fighting climate change at the individual level (and therefore in human behaviour) are critical to address climate change effectively” because, “if people do not feel or see that they are personally affected by climate change, it will be more difficult to achieve the required changes.” In other words, every single person needs to do their part if any change is to succeed. Everyone has a responsibility to help stop climate change, but to have this occur, a mass majority of the population needs to recognize they have a duty to do so. If just one person comes to terms with this individual change, then there is the potential for them to spread the idea to others, who will then spread it even further in a continuous cycle.

My hope is that my finished novel will incite a large enough recognition that climate change is a serious endeavor and needs to be addressed immediately. How I will attempt to accomplish that is through the world-building in my novel. More specifically, it will be through world-building in a dystopian setting.

World-building is a complex tool used in fiction writing. I focus on it instead of other elements of fiction (i.e. characterization) because at its core, world-building leads to the other elements. Aside from the physical setting of the world, like geography and such, world-building also encompasses the story world's other defining factors like culture, history, social classes, and more. These factors contribute to elements of fiction. For example, class structure and where a character finds themself placed in its hierarchy will lead towards characterization. In The Cleaners, Sky is a low-class worker who, after facing constant stigma due to his status, is a very pessimistic and anxious man.

Before beginning with the ideas of world-building, it is necessary to understand what the concept of a world is. It is easy to define the world as solely as a planet, whether it be Earth or an
otherworldly/ fantastical place. However, Marie-Laure Ryan in her article *The Aesthetics of Proliferation*, uses the Oxford Dictionary’s nine definitions of “world” to describe the concept as a *totality of everything*. She states that a storyworld is, “not just the spatial setting where a story takes place, it is a complex spatio-temporal totality that undergoes global changes,” and, “is an imagined totality that evolves according to the events told in the story” (33). So, a storyworld is a place that is not encumbered by a strict placement, but rather is everything that is shaped around the story and changes to adapt to the stories needs. An example for this would include genre conventions that would propel the story forward, like advanced technology or new political systems in science-fiction novels.

While the concept of a storyworld is still broad in its idea of totality, when looking at it in terms of imaginary or possible worlds it becomes much more focused. Wolf touches upon the comparative nature between imaginary worlds and the Actual world (or primary world). He states that the Actual world acts as a template for imaginary worlds. This is important for the success of the imaginary world because readers will naturally fill in any gaps of knowledge, things not described in the world, with assumptions based on their Actual world (World Design 67). A simplified example would be that a reader will unconsciously assume that the narrator is a basic human that has two arms, two legs, a head, etc., unless something in the story would state otherwise. This process has been noted as the “reality principle,” and “the principle of minimal departure.” Using this comparative action, an imaginary world is created by inducing a change that makes it different from the Actual world, whether it be a large or small change Ryan refers to the degree of change as distance from the Actual world. She states:

> In a possible worlds perspective, imaginary worlds can be situated at variable distances from the world we regard as actual or primary; for
instance, the world of the realistic novel such as Jonathan Frazen’s lowerclassmen book Freedom (2010) stands closer to the Actual world than the world of fantasy such as The Lord of the Rings (Ontological Rules 74).

The imaginary world is made from how it deviates from the Actual world, where the more it deviates the more distinct it becomes because it is less like the world we experience in our day-to-day lives. Realistic fiction and other fiction that closely relates itself to the Actual world requires less from the imaginary world because the reader will naturally fill in any untold elements with what they know. In contrast, fantasy and supernatural fiction can be quite unlike the Actual world and thus requires more from the imaginary world. This could include unique species, setting, social conventions, or whatever it is that makes it different from the Actual world. These added descriptions and elements are necessary to give life to this unseen world.

When introduced to any successful imaginary world, the captivated reader will experience immersion, absorption and saturation. Wolf references the terms as “liquid metaphors,” since the idea for the worlds is to encapsulate the reader inside of them, similar to being under water. When speaking of immersion for fiction it is conceptual or emotional immersion, instead of a physical one. It is reliant on the reader’s imagination, where if the world supplies enough detail and description then the reader will “enter” into the imagined world. However, for the reader to be truly immersed it requires absorption. Absorption is divided into two parts. First, the reader is pulled into the fiction world with their attention and imagination. Secondly, the reader absorbs the information in the imaginary world, constructing the world in to their imagination, allowing them to block out their physical surroundings. The more details a world has, the more the imaginary world fills the mind of the reader. When there are so many details that it becomes impossible to remember them all the reader then experiences saturation.
Wolf states that saturation is, “the pleasurable goal of conceptual immersion; the occupying of the audience’s full attention and imagination, often with more detail than can be held in the mind at once” (49). Having a high amount of saturation replicates the Actual world, which has so much information it can’t be held in the mind all at once. This point beyond saturation is an overflow (of information), which is required to keep a world alive in the imagination. Without overflow, a reader will believe they’ve mastered all there is to know in the imaginary world and become bored with it. The overflow leaves one to believe that there is always something being left out (50). This point beyond saturation is why when someone reads a book over again they are able to find new pieces of information that they do not recall from a previous reading(s).

Dystopian writing, a subgenre of science-fiction, is a key example of the importance of world-building because of its correlation between possible worlds and the Actual world. As described in Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan’s introduction to Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination, the dystopian imagination is used to warn of sociopolitical tendencies that could turn our contemporary world into the bleak future depicted in the writing (1-2). Paolo Bertetti states in his essay, “Building Science-Fiction Worlds,” a possible world overlaps with the Actual world and only differentiates from it in certain aspects, giving the example of mind reading in the Sci-Fi novel, Dying Inside by Robert Silverberg. Everything in the world behaves the same as the Actual world, the only difference being the one mind reading character. In addition, he states that fictional worlds are all incomplete, since every single detail of every aspect of the world cannot be written about the world. Instead, the worlds are left open for the interpretation of the reader, who will then fill in any lacking information
with what they know (49). Bertetti’s writing correlates with Wolf and Ryan’s ideas of how the reader responds to imaginary worlds.

A fantasy world like J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* takes place in a world unlike the Actual world where physical and natural laws are not compatible between the two (Bertetti 52). In contrast, a dystopian world behaves much differently. A dystopian writer lays down the foundation, a warning, for a possible world that could one day come true in the hopes that the reader will see this world, relate it to their own, and then understand the intended message. In other words, the writer is manipulating the overlap of the fictional world and the Actual world so that the reader is forced to reflect on the possibility of the change in the contemporary world. This can be done through a variety of ways with different types of catalysts, as shown through recent popularization of the genre across a variety of mediums, including *The Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins, *The Maze Runner* series by James Dashner, several of the *X-Men* comic series, and *Attack on Titan* by Hajime Isayama. I chose this selection of examples from the genre because my own dystopian writing corresponds with many of the situations depicted in the stories, including isolationism, corrupt government, environmental disasters, disease, and discrimination.

*The Hunger Games* was first published in 2008 and has since expanded into two sequel novels as well as a film adaptation. The plot follows Katniss Everdeen, a teen who lives in a post-apocalyptic North America where the wealthy Capitol uses the twelve surrounding districts to supply them with natural resources and labor. In addition, each district is forced to submit one teenage boy and girl to compete in a televised gladiatorial-like event where the “tributes” fight to the death until only one remains as a punishment for a past rebellion by the districts.
In this dystopian world, the county of Panem is ruled by a totalitarian dictatorship where the wealthy live lavish and wasteful lifestyles and everyone else is forced to surrender all they have. Those that live in the districts are kept in line through military oppression, constant monitoring, propaganda, fear tactics, and censorship. This is all done to dissuade ideas of rebellion.

_The Maze Runner_ was published in 2009 and was the first in the series with two sequels and two prequel novels, along with a film adaptation. The story is set in a post-apocalyptic world where the planet was devastated by solar flares, killing much of the population and leaving many of the survivors with an incurable disease called the Flare. Thomas, the main protagonist, is put into an ever changing maze filled with mechanical monsters, where he and the other twenty teen boys, as later told, are being tested as a way to find a cure for the Flare.

This series differs most from the other listed examples. This is because rather than the cause of the dystopia being human decisions and corruptness, the story warns of natural disasters in the form of weather and disease. The solar flares leave the planet in ruin, with some sections being transformed into desert wastelands as depicted in _The Scorch_ (the second book in the series). While many were killed due to the environmental factors, many others were left tormented by the mind-altering disease that caused violent and uncontrollable outbursts. Finding a cure is the main motivation for much of the plot, though this is only discovered later in the series.

_The X-Men_ comic series, created by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, was first published by Marvel Comics in 1963 and has since expanded across multiple books, television shows, films, and videogames. This series in its long standing has produced several dystopian variants,
including Days of Future Past and Age of Apocalypse, both of which have been adapted into the animated TV series' as well as the live action films.

The Days of Future Past (1981 by Chris Claremont, John Byrne, and Terry Austin) storyline showcases a future world where mutants, human-beings that are born with superhero-like abilities (i.e. telekinesis, shape-shifting, elemental control), are hunted down by robots called Sentinels and the world is heading towards a nuclear holocaust. The titular team of mutant-heroes attempts to rewrite the future by stopping the catalyst in the past.

Similarly, the Age of Apocalypse (a 1995 crossover series) deals with time travel, but in an opposite scenario. Professor Charles Xavier, the well-known leader of the future X-Men and mutant himself, is killed due to a time travel accident and the future is rewritten. The Professor’s death leads Apocalypse, an ancient mutant, to attack 10 years earlier than he did in the original timeline and he takes over Earth. He declares mutants the ruling class and creates a genocide of regular humans. Again, time travel is used to fix the future.

Racism is a reoccurring theme in the X-Men universe, reflecting the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, where the mutants are seen as the heinous other. Stan Lee wrote in December 1968 column, ‘Stan’s Soapbox,’ “let’s lay it right on the line. Bigotry and racism are among the deadliest social ills plaguing the world today.” As shown, Lee had a strong opinion when it came to racism and his intolerance of it. This was heavily depicted in his comics. While the roles are reversed between the two spin-offs of the X-Men series, both dystopian story lines in the comics tackle the idea of how destructive the tendency of racism can be. The two story arcs show the opposite sided extremes of how racism can be detrimental to the world no matter who it is directed towards, and Lee openly warns against it.
The Japanese comic (manga) *Attack on Titan*, published in 2009 and later adapted into an anime, features a dystopian fantasy world where humans are hunted down by man-eating giants called Titans. What’s left of humanity hides in a county protected by walls surrounding it until the wall is destroyed and humans are forced to fight against the Titans. The story follows Eren as he fights for his life alongside his friends as well as trying to unravel the mystery that are these monsters.

