

Washington, Dome City

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Aditi joined them on the bus to the ferry, which was surprising. She claimed that she needed to pick something up from the supply store in town for her newest client, but Meri didn't believe her. Aditi never willingly woke up before sunrise. Plus, there was another supply store further inland that Aditi always dragged Meri to for errands. It touched Meri to think about how she and Ida were the only things that could coax Aditi to come near the coast.

When the bus finally wheezed to a stop and the three climbed out into a pool of lamplight at the crossroads between the ferry and the town, Aditi wrapped Meri in a tight hug.

"Do you have everything?" she demanded over Meri's squirming protests. "Phone? Wallet? Medicine?"

"Yes, Amma, I double-checked with you before we left!"

"What about your respirator? When did you last change the filters?" Aditi released Meri's torso only to snatch her back by the chin, fingers testing the straps to reaffirm their security.

"Geez, hun, give the girl some space to breathe!" Ida chuckled, squeezing her wife's shoulders. "She won't even need that thing – air quality in the city is strictly controlled."

"She'll still need it on the ferry!" Aditi protested, begrudgingly releasing her daughter's face.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?" Ida asked, pulling Aditi into a hug of her own. "It's all perfectly safe. Skies should be clear the whole time."

"You don't know that! And you know very well that I'm never setting foot in one of those leaking death traps again." Aditi softened her words with a peck on Ida's lips. "If you two are crazy enough to spend a weekend down in that bubble, go ahead. I'll be plenty busy with the repairs on Huerta's Hydroponics. Wednesday's nasty storm did quite a number on their generators."

Meri had pulled her phone out at the first sign of parental affection, though Aditi's snapping fingers under her nose brought her attention back. "We remember the rules about traveling in the city, right?" Aditi challenged.

"Stay with Mama no matter what. Keep track of the Flood Chambers wherever we go. Run there as soon as I hear any sirens," Meri recited, stifling a yawn. "Report cracks or puddles immediately."

"And?"

"Uh...don't talk to strangers?"

"No, silly!" Aditi said, snatching Meri up one more time. "Have fun! Your first trip to the city should be exciting – even if it scares me out of my wits!"

Eventually, Meri was able to extract herself from Aditi's grip, and she and Ida rushed down the path to the station, flinging out their final goodbyes over their shoulders. The ferry station was dark and confusing – as the apologetic shadow at the ticketing counter explained, they were still clearing their solar panels of debris – so Meri was relieved when they stepped into the boat's flickering glow.

Rather than sequester herself to the interior of the ferry, where seasoned commuters like her mother balanced tablets and travel mugs with practiced ease, Meri meandered onto the open deck. She swayed up to the bow, steps unsteady from the unfamiliar vibrations and rocking

underfoot. She gripped the wrapped railing tightly, partially from exhilaration at the salty wind stinging her face, and partially from the mild fear of falling overboard that Aditi had been sure to instill in her during the 45-minute bus ride.

There wasn't much to see at first – brown water lapping at the sides of the boat, the occasional reflected glimmer from a distant swell, speckles of spray accumulating on the surface of her glasses. Then, a pastel pink began to tint the indigo sky, splattering color onto the canvas of waters below. The rosy hue ripened to crimson, and as the orange orb of the sun crept over the horizon, solidified into a bold ruby that set the wispy clouds veiling the heavens on fire.

Once the sunrise mellowed to a burnished gold and the sun climbed higher, Meri's gaze was drawn down rather than up. With light enough now to filter into the water, a lost world shivered into view.

The first shapes to appear were the grasping branches of drowned trees reaching for the ferry's hull, followed by the crumbling leviathans of sunken rooftops. As the dawn wore on, flickering schools of fish could be seen weaving between algae-coated trunks and darting in and out of the maws of jagged broken windows. A few times, the boat glided over hills that rolled high enough for Meri to see the bottom, where rusted debris and stubborn seagrasses mingled on the shifting plain of silt and asphalt.

“Any sharks today?”

The voice startled Meri and caused her already precarious tippy-toed position at the rail to wobble. Ida steadied the girl's wispy frame against her own solid hip as she stepped up to the edge as well.

“Don't fall in, now,” Ida said with faux sternness, tapping Meri on the nose. “Your Amma would never forgive me.”

Meri's mind was fixated elsewhere. “Sharks?” she asked, scanning the submerged bridge drifting by as if a larger shape would emerge from beneath any second.

Ida laughed. “Not the ones you're thinking of. Very few of those around these parts now. ‘Sharks’ are what we call scavenger subs in the biz. You can sometimes see them rooting around for metal scraps and other valuables left behind in the Evac. They're pretty cool – I was hoping that you would see one.”

