

Afternoon Tea

Lydia notices that Mrs. Ellett always takes her tea with a half spoon of sugar. She has hands that hold the china cup with practiced ease, her long and bony fingers stretching to fold around the frail glass. Lydia wonders if she has children—they might even be Lydia's age, around eighteen—but she doesn't let her imagination wander off.

They have been rooming together for two weeks, her and old Mrs. Ellett. Lydia keeps her side of the room clean and private, a habit of self-defense acquired from living on the road. There's nothing much beyond old dresses, the five books, and an emergency mobile—just in case Uncle Gulliver reaches. Mrs. Ellett doesn't have much herself, only an ancient computer (though Lydia has never seen her use it), a suitcase of clothes, and that cup.

Lydia really wonders about that cup.

That morning, their shared radio sparks into static life, just enough to be coherent. Lydia chews on her fingernails. "September 9th, 2050. The town of Galford is officially marked an environmental danger zone by authorities. Inhabitants of the Finley and Moran Safehouses will have to get their supplies from Kelsworth until further notice."

"That's like twenty miles away," Lydia groans.

Mrs. Ellett doesn't react, but she does glance at her with slightly raised eyebrows. "Stop chewing your nails. It's a most disagreeable habit."

Lydia blinks, caught off guard. The English primness of her wording—*most* disagreeable—is so jarring against the wasteland around them that she couldn't help but laugh, a brittle sound that hurts her throat. "Sorry, it's an instinct."

"Instincts can get the best of us." She stands up from her bed. Lydia assumes that she is about to leave, but she wanders to the bare-bones side kitchen of their room. "I'm making tea. Would you like a cup?"

Lydia's instinct is to decline, but to prove Mrs. Ellett wrong, she says yes. She has seen her work in the sun-battered garden, growing lavender and lemon verbena and thyme that miraculously survive, clipping their leaves to make tea before they wilt. Lydia doesn't understand the patience, but she supposes that Mrs. Ellett is British enough to go through with it.

Lydia still thinks of herself as a Midwesterner. Grand Marais, Minnesota exists in her dreams; the dreamy blue of the water by Gulliver's house, the dock gathering captainless boats, the shock of snow against her bare palms. In this heat, the thought of snow is like the thought of air in the midst of drowning.

She remembers sitting in a science classroom as a child, doodling butterflies as Mrs. Moray explains the rapidly alarming rise of global temperatures, a result of increased carbon dioxide due to human emissions of gas, coal, and oil. In the Minnesotan winter, it was hard to concentrate on the urgency behind her words.

Now Lydia wishes to be in that moment again. “Here you go,” says Mrs. Ellett, drawing her out of her thoughts.

It tastes like rose and lavender. “Thank you,” Lydia says, meaning it. “Do you make your own tea where you come from?” Nothing wrong with some conversation, and besides, she has nothing better to do.

“I was a gardener, so it comes naturally to me now. But no, I brought my tea flavors from the local Asda. To imagine such a life now.”

“Perhaps Kelsworth will have some. You know, before they enforce an official quota for drinking water.”

“Oh, don’t be silly. They will only have the basic necessities; no time for afternoon tea.” She doesn’t bother correcting Lydia’s other point, the one that stares out at them.

“Or novels.” She eyes the five she still keeps with her. Mrs. Ellett follows her gaze.

“You’re an avid reader,” she notes, perhaps redundantly. “*Gulliver’s Travels*. Huh, I used to read that one to my daughter.” So she does have a child, Lydia thinks. Her expression doesn’t change completely, but there is a sense of something closing in on itself.

Mrs. Ellett must’ve been lovely in her prime. She has hair the color of pale gold, though in this heat the strands thin out and droop around her face. Her hands are too delicate, the wrists dangerously close to snapping off at the stem, but there is true strength in the way she works the garden.

“Where is your daughter now?” she asks out of curiosity; she really is a slave to instinct.

“Below the ground.” The words are cold and final. Mrs. Ellett’s expression doesn’t even waver. “She died of a heat stroke six years ago. We were living in my partner’s apartment in Washington, having just escaped the heatwave in Britain. An entire ocean could not separate the fact that wherever we go, the world would still be burning.”

Lydia wants to tell her that she is sorry for her loss, but that would be void of meaning. She has experienced losses of her own; platitudes wouldn’t change a thing. Instead, she settles for: “My older brother Arthur is an engineer. He’s part of the

operation working on the spacecraft right now, the ones that will open up a new frontier out there.”

Out there means so many things she can't explain. She has always preferred the riotous heart of fiction to the ruthless necessity of science. But she isn't clueless to the progress; in his letters, Arthur described the ever-advancing experiments in layman's terms. There has already been the interstellar expansion in 2045, the first successful mission made for human cohabitation of Alpha Centauri.

“My partner, Namrata, went in ‘45,” says Mrs. Ellett. “She was—is, I suppose—a survivor first and foremost.”

She suddenly sees Mrs. Ellett in a new light: not a withdrawn older woman obsessed with her habits, but a scarred figure with a past. “If you don't mind my asking, why didn't you go with her?”

The other woman doesn't say anything for a moment, but looks into the dregs of her tea leaves as if an answer is to be found there. “I wasn't done grieving Chelsea. She was so sparky and curious, especially about outer space. She would've gone on that mission, or stay here and work on the same crew as your brother and build a better future for others. I didn't want to leave her ashes and her memories and her things behind on decayed land, it would be—it would be a betrayal. I wouldn't have it, no matter what Namrata said about moving on and building a new life. It was nonsense, I thought. She didn't have a child, she didn't *know* Chelsea the way I did. A new life would be empty.”

She purses her lips after she's done speaking. “I didn't mean to unleash all of that. You're still so young, you shouldn't be hearing this.”

Lydia tries to listen but her heartbeat is thumping distractedly in her ears. “Namrata was right,” she finds herself saying. She thinks of Gulliver, his eyes achingly earnest in the light of his decision. *You don't care about me. All those books and museum trips and movie nights while Mom and Dad are god-knows-where. You never gave a shit.* “Those who went on the mission felt they had no choice, not because they don't love us enough.”

Mrs. Ellett flinches a little. “I hardly think a teenager would have the wisdom to make that judgment.”

“I have my losses too.” *Of course I care about you,* Gulliver said. He pulled her closer for a hug, and though he was a slight and thin-limbed man, Lydia felt engulfed. *You know I would take you along if you're of age, right? We could conquer the stars.* *Here,* he pulled out what looked like a walkie-talkie, but it was one of the newest models of interstellar communication. *I think I can get it to work out there with enough tinkering.*

“My uncle—my crazy, imaginative storyteller of an uncle—is out there somewhere.” Lydia glances out the window. “These books belonged to him. To us. And now only to me.”

“Oh.” Both of them don’t say anything for a long while. There really isn’t anything *to* say. “This cup belonged to Namrata. I always made her peppermint tea when she’s feeling under the weather.”

“And that laptop?”

“Chelsea’s worlds are in there. She loved to create simulations of fantasy universes.” Mrs. Ellett smiled forlornly. “I think she would like you.”

Outside their window, they hear the gunshot of deer falling to the earth.