*Attack on Titan* shares similar aspects with zombie-apocalypse type stories. The titans are mindless beasts, with humanesque characteristics, that far outnumber the humans and whose only focus is to devour them. However, even without the monster scenario, the story is still dystopian at its core because it deals with an authoritarian-monarchy, where the population has no choice but to follow their king due to their situation of literally being trapped inside a wall, even if it means people marching to their death. The story also deals with militarism, showcasing child recruitment and the “glory” of dying an honorable death with speeches and suicidal missions where soldiers have the choice of just dying or dying fighting for their country.

As described, each example has its own type of warning displayed in the dystopian setting. While some may overlap with each other, each story is still unique in how it warns against a particular problem. My novel touches upon many different aspects, but the overall cautioning concerns climate change and the need to band together to stop its progression.

In Ryan’s term of distance, *The Cleaners* deviates from the Actual world much more than the *X-Men* series, which is placed in modern American society, but not as far as *Attack on Titan*, which is set in a world with various degrees of technology and giant monsters that run amuck. Instead, it is settled in a mid-ground distance, similarly to Collins’ and Dashner’s works. This is done to show readers that while the disastrous situation has not occurred yet, it is not an
impossibility. Using a future, post-apocalyptic world as a deviance to the Actual world will hopefully provide the reader with a sense of urgency. This is because this world-building creates a warning that the described possible world could become a reality in the Actual world.

*The Cleaners* diverges enough from the Actual world to give it its own sense of self, however, it also stays close enough to provide an unmistakable warning to the readers. From the first sentence, the story states what caused this outcome and that humanity is to blame. By doing so I intend to inspire action from readers as a response of the warning displayed. I combine the real-world threat of Global Warming within a dystopian universe where mankind and the Earth are suffering from humans not changing their habits, causing readers to see the world I describe and then reflect on their own life choices by relating my fictional world to their Actual world. Manipulating the reader to connect the two worlds will induce a personal connection between the reader and climate change, which in turn will then call for an individual change. When this happens, then those who seek an individual change will increase, causing a larger mass doing their part to help the environment.

Many factors contribute to how a reader connects to the stories they read, like the character or the setting or theme, but nothing connects the reader and the author more than the world that is built in the fiction. Imaginary worlds exist through how they depart from the Actual world. This departing gives life to the piece, making it interesting and causing the reader to want to be immersed into this world. Where the imaginary world remains similar to the Actual world is where the reader connects to it. They take what they already know and experience from the Actual world and place it in to the fiction, giving them a sense of familiarity. Doing so allows a dystopian writing to take this familiar notion and force the reader to recognize a particular problem through a series of warnings. These warnings can vary in degree and styles, whether it
be because of natural causes or mankind. Either way, the message is still the same. Action needs to take place or the world will turn to ruin.
Nearly 700 years ago, our fair planet finally succumbed to the disease that was man. After the many years of harmful pollution due to human-made machinery and products, Earth had become essentially uninhabitable. The destruction of our atmosphere caused the climate to rise in temperature, the plants began to die, the animals were disappearing, the ice caps were melting, the oceans rose and shores were wiped out. How was man to survive the tragedy that they had brought upon themselves? Simple. After much planning, research, and preparation, humans fled deep underground, like many animals once did to escape the intense heat of desert climates, in communities located as far north as possible. The plan was to wait out this tragedy, hoping that with man out of the way, the Earth would slowly begin to repair itself. After the appropriate amount of time had passed, we humans would ascend from our shelter to once again reclaim the lands we had called home for millennia.

R.C.
Chapter 1

Sky swayed as he stood in line, his body demanding rest. Working two consecutive shifts each day had left him exhausted. *Not yet,* he thought. He ran his fingers over the worn material of the plain sack he held, the rough material giving him comfort in its familiarity. It was empty, except for the air filled bottles resting at its bottom.

The lights from the cave ceiling flickered overhead, keeping the the community lit in lieu of any natural source of brightness. The lights never went out. Someone, somewhere was always working a shift. He had never heard anyone complain about it. The dim lighting was much better than being left in total darkness.

Finally reaching the entrance to the distribution center, Sky stood before a man who sat behind the wall that separated the two, except for the large cut out that allowed for them to interact.

“Name?” the distributor asked, clearly bored.

“Hawkins, Sky.”

The man took out one binder and flipped through it. “Hawkins, Sky. Hawkins, Sky. Ah, here you are. Will it be just your rations or will you be collecting for your mother as well?”

“For the both of us, please.”

The distributor jotted down something on a slip of paper as he referenced the information from his binder. While Sky could not see what he wrote, he could only assume the man was keeping track of his name and the rations he and his mother would receive for the day. The man then took the sack and empty bottles from Sky and tossed the items, along with the paper, at the young boy who had been standing quietly next to him. “Two rations, and don’t keep me waiting,
boy!” The boy scurried off to do as he had been told, returning a moment later with his rations, and handed the once empty sack to Sky. He opened the sack to find two small potatoes, both of which could easily fit into the palm of his hand. The bottles of water sat next to them.

“That’s it?”

“Yes, it says here that your mother didn’t meet her quota the last few days. So that’s all. Unless you’ve got something to say about it.” The man smirked at Sky, knowing full well that the younger individual wouldn’t dare challenge him. “So what’s it going to be? Got something to say?

“No, Sir.” Sky said. His jaw clenched as he held back his anger at the situation.

“And? Did your mother forget to teach you manners, like she forgot how to do her job properly?”

“No, Sir. Thank you, Sir.”

“Good, now get out of my sight. Next!”

Sky turned around and stalked off, the bag of rations held tightly in his hand as he returned home.

Back turned to his mother as he cooked, Sky listened to her even breathing almost meticulously, waiting for any hiccup of uneasiness in the process. The steady flow of air was easy to detect in the one room home. He dumped his half of the day’s water rations into a well-used black pot, filling it enough to cover half of the two small potatoes. Tossing in a clump of salt for flavor, Sky set the pot over a small open fire before sitting on the ground at the side of the bed where his mother slept, the only bed in the home. Leaning his head back, he let out a sigh
as he gently flexed his shoulders and back, feeling the tension slowly leave his tired and sore body.

For the Mud-Shackers like himself, those who lived on the outer edges of the village in homes constructed out of mainly rocks slathered together by a mixture of mud and the occasional piece of wood, work mostly consisted of carrying water from the underground lake to the purifying building. Carrying bucket after bucket of water each day, whether by hand or hung on poles and then rested on their shoulders, put a strain on the feeble peoples’ bodies, often resulting in hunched backs and bruised necks. With little chance to build muscle due to lack of food, the long hours of labor did nothing but weaken them further. It was not uncommon to see ‘Shackers pass out from exertion or exhaustion, almost on a daily basis. Sky himself had done so more than once.

The water carriers were the lucky ones, however. Many others had it much worse. Those assigned to the plantation were made to plow and churn the fields of dirt where the seeds of genetically modified food was grown. Each day a new field had to be prepped for the next batch of plants to grow to feed the community. The heavy farming materials strained the workers’ bodies, almost to the point of ruin. Still, Sky would rather work the fields than spend hours on end producing electricity for the village. Since there was no wind or running sources of water to produce energy, the duty fell on the people, using their own body power to pedal on stationary machines or push cranks and large wheels with no breaks until the next shift came in.

With his mother’s body continuing to fail, he had been forced to take on her workload, so that no one took notice and cut their meager rations even further. He began each day working his mother’s shift, running water from the underground lake to the purity plant. After which, he trudged the fields for his own duties. By the time he was done, he barely had enough time to
collect his family’s daily rations before the distribution building closed for the day. He had no choice in the matter, only the useful were fed. Those were the same rules the first settlers followed, and so they remained.

Just as his eyes began to close he felt a hand smooth back his sweaty dark brown hair. He let himself enjoy the small comfort momentarily, reminded of the same repetitive action from his childhood as he slept cuddled close to his mother. “Hey,” he murmured.

“Hello, my darling,” his mother said softly, her voice so quiet he could have easily missed it had he not been listening for the reply. Her hand travelled to his face, scratching at something on his left cheek, most likely dirt that had been caked on from the fields. “You’re positively filthy.”

Sky grabbed her hand. Her fingers were so thin they were almost skeletal. He could probably break her fingers if he applied the slightest pressure. He let go and stood up to check on the food, mixing their large, dented spoon through the water so that nothing stuck to the bottom due to neglect. There was nothing worse than trying to scrape off burnt bits from their only pot. Not willing to waste any water to soak any burnt food, Sky would have to use his fingernails to scratch away at it, often breaking his nails and resulting in them being jagged for weeks afterwards.

Sky kept his back turned from his mother. He refused to look at her fragile body, choosing instead to watch the water boil their pathetic meal.

“You must be tired. Why don’t I watch the food while you rest, and then after we eat you can go and wash up and we can take a light walk.”

“I’m fine,” Sky said. “You just sit there, and wait.”

“Darling-”
“Don’t ‘Darling’ me.” Sky slammed the spoon down, the clanking sound cutting through the air, his voice calm and even despite his forceful actions. “Please, just do as I say.”

“Sky,” his mother called out to him. “Sky,” she repeated. “Sky, look at me.” When she realized he wasn’t going to do so, she said, “I’m going to work my shift tomorrow.”

He picked the spoon back up and thrust it into the water. The potatoes had finally started to soften and soak up some of the water in the pot. He began turning them into a mush that would be easier for his mother to eat. “No, you’re not.”

“This isn’t up for discussion, I’m going,” she stated firmly.

Sky stopped mashing the food, and then said, “You’re right, this isn’t up for discussion, because tomorrow will go the same way it has been for the last year. I’m going to spend half the day working your shift at the water plant, and then I’ll run over and work the other half dragging rows in those fucking fields, and you are going to stay. Right. Here.”

“Sky, you can’t-”

Her rebuttal was cut off by the sound of a woman’s distraught yell. Sky crossed the small room to peek out from behind the cloth that covered their doorway. A few shacks down the dirt pathway, a woman, who appeared not much older than Sky, was kneeling on the rocky ground, clutching a small child to her chest. Two men covered entirely in pristine black uniforms, from their boots to their full-face helmets, stood over her. Cleaners.

The road was quiet enough for him to hear the exchange, everyone else having gone into their own homes to not so secretly watch what was happening. “No, no, no.” the woman said. “He fine, my son is just fine. You can’t take him. He’s fine.”

“Ma’am, there was a report of a sick child in need of being sent to Quarantine,” one of the Cleaners said, taking a step forward to reach for the child she was protecting.
The woman twisted her body away from the men, trying to shield the boy further from the impending danger. “He’s fine,” she spat out. “My son is fine, you can’t have him. Go find someone else to drag off.”

The first man, having had enough of the hysterical mother, shot his hand forward and grabbed a fistful of her dark hair, wrenching her back. His partner snatched the child from her arms, turning him around to get a full look at the child, his hands on the boy’s shoulders, keeping him in place as he inspected him. Even so, the boy’s head rolled to the side, eyelids fluttering over glazed eyes. He probably wasn’t even aware of what was happening.

The cleaner pressed something on his helmet before stating, “Recording. As of 11:26 PM, Invalid #1361C has been deemed in declining health. Symptoms include inability to focus, appearance of rash on face and arms and-” The cleaner was interrupted as the child seemed to convulse and then start coughing. The forceful expulsions of air echoed off the homes surrounding the group, each cough sounding more wet and painful than the last. Once the fit ended, the boy swayed on his feet. The cleaner’s grip on his shoulders was the only thing keeping him standing. The cleaner took a piece of light-colored cloth from his back pocket and rubbed it down the jacket of his uniform. “and blood produced by coughing fits,” he continued. “Until Invalid #1361 has recovered from his ailments, he shall be removed to Quarantine where he shall be monitored and receive the appropriate care.”

With that, he promptly picked the boy up and took off in the direction of Quarantine, walking down the road with quick and determined focus. The partner, who had kept a steady grip on the woman, released her, throwing her to the ground in the process, before quietly following after the other.
Sky closed the curtain now that the scene was over. It did nothing to muffled the agonized wail that the woman let out as despair of her lost child washed over her.

“How old?” Sky’s mother asked. He turned to look at her for the first time that night. Skin that seemed almost translucent was stretched thin over her skeletal frame. What was once full, dark hair, was now thinned, having fallen out in clumps over time, her teeth as well. Her brown eyes were sunken, and dulled by exhaustion and pain. She looked more monster than human. Her appearance made Sky ill. She was a stark contrast to the lively, happy image he remembered his mother being not long ago.

“Ma’, who cares?” He turned and picked the spoon up, returning to the chore. Deciding that the food was cooked enough, Sky grabbed out their single set of bowls and began filling them with mush. “If I had to guess, he was little more than a babe, no more than four or five. Not that it really matters anyway.”

“Of course it matters. He matters. Are you going to face that poor mother and say that her son doesn’t matter?”

Sky took the spoon and slammed it down again in frustration. “It doesn’t matter because Quarantine is a death sentence. You know as well as I do that once you go into Quarantine you don’t come back out.” Sky took the bowl he was filling and shoved it into his mother’s hands. “And that’s why you don’t leave this damn house.” He turned and walked out of their home, not bothering to wait for her reply.

His body still felt tight with anger as he neared his destination, the outskirts of the Mudshacker’s domain. The village consisted of the three main tiers, forming a half-circle at one side of the gigantic cavern. Sky’s home, along with the rest of his breed, sat at the bottom ring, their
section overflowing with the abundance of the population. The middle-tier held both Quarantine and the distribution building, resulting in it being called the Tier of Hope. The distribution building gave their empty stomachs hope for their next meal, while the rest of them hoped they’d never end up in Quarantine. On the top and final level sat the Knowers. Direct descendants of the leaders that first governed the underground community, they were the ones who knew and decided everything, from who worked in which compound, to the secrets of how their food was grown, to even the status of the above world. They knew, so the rest followed them without question. It’s not like any of the ‘Shackers had any way of maintaining the community if the Knowers were overthrown. Those foolish enough to question were dragged away by Cleaners. Sky knew better than to cause any trouble. What would happen to his mother if he was taken away? She’d probably join him before the day’s end. That’s why he worked so hard, if someone didn’t fill her shift, hell, or if someone even saw her, there’s no doubt that the Cleaners would come for her within the hour. For some reason she didn’t seem to understand the predicament she was in, and it both scared and angered Sky.

Even at the outer edgings of the lowest tier shacks lined the roads with little to no space in between. For a long time it seemed like new homes were being built every day for the constantly growing population. Now, however, many of these homes on the outskirts seemed to be abandoned. With the recent decrease in children being born, and an increase in sickness, homes were being left empty. In an effort to keep the ‘Shacker’s contained into as confined an area as possible, those who lived in the furthest placed homes were corralled by the Cleaners and placed into the shacks closer inside the tier.

While the outer part of the mud-shacks might appear empty, everyone knew that they were not. Instead, they were reconstructed into hidden stations for traders of food rations,
clothes, goods, and any other materials that a poor ‘Shacker could ever want. For the right trade of course. Sky had once traded two days’ worth of rations for a pair of used pants after he had ripped his only pair as he was plowing the fields.

As he walked past these pseudo-empty shacks, Sky could feel hidden eyes watching his every move. Trading wasn’t illegal in the technical sense, but it was an unspoken rule to keep it hidden and out of the prying eyes of the Cleaners. One wrong move could get just about anyone removed to Quarantine. This had created a wariness and untrust amongst the ‘Shackers. Anyone could be a lacky or informant to the community’s enforcers. Even friends were held at arm’s length for fear of them trying to earn the Cleaners’ favor with your secrets. Sky followed this way of life as well, everyone was kept at a distance. Well, almost everyone. He trusted one person with his life and secrets, his only friend.

A friend who was also running late. Sky was reminded of this fact when the shift announcement began. Static rung out through the speakers that littered the community before switching to the same pre-recorded message that he had heard all his life.

_The time is now 11:55 P.M. and First Shift will begin in five minutes. Make sure to arrive at your appropriate work areas on time to avoid any possible cuts in your rations. And remember, we are a community, so only together can we prosper. Have a wonderful shift everyone._

The announcement clicked off. He detested the cheery nature of the recorded woman’s voice. What did she know about the labors he endured on a daily basis? _Prosper. As if. We’re all just rotting away._ Sky continued walking, now growing impatient that he had not found his friend yet. If they didn’t get going soon it would be too late.

“Hey, wait up!”
Finally, Sky thought, turning around at the sound of his friend’s voice. “You’re late, Leon.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I closed my eyes for just a moment and next thing I knew I was running late.”

Sky just stared at his friend, not content with his excuses. As the caretaker in his home, Leon should have a better sense of responsibility by now. Like Sky, Leon also worked extra shifts to take care of his family. His younger sister was still too small to be assigned a shift, and his grandfather was too old now to work the fields.

“Here.” Leon held up the small bag he was holding as a peace offering. Sky took the bag and saw that it was filled with grains. Taking a handful, he shoved it in his mouth and gave the rest back to his friend. It wouldn’t be enough to take away his hunger, but it would quell the ache in his stomach. The grains dried out mouth, but they sure did taste better than any of the rations he was ever given. Leon was an apprentice to one of the maintenance workers. Their job was to keep the machines and other gadgets in the community running smoothly. As such, Leon was given a higher grade of rations in comparison to other Mud-Shackers.

“Come on, let’s go.”

The two quickly and quietly walked out of the lower tier and headed towards the maintenance building, which was sandwiched between the electrical building where human generators were busy supplying power to the community, and the lake. Skirting around the lake’s edges, the two scurried as silently as possible behind the building. Neither one wanted to draw attention, what they were planning wasn’t exactly considered legal in the community. Sheltered between the cave wall and the building, Leon pulled out a bag hidden by some large rocks. Inside were two headlamps. He handed one to Sky, and without saying anything, the two headed
toward the small cave opening they had found as children. Located not far from the lake, it was well hidden by the uneven rocky walls, and led out to a network of tunnels that surrounded their cave home. As far as they knew, the opening had not been noticed by anyone else. The two had been exploring the tunnels for years, venturing out whenever they could find time. Even so, that only meant they could transverse the network maybe once a week.

Finally stepping into the tunnels, Sky could breathe easier now that danger from being seen had passed. Trying to leave the cave was the top offense to the community. If anyone found out what they were doing, they’d be in trouble, the kind of trouble that ended up with public execution. The main opening to the tunnels was always guarded heavily. No one was really sure why the tunnels were off-limits. Sure, there was the risk of getting lost in them, but the two of them were able to figure out how to navigate them overtime. Leon even sketched out a map of the system they had explored so far. Perhaps the rumor that the tunnels led above ground were true. It’s said that the settlers had used the tunnels to bring down large supplies and farm animals into the community, but those rumors have never been confirmed. Other than the Knowers, no one knew where or how the originals got down here.

Sky didn’t care what the reasoning was. If he was lucky he may be able to find some mushrooms to eat. The fungus he managed to find usually didn’t upset his stomach.

He had once asked Leon why he liked exploring the tunnels. His reasons were much more juvenile than Sky’s. He did it for fun. For the thrill. For adventure.

“Okay, which way today? Left, or right?” Leon asked as he pulled out his map, his headlamp lighting up the paper.

“Left.”
“Right it is, come on.” Sky just shook his head at the other’s antics, casting his light across the dark rock walls.

The two chattered freely as they walked. As far as they knew, they were the only ones in the tunnels. Though nothing was particularly new in their lives, Sky mentioned the Cleaners’ visit today, and the fight with his mother. “It’s like she doesn’t understand what I’m doing it for her. Like she doesn’t care if she gets taken away. She just gets me so mad sometimes that I can’t think straight.”

“I know it’s frustrating. Gramps was like that at first when I took up his shift, but think of it from her point of view. You’re her son. Of course she wants to do what’s best for you, even if that means risking herself.” Leon always was the voice of reason.

“What’s best for me would be if she just did as I told her. I’m so tired of fightin-” Sky’s rant was cut short when he felt his footing come loose as the earth caved in on itself. He tried to gave the hole’s edge as he fell, but the dirt just crumbled through his fingers as he went sliding down. Wind whooshed past him as he fell further and further, bumping along the tunnel’s edges, bruising and scraping his body along the way.

After what seemed like an eternity of falling, Sky tumbled out of the tunnel and directly down into a smaller cave, landing on his feet, only to fall over as the momentum caused his legs to give out. Instinctively, he tucked his limbs in, not willing to risk breaking a wrist or arm trying to catch his falling body. He landed heavily on his shoulder instead, the thudding sound echoing around him and sending a cloud of dust. His lungs and eyes were filled with dust, leaving him to cough and rub his sleeve across his face trying to find any kind of relief.
“Sky!” He heard his name being called distantly, the word seeming too quiet in comparison to the panic noticeable in Leon’s voice. He must have fallen much farther than he had realized. “Sky! You dead?”

Sky turned to look up, his light shining across the ceiling and locating the hole he had fallen from. “Not today,” he called, hoping his friend could hear.

After a moment he heard Leon’s voice again. “And tomorrow?”

That was a good question, Sky realized. Flexing his shoulders and arms he concluded that nothing was broken from the waist up. Below, however, was a different matter. Already he noticed a dull ache in his left ankle. Slowly, he stood up, putting a hand on the rocky wall to steady himself. When he set his foot down, the ache quickly turned into a sharp pain. Gritting his teeth, Sky forced himself to put more weight on the ankle, and despite the pain he felt, he was relieved to realize that the ankle could support him. It wasn’t broken. He could work. No Quarantine for him.

“Not tomorrow,” he called, finishing their way of checking in on each other during their little adventures.

“Don’t move, I’m going to try to find you,” Leon called. Before Sky could call out his affirmation, his friend’s voice echoed down, “Just so you know, if you do die, I’m taking your rations.”

He smirked up at the hole, glad his friend was able to keep his humor in the situation. “As if you need them, you’ve already got a fat head.” He waited for a response but no more words floated down, though he thought he heard a familiar deep chuckle. It was too quiet and far away for Sky to be sure.
Not willing to sit around helplessly, Sky decided to try to find his own way out, despite his friend’s request. Slowly, he made his way around the cave wall, using its as a support while he tried to keep as much weight off his ankle as possible. It might not be broken, but he didn’t want to tempt fate and injure it any more than it already was. It was still a painful process, the slightest weight sending a new stream of sharp pain up his leg. He hoped Leon would find him soon, otherwise, given the slow pace he was forced to use, they wouldn’t make it back home before his morning shift started. “Dammit Leon, hurry up.”

His headlamp shone against the rocks. The dark tunnel seemed endless. Sky had never been alone in the tunnels. Leon was always there with him, their dim lights and words filling the passageways. The absence of his friend was unnerving.

As he hopped along the siding, he made his way along an out cropped section. However, when he placed his hand on the large rock, his hand went through it and he fell. Again. Groaning from his place on the ground, he sat up partially to look at where he had fallen from this time. Everything looked normal, until he saw that the rock he had fallen through now separated him from his legs. *I’m inside a rock,* he thought, almost bemused at his ridiculous situation. Moving his legs, the rock gave way in the same way that the cloth that covered the entrance of his home did, and he realized that the rock had been a thick, dense, cloth material designed to blend in with the rocky exterior of the walls. Turning around, Sky saw he’d landed inside what appeared to be someone’s home. Or, at least it used to be someone’s home. Everything seemed to be covered in a thick layer of dust, long since abandoned by its owner.

Sky felt a chill run through his body as he realized that he and Leon had not been the first ones to enter the tunnels. While amazed that someone had hidden a home so far out from the
community, he was also wary of what might have happened to the owner, and if that same fate will befall him and his friend.

Getting back to his feet, Sky ventured further into the cave-dwelling, taking note of the barren bed in the corner. Other than a table there was not much else in the way of practical living arrangements. The rest of the room was covered in stacks of papers and books, with pencils scattered about. Curious, he picked up a stray piece. He had never held paper before. The closest he had been to holding any was when Leon had once brought home some sort of drawing of the mechanics of one of the machines he was suppose to study for his apprenticeship. The paper felt a bit rough between his fingers, and upon closer inspection, he saw that it held texture with lines running vertically and horizontally. Not satisfied, Sky picked up a stack papers that appeared trapped between two pieces of leather. Flipping it open, he saw dark scribbles placed on the papers. The scribbles continued onto the next page, and the next, and the one after that. Every page seemed to be filled with the scribbles, at least that was what Sky thought until he landed on a page with a drawing of some beast on it. He had never seen an animal before. Supposedly the Knowers kept some somewhere for food purposes, but that was only a rumor. No animals existed where the Mud-shackers could see them.

Sky traced the dark lines of the animal’s face, feeling the indentation it created on the paper, fascinated by its surreal appearance. He found the eyes to be the most entrancing. Large and completely black, they were surrounded by dark markings. The nose was set lower down the face. Sky brought his hand to his nose, and felt the way it jutted out from his face, very different from the creatures, which looked flat in comparison. Their mouths were different too. The animal’s was square-like and extended out. On top of its round head sat two large, pointed ears with tufts of hair sprouting out from them. Around the mouth, on the chin, and just above the
eyes were long pieces of hair that stuck out. The creature was mainly hairless, except for the ears and the line of short, dark brown hair that ran along the spine of it, ending at the tip of the tail. It stood on four legs. Smaller drawings surrounded the creature, focusing in on various parts. Hidden in its feet were sharp, curved nails. Its mouth held four long, pointed teeth that were surrounded by smaller, pointed teeth.

The unfamiliarity of the creature frightened Sky. Could this be the reasoning behind the cave-home-owner’s disappearance? Was this something that lived in the tunnels? Sky could feel his heart thumping in his chest. Was this the reason the tunnels were off limits?

“Sky?” he heard Leon call, distracting him from his thoughts. He seemed close. Taking the pages with him, Sky wobbled back out of the hidden cave. Upon exiting he saw his friend staring up into the hole that he had fallen from, as if he expected Sky to emerge from it at his call.

“You don’t really think I would try crawling back up that way, would you?” Sky teased his friend.

Leon turned around and quickly walked over to him. He grabbed Sky by the arm and pulled him against him, arms circling his friend as he held them close together. “There you are, thank goodness.” Leon sighed, closing his eyes as they stayed like that. His body, as warm as his usually cheery demeanor, washed over Sky, reminding him how alone he had felt without the other around. “Don’t scare me like that. I thought-” he trailed off.

“You thought what?”

Leon released him and stepped back. “I don’t know what I thought. One second you were there, and then the next you were gone and there was just a hole in your place.” He took his
hands and rubbed them over his face, suddenly looking very tired. “I thought you were dead. What else was I to think?”

Sky wasn’t sure what to say. What could he say when he could have easily died, or been sentenced to death had he broken his leg or anything else that would keep him from work? Maybe it was best that he just tried to distract them both from the entire ordeal.

He lifted up the bound pages he still had in his hand. “Look what I found.”


“Is that what it’s called?” Leon made an affirmative noise, opening up the book and turning various pages that his head light illuminated, a concentrated look on his face. “What are you looking at, it’s only covered in silly markings.”

“They’re not markings, they’re words,” Leon said, still not looking up from the book. “It seems to be some kind of journal.”

“Wait, you can read?” Sky was astonished. No one knew how to read. No one except for the Knowers and the Cleaners.

“Yeah, I had to learn so I could read the schematics for the machinery.”

For a moment, Sky felt hurt. He thought he knew everything about his friend. What other secrets could he have that Sky was not aware of? Trying to shake off the feeling of mistrust, he grabbed the book, turning back to the drawing of the beast and showing Leon, he said, “Here, read this.”

His friend just looked at him for a moment before turning back to the book. “It looks like this is a journal entry from someone called R.C., about expedition he took outside the cave into the above world. This is one of the animals he found. He calls it a Scorching Desert Cougar, and
it evolved from something called a mountain lion. Sky, this is incredible.”

“So that thing doesn’t live in the tunnels?”

“What? No, there’s no animals down here as far as I know,” Leon said, still flipping through the book. Sky felt relief course through him. They were safe.


“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out,” Leon said with a fevered look in his eyes, the same look he would get whenever he described a new kind of machinery.

“Why?”

Leon placed a hand on Sky shoulder, gripping it tight. “Don’t you get it? Whoever R.C. is, he got out. He went topside. This journal proves that. It explains everything that he saw and encountered. Sky, with it, we could get out.”

He had never seen his friend like this before, so worked up over some silly pages. Nobody had left the community since first coming down here hundreds of years ago. It just wasn’t possible. “Are you sure you didn’t fall down and hit your head?” Sky joked in a tight voice. “Even if these pages are right, if this guy really existed, we can’t leave. What about our families?

“We’ll take them with us.”

“Ma’ wouldn’t make the trip, you know that. Neither would your gramps. And what about your sister, she’s too young to take up there, especially if there’s more animals like that one waiting to attack someone as helpless as her. Just put the book down, and let’s forget about this crazy adventure.” At his words, the spark seemed to have disintegrated from Leon, his face losing it’s excitement and looking very tired once again.
“You’re right,” he sighed. He placed the book in his waistband, shirt hiding it away. “But there’s no harm in some light reading. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Suddenly glad he hadn’t shown Leon the hidden room filled with more of what he assumed would be R.C.’s work, Sky put his arm around his friend’s shoulders, and together they slowly made their way back to the community, where their families and work waited for them.
Chapter 2

Each step felt like agony to Sky, a sharp pain still originating from his ankle every time he put weight on it despite the tightly wound piece of scrap cloth he had placed around it. Days after their last excursion into the tunnels and the sprain had still not healed. The added weight of the two five-gallon buckets of water, hung off of a pole that was balanced over his shoulders, was not helping to lessen the pain. At the beginning of his shift the pain had started as a dull ache, but as the hours went by with no rest it had quickly developed into a much bigger hinderance.

Sky realized that he was noticeably limping by now. Try as he might to keep steady the water sloshed around in the bucket, and every few steps he would feel some of it drip over the edge and either sink into the dirt path below or dampen his clothing. At this rate he’d be lucky to have three-quarters of his bucket full by the time he finished his trek to the purification plant. He was just about halfway through the mile-long route. He was working on his ninth-round trip. If he could deposit this final load, he’d make the quota for the shift. No ration cuts. And if he was lucky, he might be able to sneak away and get in some extra resting time before he had to run off to his own shift in the fields.

He just needed to stop to catch his breath for a moment…

“Keep moving, boy! Unless you want to have a talk with the Cleaners, tell them why you’ve stopped working,” a young man yelled. Sky recognized that voice as the son of the head of the purification plant. Eyes as sharp as ever. Even when surrounded by dozens of other workers, Calder was able to spot anyone who slacked in their work. For someone who was such a hard-ass about hard work, his own work was laughable in comparison. All he had to do was
lead the front of the line of workers back and forth between the plant and lake. He took a light stroll while the others carried bucket after bucket of water, backs hunched over from the weight, knees buckling from exhaustion.

Sky resumed his staggered walking. His breath came out in ragged wheezes from the exertion on his body. Calder followed closely after Sky, barking orders every time he found something that didn’t comply with his idea of how a worker should act.

“Keep up the pace!”

“Stop limping, or I’ll give you something to limp about!”

“Spill another drop of water and I’ll make sure you get half rations for the next ten days!”

By the time Sky made it back to the purification plant he was on the verge of collapsing. He lined up to deposit his collection of water, and felt a euphoric relief. Just a few more minutes and he could take a small rest before trudging over to the fields.

Then he felt a sudden blow to his back, right between his shoulder blades. The force caused Sky to stumble, and the water sloshed precariously in his buckets. He placed down his load and turned around to find Calder, hand raised as if to strike him again. Though only a few years older than Sky, Calder was double his weight and almost a full head taller. He was out-sized and out-classed.

“Listen here you brat. I don’t care how many shifts you work. When you came to me, begging to take over your damn mother’s shift, I didn’t ask questions. I did it for one reason, and not because of whatever friendship you thought we had as kids. I did it for results. We barely make our shift quota as is, and if workers start dropping out, that puts the load on the rest. There’s no way you sack of bones would be able to meet an increased workload. Do you know what happens when we don’t make our daily quota?” Calder grabbed the front of Sky’s shirt in
fists and brought his face in close. “Then my rations get cut. So, when you came groveling to me, I gave you one simple, simple task. Make your fucking quota. Don’t mess with me or you will regret it.”

Sky kept his eyes focused on the ground. What Calder said was true. Once his mother fell sick he knew he had to take over her shift or else the Cleaners would have been at their door in no time. He had known Calder as a young child. Sky had spent many days accompanying his mother on her shift. Calder and Sky would run off to play as the adults were burdened with their tasks. While Calder would be the future head of the plant, they were both Mud-shackers, the bottom of the barrel workers in the community, and no one could find fault in letting children be children. In the little time that they could afford to be at least. Sky had hoped that this connection would be enough to gain him access to the shift and the rations that went with it. For whatever reason it had been, Sky had gotten what he wanted and now he had to hold up his end of the deal.

“Do you understand?” Calder asked through clenched teeth, obviously upset at the younger man’s lack of response.

“Yes,” Sky said quietly, still not looking the young man in the eye.

“Good,” Calder said, releasing his grip on Sky. “Now get back to work before you piss me off even more.”

Before Sky could turn to pick up his buckets once more, both of them were startled by a voice that asked, “Is everything alright here, boys?”

Calder spun around, making a shocked sound when he recognized the older man. “Good shift, Knower Grimwald.”

Sky’s blood ran cold, panicking. A Knower? How much had he heard about his situation? He couldn’t tell as the man’s face remained impassive, revealing nothing.
“Good shift, Calder. Please, let me introduce you to my daughter, Beryl,” Grimwald said, gesturing to the young lady beside him.

Despite her petite figure and short stature, the girl clearly gave off an aura of authority. She held her head high, staring Calder in the eye, and said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” The young man only gave her a nod in return, seeming unsure how else to address the girl.

Turning back to her father, he said, “It is an honor to have the Grand Knower here, along with his lovely daughter. What brings you so far out from the first tier today?”

“As you are well aware, all of the Knowers’ heirs are required to study and memorize every rule, happening, and function of every aspect within our community until deemed proficient. While my daughter has done just so, we have decided that as my heir and future overseer of our community Beryl shall attend each workplace section for a period of time. She shall remain in each section until she is thoroughly familiar and experienced in how the workplace is run. Think of it like an apprenticeship.”

“Well, that would be splendid, Sir. Just splendid. We could always use more line supervisors. Without a watchful eye, these ‘Shackers wouldn’t get anything done. Isn’t that right, boy?” Calder laughed, and slung his arm over Sky’s shoulder like they were old friends. The tight grip however clearly said, keep your mouth shut and don’t mess this up, so Sky just nodded.

“Why don’t we hurry on ahead and speak to my father on the matter?” Calder said.

“Very well. Come along, Beryl.”

The two men started to walk off, a relief to Sky, but then the girl called out to her father. “Father, I would like to look around if that is alright. I’ll follow after you in a moment.”
Grimwald hesitated before saying, “Of course, my darling gemstone. Don’t be long.” He placed a quick kiss on the top of his daughter’s head, then turned and walked off into the purification plant with Calder in tow.

The line leading into the plant had shortened considerably at this point, leaving the two of them as alone together as possible in a public setting. Sky wasn’t sure what to do as Beryl stared at him.

Next to the girl, Sky felt inadequate in every way. She was his opposite. His superior in status and appearance. Where his skin was practically translucent and blemished by filth from work, hers was a clean, pale golden-brown. His hair dark and short, her’s an auburn that tumbled down her back in masses of tiny ringlets. Even his eyes, which his mother had always claimed to be a beautiful light blue could hardly compare to the vivid green of Beryl’s large eyes.

“Hello,” he said, tentatively.

She frowned in return. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m Sky.”

“No, who are you?”

Taken back by the repeated question, he said, “I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

Beryl gave an amused snicker, before purposefully kicking over one of Sky’s buckets. He watched in horror as his labor disappeared into the ground.

“You are nothing except Mud-scum. Next time remember your place before talking to me,” Beryl said, then strode off in the direction where her father had gone.

Shocked at what had just occurred, he numbly picked up his buckets and followed Beryl into the building. With no time to replace the lost water, Sky was forced to accept that he would have another ration cut.
Sky had had just enough time to rewrap the bandages around his ankle before he limped over to the fields to begin his own shift. His plans to rest were foiled due to his interactions with Calder, and then Grimwald and Beryl. And then Calder again when he heard that Sky had not met his quota. Again. Another long lecture that had left him both physically and mentally tired.

“‘Bout time you got here. I thought you were going to miss check-in,” Leon said, clapping his friend on the back in greeting. The same place that had been struck earlier, and Sky winced at the added pressure on what was most likely a bruising area.

“Yeah, I’ll explain later.”

“Great. Then come to my place after our shift. Gramps has been complaining that his other grandson hasn’t been paying him enough attention.”

Sky chuckled. Leon definitely got his sense of humor from the old man. “Alright.”

Together, the two entered into the large building that contained the fields. It was by far the largest building in the community, home to seemingly countless sectors of land. Each type of food was divided into its own sector, and from there each sector was divided into a variety of fields that were rotated for plowing depending on the time of each crop’s last growth. Each sector was enclosed into its own area, separated by walls.

All the sectioning off seemed tedious to Sky. Dirt was dirt. It didn’t matter where it was placed down. Take out the weeds, plow the rows, throw down some seeds. Was there anything else that really mattered when it came to growing crops? When Sky first began working the fields, like every ‘Shacker that starts their first shift, they are told why their jobs were so important to the community.
For the most part, the explanations are relatively obvious. Those in the power plants create electricity that power everything needed in their cavernous home. Their water needs to be purified or else they’d get sick from drinking it, which made sense to Sky. Once as a child he had gotten thirsty while playing and taken a small drink from the lake. Several hours later it had left him with terrible stomach cramps. However, the work in the fields just confused him. He understood that they needed food, but the man explaining the whole process made no effort to help Sky really understand how it all worked. He said things like, ‘genetically-modified,’ and ‘nutrients,’ which Sky had no idea what either meant. They plant the seeds, the seeds grow into food, they eat the food, and the food has more seeds which they plant again. Why complicate it any more than that?

Both young men were able to check-in on time, one less reason to cut his rations, and assigned their sector for the day.


“Eklund, Leon. Sector J, Field 10.”

Leon gave a small shrug, not at all upset that the two wouldn’t be working near each other that day. Sky wasn’t upset either. Like most other Mud-shackers, the two had long since accepted the rulings of their workplaces. They both knew they had a job to do, and they had to do it well. There were others depending on them.

Gathering the tools they needed, they entered into Sector J. Because there was no natural lighting for the plants, the artificial lighting in each sector was especially intense. Like every day that Sky had worked in the fields, his vision went white as he stepped into the sector, blinded by the amount of incredibly bright light. Rubbing his eyes with his palms and squinting, he and the rest of the sector workers stumbled half-blind to their respective fields. Sky swore that Leon was
still smiling even as he was knocked aside by another blinded man. *Damn joyful-bastard*, Sky thought, mood worsening as the bright light brought on a familiar headache.

Sky reached his section. Falling to his knees he began to dig out any rocks or weeds he could see on the soil. He could feel the intensity of the light spread heat across his back, already he was breaking out in a sweat. By the time he finished his day he would be drenched. After weeding he would need to till the section. Then he would plow the field into rows, Finally, he would finish his shift by planting the seeds. Sky had a lot of work to do and very limited time to do it.

After grueling hours of work, Sky was finally done for the day. Everything ached, from his head to his arms and shoulders, right down to his ankle. He wanted nothing more than to go into a dead sleep until his next shift. He knew, however, that Leon wouldn’t let him get away with it. He could already see his friend walking over, his easy-going grin still plastered on his face.

“Do you ever stop smiling?”

Leon paused, as if to contemplate and answer. “Sure I do, just when you’re not looking.”

Sky shook his head and laughed. “Alright. Let’s go collect our rations and then head over to your place. I’d hate to keep Gramps waiting.”

“What about your mom?”

“I can drop her off something on the way over.”

“You still upset with her?”

Sky shrugged. “I don’t want to talk about it.”
After collecting their rations, a small sack of grains and three limp carrots for Sky and four palm-sized potatoes plus some grains for Leon, the two headed towards the Eklund home. Sky had left the grains and a bottle of water for his mother, who was thankfully asleep when they had stopped by. When they arrived at Leon’s shack, Sky was greeted warmly by the other two residents.

“Sky!” Leon’s younger sister, Rosette, exclaimed. She ran over and gave him a hug, which he gladly returned, burying her face into his chest. “Where have you been? I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“I know. I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Sky, my boy, that you? Come over here. Leon, take down this blasted rag, I won’t let you forget about me that easily.”

Leon had hung a large piece of fabric, torn in many places, over one wall of their home in an attempt to give the elderly man a bit of privacy. Whether appreciated or not. The family had been lucky enough to acquire a second bed, one for Gramps and one for the siblings to share.

“As if we could ever forget when you’ve got that loud mouth, old man!” Leon said, doing as he had been told.

“Did you hear that? Raised that boy like my own son, and that’s how he treats me. That’s why you’re my favorite grandson, Sky.” Sky could only chuckle at their antics. Those two were quite the pair.

Sky sat down on the part of the bed that the man did not occupy. Unlike his mother, Gramps was bed-bound due to a body frailing from old age. An almost unheard of problem. Most ended up dying from overexertion, starvation, or sickness long before they had to worry about aging. Even so, the old man was far from feeble. If it wasn’t for his back continuously
giving out, Gramps would have been more than content to continue working. He didn’t want to become a burden on his grandchildren. Leon once told his friend that the old man was too stubborn to die and that he’d outlive them all.

Gramps reached over and gave Sky’s hand a firm squeeze. “My boy,” he said affectionately. “My boy!” He pulled the younger man to him and give him a joyful hug, “How have you been, my boy?” Sky loved speaking with Gramps. Just like Leon and Rosette, he had an infectious happiness that was so foreign in the community. Always able to find the humor in any situation. The two conversed as the siblings set about cooking up the combined rations.

Leon helped with cooking and chores when he could, but Rosette took care of most of the chores. Like many young children without an assigned shift, Rosette would follow either Leon or Gramps to their shifts before she was big enough to handle being home alone. To be useful, she did whatever cleaning was necessary, and once Gramps was left home-bound, she took care of the old man, making sure he was always comfortable. Occasionally, she would go out to play with other children, but that was happening less frequently as more children were being sent off to Quarantine.

Once the food was finished being prepared, the group ate and talked about their days. Sky complained about Calder and his encounter with Beryl. Leon babbled on about some blueprint he was studying over at maintenance. Rosette excitedly spoke of how one neighbor a few shacks down had their baby earlier in the day.

“I sat here. All day. Doing nothing,” Gramps complained. The three younger individuals just shared looks of amusement. Only Gramps could find fault in getting to relax.
Once they had all finished eating, Leon said he needed to speak with Sky alone. Sky said his goodbyes and promised to visit soon. He received a particularly strong hug from Rosette, and then the two boys left and walked along the dirt road in the direction of the lake.

“She’s getting big. Won’t be long until someone comes along and notices.” Sky said, throwing his arm over Leon’s shoulders as he limped along. He was making him walk, the least he could do was help him.

Mud-shacker children weren’t on the radar of the community officials until they were old enough to work, aside from being noted as existing. There was simply no way to do it. The Cleaners were too preoccupied with enforcing rules or collecting the sick to bother with keeping track of ‘Shacker brats running around. So long as they stayed out of trouble that is. Once they started working, whether out of necessity or being deemed old enough, children were assigned a shift and workplace and marked down to be able to receive rations. Families were enticed to have more children, better rations for those who have more children.

Leon tensed, “I know.”

“How old is she again? Seven? Eight?”

“She’ll be ten soon.”

Sky frowned. “Really? That doesn’t seem right. You sure?”

Leon shrugged. “Pretty sure.” ‘Shackers rarely tried to keep track of the passing days. Days of work all blended together. The only ones who counted the days were the Knowers, and everyone else kept a vague sense of time through whatever days the Knowers deemed as important. Like the anniversary of the settlers’ descent to the cavern. Sky knew he was born sometime between that day and the day where the ‘Shackers were given an extra ration as some
sort of yearly gift. He honestly wasn’t sure how old he was. Maybe twenty-four. He could be off by a few years. He really didn’t care as it didn’t change his day to day life knowing.

“Well, maybe she’ll work a shift for a few years and then get picked up by some Cleaner. She’s pretty enough.”

“That’s not funny,” Leon said, giving his friend a hard stare.

“I wasn’t trying to be funny. You’re going to have to make sure she knows what her options are soon, or she may make a decision without knowing the consequences. Once she’s out working someone will be sure to notice her.”

Rosette was already showing the beauty that she would grow into with time, with wavy wheat blonde hair that was set around almond-shaped hazel eyes, and despite her pale skin her cheeks always seemed to have a rosy hue that gave her a healthy, natural glow. Sky’s own skin appeared ashy in comparison. There was no question that in a few years’ time, she’d be swept off to a higher tier, under the guise of an apprenticeship or other service work, only to be married off to some Cleaner or another official when she came of age. It wasn’t common for a ‘Shacker to move up in status in such a way, but it was certainly not unheard of.

Even Leon had been propositioned once before when he was about thirteen. Sky had been with him when it had happened. The two had just come off a shift and were collecting their daily rations when a lady Cleaner had approached them, taken in by the boy’s looks which were nearly identical to his sister except for his short hair. She had tried to sway Leon with tales of comfort and a full belly. Leon knew better than to be tempted by such words. Anyone who moved up a tier, whether by work or marriage, was no longer allowed to consort with their old tier. Supposedly, it was to keep the new ranked individual safe from those jealous of their raised position. No one believed that nonsense. This rule was enacted for two reasons. First, to keep the
tier’s newly collected Gems, and that’s what they were, gems to be shown on display for their brilliant beauty, nearby at all times. Status items for the higher tier-born individuals. Secondly, to keep the Gems from letting slip any secrets they may have learned while situated in their new homes.

The Cleaner had not liked Leon’s answer and tried quite persistently thereafter to persuade the boy to reconsider. He had not been swayed, knowing that his family needed him, which was worth more to him than any life of ease could offer. Eventually, she had given up the chase, or so Leon had told Sky, though he wasn’t convinced. Time had not deterred his good looks. If anything, he’d grown even more handsome. Gone were his boyish features, replaced by a rugged handsomeness which was only slightly sullied by malnourishment. Sky still saw that Cleaner, always recognizable since she seemed to have a dislike for the standard helmet which was never on her person. If Leon was ever in her vicinity, she would always be caught staring at him, whether in regret of her lost gem or conniving on how to steal him away, Sky was never quite sure.

“There’s been talk,” Leon said suddenly, “of a new shift job being made.”

“What for?”

“For girls…healthy girls. They say not enough kids are being born, too many dying babies and too many sick people going to Quarantine. The community is dwindling too fast, that it won’t last at the rate the population is declining.”

“I don’t understand. What’s that got to do with a new shift?”

“Sky, they’re talking about taking healthy girls away and putting them with healthy men. Make them pop out babies until they can’t anymore.”
Sky stopped, his feet feeling as heavy as rocks. Rosette’s bright, beautiful face and cheery laugh coming to mind. To think that someone, the Cleaners most-likely, could one day come and take her from them, to force her to mother child after child was sickening. To steal away her future and happiness like that would be worse than if she became a Gem.

“That won’t happen,” he said.

“Yeah,” Leon said, not sounding convinced.

“Listen, it’s just a rumor. A bad rumor at that. The Knowers wouldn’t do that, wouldn’t just take girls away from their families. Maybe they will make a new shift, but I’m sure it will be voluntary.”

Leon ran his hand over his face, suddenly looking much more exhausted. “I hope you’re right,” he said, then started walking again.

When they reached a deserted section of the lake side, they sat down, “Okay,” Sky said, “why’d we have to come all the way out here to talk?”

Leon gave a mischievous grin as an answer; the playfulness having driven away the seriousness of their dark conversation from their walk over. He made a show of looking around. There was no one in the area except for the two friends. Satisfied by this, Leon pulled a familiar looking book out from under his shirt. “Okay, so I was doing some searching and--”

“Stop, I don’t want to know anymore.” Sky got up, intent on leaving his friend and his book-nonsense behind, only to be stopped when Leon grabbed on to the sleeve of his shirt.

“Please.”

He really needed to learn how to not give into the blonde’s antics. He sat back down.

“Fine.”
Leon beamed. “Okay. As I was saying. I did some research in the Archives.”

Sky whipped his head around to look at his friend. “You’ve been to the Archives?” The Archives contained the complete history of the community, including information about the above world. It was located in the Knowers’ tier and very few Mud-shackers had ever been inside the building.

The blonde looked at his friend like he had just asked something obvious. “Of course, I have. That’s where all the blueprints to the community’s machinery are kept. I can’t get into the restricted areas. Or take out any books. But no one stops me from reading them in my own spare time.”

“How didn’t I know about this?”

Leon shrugged. “It didn’t seem important. Besides, there’s only manuals, shift records, and personal records outside of the restricted section. All the interesting information about the above world and the community’s history is kept locked away, and there’s always at least one Cleaner keeping watch as well.”

Sky frowned. He’d been learning a lot of new things about his friend. “Continue.”

“Right. Well, so I figured out who R.C. is. His name is Rambert Cassidy. He was a Knower about seventy-five to a hundred years ago. The dates are a bit fuzzy. Anyway, he spent his life researching the above, from before we had to settle down here, to the changes that happened while we were down here. This is one of his journals about his expedition to the above world. It explains all that saw and experienced. It’s really incredible.” The other boy paused his excited rambling. He realized that Sky wasn’t as thrilled at the new information as he had hoped. “You could at least act a bit more interested.”

“It’s a book. You’re talking about lots of books. I can’t read. Why would I be excited?”
“Okay, fair enough. Here,” Leon said, flipping the book open to a random page. “I can teach you. It’s not that hard.”

Sky pushed away the offered text. “No thanks.”

“Why? Come on. We’ll go slow. Then we can read the journal together.”

“I don’t need to know how to read. What am I going to do, read how to fill a bucket with water or dig some dirt? Not interested.”

Leon closed the book with a loud thud. “Why do you always have to be like this? You’re so stubborn.”

“I’m stubborn? You’re the one who won’t stop talking about some dead guy and his supposed journey. How do we even know that he really did go topside? He probably made it all up.”

“He didn’t, why would you--” The other trailed off, making a noise of frustration. “Why won’t you just listen to me? This is the most exciting thing to happen to us, and you don’t even care.”

Sky stood up again. “You’re right, I don’t care about some book. I don’t care about something that happened a long time ago. If this Rambert guy had found anything worth listening to, we wouldn’t be down here. We wouldn’t be stuck dying in this damn cave. What I do care about is working to keep my family alive. You want exciting? My father, your parents, they’re all dead. They worked day in and day out. And what did they get in return for it? Dragged off to Quarantine. The most exciting part is that if we’re not careful we’ll end up right there with them. Ma’, Gramps, and Rosette too. Sorry if that’s not exciting enough for you.”
Sky turned to leave, but Leon grabbed his arm, stopping him. “Okay, I understand where you’re coming from. I just don’t see why it’s so bad for me to want to read Cassidy’s journal. What harm could it do?”

He shrugged off Leon’s hand. “That’s just it. You don’t understand. You don’t care to understand. If you did, you wouldn’t be putting yourself or your family at risk like this. If anyone finds out that you have this, the Cleaners will come for you. They will take you away, and then Gramps when no one shows up for his shift. Where will that leave Rosette?”

“That won’t happen.”

“I hope so, for your family’s sake. But just in case, until you get rid of that thing and your crazy ideas, stay away from me. I know my place. You need to remember yours.”

With that, Sky turned around and limped off towards home.
Chapter 3

Sky’s earliest memory was of his mother crying in despair, her body crumbling down to the floor as though the strength had left her body. Like every child, he was born to a mother and a father. His father worked his shift at the power plant. His labor was tough, with no rest, as he used his body’s energy to produce energy for the community. Sky was never allowed to accompany his father to the plant. Instead, he spent his early childhood running around as his mother brought water from the lake to the purification building. It was much better for a child than being stuck inside a building as the adults spent hour after hour cranking machines to generate electricity. Sky’s mother had told him that his father would come home exhausted every day after his shift, but he never complained. He was providing for not just his family, but the community as well. It filled him with a sense of pride, knowing he was doing his part.

One day he didn’t come home.

Sky can vaguely remember his mother’s anxious demeanor as she dragged him through the rows of mud-shacks, asking any and every one if they had seen her husband. It wasn’t until the next day that two Cleaners had stopped at their home to inform his mother what had happened. His father had collapsed during his shift. His heart had given out after the constant strain from his shift work. When his mother begged them to let her see his body they stated that it had already been taken to Quarantine.

Sky will never forget the fear he felt as his little hands grasped onto his sobbing mother. He stood frozen as the Cleaners in their black uniforms watched the scene unfold. With their faces hidden behind their helmets, they didn’t seem human to Sky. These dark creatures who had caused his once joyful mother to collapse with only a few words. Then as suddenly as they had appeared they left, no words of condolences to be said.
Leon’s recent actions had been stirring up these bad memories that Sky tried to keep buried away in the recesses of his mind. Every Mud-Shacker child grew up hearing about the Cleaners, their parents using stories of them to frighten unruly kids into behaving. ‘I’ll call the Cleaners here to take you away if you don’t settle down.’ ‘The Cleaners will whisk you away if you’re not home before the start of first shift.’ ‘I heard the Cleaners like to gobble up naughty little children who don’t listen to their parents.’ They all seemed like silly little threats, but the words held unspoken truths and warnings that the children would later realize when they grew older. Don’t piss off the Cleaners, or you won’t live to regret it.

No one in the lowest tier knew how the Cleaners came to be. Ask a hundred different ‘Shackers and you’d get a hundred different answers. Some say their class has existed since the start of the community. Others will claim that they crawled out of the tunnels, already dressed in their dark garments and ready to drag off unsuspecting workers. Sky once heard that they were summoned to duty when whispers of rebellion began generations ago. No matter how they came to be everyone knew what they really were.

The Knowers’ trained puppets.

Stronger, smarter, fiercer. These individuals were placed above the lowly Mud-Shackers. For the most part, they are anonymous entities, no faces or discernable features displayed to relate them as humans. Rarely, did they interact with the laborers outside of overseeing their duties. How could they, when making any meaningful connection could jeopardize their resolution to enforce the community laws? Could dissuade them to follow the absolute orders of their masters? It was their job to clean the Mud-scum from beneath the Knowers’ feet.
Leon, for some reason, seemed to have forgotten just where they stood in the hierarchy of the community. How little their individual person meant in the eyes of their leaders. They were expendable.

Leon’s excitement to leave the cavern was overshadowed by the possible punishments that would ensue if they were caught. They, and anyone involved would die. And without them to work their shift, both his mother and Leon’s grandfather would be taken to Quarantine. All the more reason for him to avoid his friend. His words of warning weren’t reaching past Leon’s obsession with R.C.’s book and the tales of the above ground world. Perhaps actions would transverse where words had failed.

It wasn’t hard to avoid his friend. Leon worked part of his day at the maintenance facility, which was the opposite side of the cavern from where Sky spent his time at the purification building. While it was tricky to dodge Leon’s attempts to talk at the start of their second shift at the fields, he still managed by arriving last moment for check-in. Once the shift began, it was nearly impossible to talk to the other workers as supervisors watched their every move, just waiting for a reason to cut a worker’s rations.

When he wasn’t avoiding Leon, he was avoiding going home to his mother. It wasn’t that Sky was angry at her anymore, but rather that he didn’t want to fight again. He knew that he shouldn’t have snapped at her as he had done days ago, but he didn’t want to apologize either. If he did, he worried that she would insist on working her shift again and then they’d be right back to where they started. He just wanted to keep her safe from the Cleaners and from Quarantine.

Sky continued on this way for two weeks. He kept to himself, staying far away from his mother and from Leon. Unfortunately, this also meant that he had to stay away from Rosette and Gramps, both of whom Sky considered as close as family. Instead, he developed a routine. Go to
his shifts, collect his rations, drop off some to his sick mother who was almost always asleep, and then scout for an empty shack at the edge of the bottom tier to sleep in for a few hours.

Sky was lonely.

As he laid in the too quiet shack he couldn’t help but dwell on it. It was unusual for him to be alone. He was always surrounded by other workers during his shift, and his mother was always in bed at home. During the rare times that he strayed from those locations, Leon was always at his side. Sky hated being alone. He knew he did this to himself, but he couldn’t figure out a better way to get them to listen to him. To not get angry at their foolish words.

Why couldn’t they leave things exactly as they were? Their lives weren’t great. The work was hard. The food was unfulfilling. But they were alive and together. That’s all that mattered to Sky. He’d suffer any terrible shift if it meant he could stay together with those he cared about. It was the only thing that kept him trudging through day after day of torturous labor, knowing that he had a family waiting for him at home. Counting on him.

Without them around, Sky wasn’t sure if he’d have the will to do it. Each day seemed to be escalating him towards his limits. Breaking him.

His shifts running water from the lake to the purification building had become almost unbearable. If Calder wasn’t berating him with every step he took, then Beryl was there to get in his way.

“Watch where you’re going, Mud-scum,” Beryl had said earlier that day, pushing Sky out of her way. He had spilled nearly half a bucket of water.

This kind of treatment occurred constantly. Now that Beryl was acting as a line supervisor, she had decided it was her mission to make sure Sky failed at his job. Not that he
could understand why. He’d missed his quota four times in the last two weeks because of her, resulting in not just cut rations but also long-winded scoldings from Calder.

Mentally and physically it was taking a toll on Sky. Less food and no one to confide in, he was miserable.

Tomorrow, he decided. I’ll go and talk to Leon tomorrow. He must be over this R.C. nonsense by now.

Even when he wasn’t actively avoiding his friend, it wasn’t always easy to talk during their shifts. Sky had gone over to the fields as soon as he could, hoping to find Leon waiting for check-in like usual. When he couldn’t see the blonde in the crowd of workers he waited as long as he could before getting checked in and grabbing tools for the day’s work. He knew the other young man was there though, having heard his name be called out for assignment.

“Eklund, Leon. Sector A, Field 2.”


They were working nowhere near each other today. No chance to talk then. I’ll catch him at the distribution center. He always gets his rations after working the fields. With that goal in mind, Sky used the time to go over what he wanted to say to his friend. His mind working just as hard as his hands. He’d make sure to keep his anger in check, promising himself not to lash out despite anything Leon may say. They were both adults, both providers that had had to learn responsibility at a young age. They could talk this out. Sky would appeal to his friend’s rationality. They needed each other. They had no one else.

After field shifts were done, tools were put away in order of what field a person had worked. As such, Leon had left long before Sky was able to. He made his way to the center as
fast as he could in hopes of catching up to Leon. With no such luck, he got into line for his
erations, keeping an eye out for his friend. He had made it nearly to the front of the line when he
finally caught sight of the blond young man walking around to the side of the center.

“Leon,” he called out. His friend didn’t seem to hear him as he kept walking,
disappearing around the corner of the building. Sky got out of line and weaved his way through
the crowd and followed after the other. “Leon, wait.”

Sky rounded the corner in pursuit, only to stop in his tracks when he saw who Leon was
with. It was the Cleaner-lady, the one who had been chasing after Leon for years. Sky back
around the corner and peered out at the interaction between the two. He watched as she linked
her arms around Leon’s neck and reached up to give his friend a quick hid kiss.

“I’ve missed you, my gem,” she said. “You shouldn’t leave me alone for so long.”

“I’m sorry,” Leon said, placing his hands on her hips.

She gave him another quick kiss, and said, “You’re lucky you’re so cute. Now, let’s go
have some fun.” She took his hand and began to lead him away.

“Whatever you want,” Leon said.

Sky felt a wave of betrayal rise up inside him. Liar, he thought as he watched the pair
walk away. All Leon had done was keep secrets from him, where Sky had always told his friend
everything. They were supposed to be as close as family. They weren’t supposed to lie to each
other. Leon spoke of leaving the community, of going topside, but in reality, he was just going to
leave him, leave his family, and go off to live with the Cleaner.

Sky turned around and walked off towards the lower tier. A heavy feeling settling in the
pit of his stomach. Nauseous. Confused. Hurt. He wanted to get as far away from the lies, but the
scene kept playing in his head. He couldn’t deny how well the two looked together. Her sleek,
white hair practically glowed under the lights’ illumination. While he couldn’t see them from his hiding place, Sky knew how enchanting her dark eyes were, a stark contrast to her overall pale complexion. They held undeniable intelligence and mischievousness in their inky depths.

They were both beautiful and strong and confident.

Sky didn’t want to know anymore. He didn’t want to know anything. He wanted everything to go back to the way it was before he knew. Before R.C.. Before the Cleaner-lady. Before Leon’s lies. Not knowing was familiar. Mud-shackers grew up not knowing. All they had to do was work their shift.

As Sky walked through the rows of shacks, he wanted to see the one person he could trust. The one person who had always cared for him, who always had his best interest at heart. For the first time in a long time, he wanted his mother. He wanted to hold her close as she told him that everything would be alright. He wanted to depend on her, instead of the other way around.

His feet steered him in the desired direction. Swiftly, he walked the same pathways he had followed all his life. Worn down and uneven, it was easy to stumble while trotting along the rocky roads. Sky was used to it, used to every aspect of his world trying to trip him up. Make him falter. But he knew where he needed to be. Who needed him. Who he needed.

He hadn’t stayed in his home for two weeks, but as he stood outside his shack and gazed at its unchanging qualities it suddenly felt like he’d been away for much longer. Slowly sweeping aside the cloth door, Sky peered into the single room residence. As per usual, his mother lay sleeping in bed. He watched as her chest rose slowly up and down, her breath steady and deep in her slumber.
Quietly, Sky stepped over to the bed and knelt beside it. Her took her hand in his. They felt thin and cold to touch, but they were also so soft. Growing up, his mother's hands always had a sort of roughness to them. The skin thickened and calloused from the daily work. Even so, they held a gentleness that mimicked her kind personality. Now her hands had long lost its rough coating, giving way after her lack of labor.

He laid his head on top of their conjoined hands. This was the safest place Sky could think of. The small world that just he and his mother occupied. There were no Knowers, or Cleaners. The journal and R.C. and the above world were distant nonsense. Leon and his lies were gone. The heaviness in Sky’s chest faded away and his breathing evened out to match his mother’s. His consciousness drifted, and despite knowing the unavoidable joint pain his current position would cause, he let it happen. The call of sleep settling over him like a soothing lullaby.

Sky wasn’t sure how long he slept for, minutes or hours. Either way, he was more focused on what had woken him from his contentedness. He feigned still being asleep as he felt the bed shift under his mother’s moving weight. Her fingers returned the embrace from his own hand. She laid her other hand a top her son’s head, lovingly petting his hair a few times before gripping onto his shoulder.

“Sky,” she said as she lightly shook him. “Sky, you can’t sleep like this. You’ll end up hurting yourself if you do.”

He lifted his head, opening his eyes to look at his mother. There was no anger in her features. Nothing to convey she felt any ill will towards her son and his recent behavior. She had every right to feel that way. Sky would have understood. It just wasn’t in her sweet disposition.

“What time is it?” Sky asked.
“It’s the middle of the first shift. You have time to sleep, but not crouched on the ground like that.” His mother tugged at his shirt. “Come now, take a turn on the bed. Come on, silly boy.”

For once he did as he was told, happy for a small bit of coddling. Sky moved sluggishly. His body creaked and his joints popped as he moved off the hard floor, weighed down by his own tiredness. He flopped down onto the bed, his mother shifting to sit on a small bit he left unoccupied. The bed itself was not all that comfortable. It was lumpy and worn down, and the material felt coarse and itchy. It was better than the dirt floor he had taken the habit of resting on so that his mother could sleep well. He relaxed into it, a sigh escaping from him. “I’m sorry,” Sky said after a moment.

“Whatever for, my darling? For taking up the bed? You work so hard. A good rest is the least that you deserve,” she said, returning to smoothing down his unkempt hair.

“No. I didn’t get our rations for the day. You must be hungry.”

She paused her movements. “What happened?”

Sky shrugged. “I got out of the fields late. By the time I was able to get over to the second tier, the center was already closed.”

He felt a small, sharp tug from his hair. A meager punishment. “Sky Hawkins, don’t you dare lie to me,” she said, scolding him like a child. “I know you too well for that. You would have fought your way through every other person in line for rations if it meant you got your days’ worth. Something happened. You tell me the truth. Now.”

Sky was torn. He wanted to shield his mother from all the shit that had been piling up on him lately. She had enough to worry about with her declining health. She was the type of person
to put herself through hell if it meant easing someone else’s burden. However, he wanted to confide in her. Sky had no one else to turn to.

“Please,” his mother said when he didn’t respond right away.

Something clicked inside him at the tone of her pleading. Before he realized it, he was telling her everything. From his adventures in the tunnels to finding R.C.’s hidden room and book. He told her about Leon’s obsession with the writings, their fight, and his lies. About the Cleaner-lady. His worries about Rosette’s possible future. Beryl. How much he regretted their argument over her shift. Everything that had been building up inside him.

She sat quietly through his whole tale, making no move to interrupt him. When he finished she didn’t speak for a moment. Finally, she said, “You’ve been through so much, and it’s all my fault. If it wasn’t for me you wouldn’t be going through all this trouble.”

Sky saw her eyes glisten with unshed tears. “No, Ma’. Don’t say that. I don’t blame you for any of this.”

“Well you should. If I was healthy, if I could work, you wouldn’t have to carry this burden. I never wanted this for you. These troubles, this rotten life. You’re still so young. You should be spending your time with friends. Falling in love with a sweet girl. Not taking care of me.”

The mention of girls had the scene with Leon replay in his head again, a fresh spark of pain running through him. “That’s not something I really care about.”

“It should be,” she said forcefully. “We may all be stuck in this cave, doing the same thing each day, but whether anyone else agrees or not, I believe we were all born with our own purpose. And no, I don’t mean our purpose in the community. Our own personal reason for being born.”
“Okay,” Sky said, unsure of what this was leading up to. “What is your purpose then, Ma’?”

His mother gently took his hands in hers. “I knew my purpose the day you were born. The first moment I saw you I knew I was here to be your mother. To raise you into a wonderful, strong young man, and to love you with all my being.”

He was touched by her sincerity in her words. “And what about me, what is my purpose?”

“That’s the thing,” she said, releasing her grasp and wrapping her thin arms around herself. “You have to be your own person to figure it out.”

“What do you mean?”

“You take every ounce of energy and focus every point of thought into how to protect me. You’re too afraid to do anything, to change any aspect of your life, just on the mere chance it could put me in danger. Darling, you need to live to have a purpose. You aren’t living, and at the rate you’re pushing yourself, I don’t think you’re even surviving.”

“You make it sound like there’s something wrong with me wanting to keep you safe.”

“There is when that’s all you do.”

He could feel the start of a headache forming. They were getting nowhere with this conversation. He didn’t want to fight with her again, but she just wouldn’t acknowledge why he was doing what he did. Didn’t recognize his need to keep what was left of their small family together. “Ma’, please. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

His mother sighed. “You’re as stubborn as your father. I always used to tell him that he must have had rocks for brains he was so hard-headed.”
That startled Sky. His mother rarely mentioned his father. He never brought the topic up either, worried he’d upset her. He was curious about the man whom his mother had cherished so dearly. Who made up half of his being.

“Can you tell me more about him, about Pa’?”

Tentative about his sudden interest she asked, “What do you want to know?”

“Anything. What did he look like? I can hardly remember.”

“It’s probably because you were so young when he left us. Four maybe. It’s no surprise you’d have trouble remembering. Let’s see. He was pale, just like most of us in this dark hole. Nose was a tad crooked. He told me his late brother had thrown a stone at him and broke it. That it never healed quite right. I’m convinced he fell flat on his face and busted it. Man was as clumsy as could be. Always tripping over his own feet or on the air itself. I don’t think he saw too well either. But he his pride would never let him admit to any faults he had. His eyes were a pale, pale blue. Sometimes I swear they almost looked white. His hair was fair too. Blond, but it looked more like a fine silver when he was close to lighting. You got my dark hair, but other than that, you look just like your father. So handsome.”

This was the first time in a very long time that his mother seemed so relaxed and at peace. Her sickness had taken a toll on not just her body, but her mentality too. She hated being stuck in bed for hours on end, trapped inside their small home. Speaking about his father appeared to have revived her, at least a tiny bit. Sky wanted it to last a little longer. “What was he like?”

“Stubborn, like I said. Once he had his mind set, there was no changing it. Had a way with words. He could convince you that light was dark and dark was light and you’d be none the wiser.” Sky watched at fond smile appeared on his mother’s face as she reminisced about her lost
love. “Oh, how he made me laugh. He loved to bring happiness to others. No one can argue that shifts at the power plants are the worst, but I don’t think your father ever grumbled about it. He believed his job was the most important, that he was the light of our world and the community depended on him. What a fool he was.”

That surprised Sky. Her affectionate tone suddenly giving way to criticism.

“What do you mean? Should he have hated his shift placement? I don’t understand.”

She sighed. “He gave his all towards a lost cause. He thought he was necessary for the success of the community. Pushed himself to his limit but he didn’t make any difference. He died and nothing changed other than me being a widow and you fatherless.”

This cynical attitude coming from his mother was disturbing. Foreign and unfamiliar. Like she was a completely different person.

Without giving him time to respond, she said, “Sky, I’m dying. We both know it.”

“Ma’, don’t say that,” he said, a string of panic running through him.

“Don’t deny what you can see. I raised you better than that. Now listen. I’ll either go on my own or I’ll be taken to Quarantine. I’m not sure when, but I’m certain it won’t be much longer. This place is rottig me away. I will not let the same happen to you. You need to leave.”

Sky shook his head, not believing the nonsense his mother was saying. “Go back to bed. You sound ridiculous.”

She grabbed his chin with more force than he thought her feeble body was currently capable of. She directed his head so that he had to look directly into her gaze. “Do not talk to me like I’m crazy.”
He tore himself from her grasp and stood up. “Then stop acting like it. You sound just like Leon. Even if we could find a way out there’s no guarantee that what’s up above is any better than down here. At least here we know what we’re up against.”

“You’ve always fretted over every little thing. Dammit, for once in your miserable life be brave. This community has no future. It decaying around us. Out there, far away from here, you at least have a chance.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Sky stared at the floor, no longer able to look his mother in the face. “Because you’re right. I’m afraid. How can I even fathom leaving the only place I’ve ever known when all I’m able to do is hide from my problems? I’d have to break every law and abandon my home on the slim change that life topside would be worth it. That I’d be able to survive up there. I won’t do it. I can’t. I’m not smart enough. Or have the strength or courage. I couldn’t confront my best friend about his lies. I just ran home to cry to my sick mother.”

Done with his confession Sky just stood there, his face heating with his shame. Oh, what his mother must think of her cowardly son.

When it appeared that Sky had nothing else to say, his mother merely cleared her throat to catch his attention. When he peered up, she made a gesture for him to sit next to her.

When he did, she said, “Let me tell you why I gave you your name. Sky, a mother will do anything, sacrifice everything for her child. She does this because they are a part of her, the part that will live on after she is gone. Every mother shares the same dream that her child will live a better life than she did. With more joy and love and without any regrets.”
My dream for you was much more idealistic. I always knew that you’d grow up to be strong, strong enough to endure the horrendous labor we’ve all become accustomed to. Even so, I wished that one day you would be free from this pit of a home. You’d feel the warmth of a sunlit day on your sweet skin. The wind would tickle through your hair, and your eyes would reflect the wonder that is the sky.”

Sky shook his head, not convince by her words. “I don’t think I can. Whatever you see in me, just isn’t there.”

“I know it is,” she said, sure in her decision. When Sky stayed quiet his mother said, “I’m not telling you to run away today. Start small. Work towards a tomorrow worth seeing.”

“How,” he said, “where do I begin?”

“I think you should try talking to Leon. You’re both stubborn in your own way, but you also understand each other the best. In a community like ours, where everyone is willing to step on one another just to secure their basic necessities, a strong and loyal friend is what you need most. You may have your doubts. You may feel betrayed. But what you two have, the bond you’ve formed together, isn’t worth trying to salvage? Just listen to what he has to say. Really listen. It can’t be any worse than what you’re thinking now. I won’t make you. Please consider it though, for me.”

“Okay, Ma’. I’ll think about it.”

Despite all that had been said and the uncertainty that Sky felt, he got up and prepared for his day of work. His future may not be settled, but today was already laid out.
Work Cited