Mother and daughter leaned out to scrutinize the seafloor again, this time with Meri's fingers twisted firmly in the hem of Ida's blazer. A few minutes later, Ida nudged Meri and pointed to the horizon.

“There she is!” Ida exclaimed. “We can look for sharks again during the return trip on Sunday. You won't wanna miss this!”

With additional sunlight charging its solar panel, the ferry was able to grind up to a quicker pace, so the distant dot to which Ida had directed Meri's attention soon grew to a white tower rising from the waves, its spire blinking a staccato welcome. Around its base sprawled a series of docks, where other ferries from other directions drifted to a halt and expelled buzzing clouds of passengers.

Through the increasingly frothy wake, Meri could see the water rapidly shallowing, though the source of the disturbance was too bright with refracted light for direct viewing. With a squint, a grimace, and an adjustment of her glasses, Meri shifted her gaze up to the water ahead to admire the transition of colors of navy to turquoise to rainbow-tinted aquamarine.

Once the ferry groaned into the dock and the gangplank squealed into place, Ida and Meri simply followed the flow of people converging on the tower. Meri focused on the slap of her sneakers against the metal grating to avoid being overwhelmed by the crush of bodies that

constantly threatened to close in and separate her from her mother. When they began their final approach to the tower, the pace slowed, and Ida reached back to grab Meri's hand.

"Hold tight – we don't wanna get separated on the elevator!" Ida said over her shoulder. Meri pressed herself against her mother's back, pulling her bag straps tight.

The wait felt like an eternity to Meri. When she dared look around, she was confronted with a wall of slacks and blouses and overstuffed bags, so she faced sullenly forward and picked at a colorful patch that Aditi had recently used to repair a tear in the sleeve of Ida's suit. Over the hum of idle chatter, crisp *dings* and graceful *whooshes* echoed as the elevators that ringed the base of the tower periodically admitted bursts of the waiting masses, just as Ida had described when preparing Meri for the trip. Each new noise gave Meri a flash of hope, but their movement remained incremental.

Finally, Ida and Meri were able to wedge themselves into a tarnished metal compartment. Once again, Meri was lost within the forest of adults, and so her only impressions of the experience were the subtle smoothness of motion and the pressure in her ears building to a pop as they descended. In anticipation of finally entering a public space where she could breathe clean air, Meri pulled her respirator down, but immediately regretted it when she caught a whiff of the stale, sweat-tinged scent that permeated the tiny room.

When the doors finally sprang open once more and the elevator's riders spilled gratefully into the spacious hall, the first thing that Meri saw was a bold sign of white-on-black lettering, reading "Welcome to Washington D.C.". The sign was bolted above the wide entrance leading to the metro station, high above the heads of the river of humanity that poured into it, so Meri had no idea how someone had managed to climb up and neatly paint the letters "D.C" into the vertical words "DOME CITY" without getting caught. She craned her neck to watch the sign pass in bemused wonder as Ida tugged her along with the current below.

The metro station wasn't nearly as crowded as the surface station, so Meri was able to admire her surroundings, head swinging from the flashing ad screens that adorned the walls of the cylindrical terminal and the blurry glimpses out the opposite windows as Ida led the way to the appropriate platform. They didn't have to wait long before the silvery snake of a train whistled into place and the doors slid open to admit them.

Meri rushed to a window seat, swinging her feet and positively bouncing with excitement as the train began to pick up speed through a dark tunnel.

"We only have a few stops to go," Ida warned Meri as she settled in beside her, "but we'll have plenty of time to sight-see around the rest of the city after we visit my office."

Meri didn't respond – the train had just burst into the open and she was transfixed by the explosion of colors and shapes that greeted her.

The city looked like it had been pieced together by a gaggle of toddlers with shiny building blocks. Angular buildings that looked straight out of a history text-site shared the skyline with modern curved spires and smooth arches. Verdant rooftop gardens bushed up from their crowns like silly hats or draped elegantly over the walls. Drones whizzed through the canyons between them, packages secured in their magnetic claws or advertisements fluttering behind them.

Looking down was disorienting at first, due to the sudden drop-off from the side of the train, but Meri swallowed her nausea, fascinated by the skittering people below. Riders of sleek bicycles and whirring electric scooters zoomed by in the central roads, while walkers bustled past brightly colored shop windows and elegant office entrances on the sidewalks. Light streaming through the shallowest waters cresting the highest point of the dome cast a rippling

haze over the central city, punctuated by shadows from the lattice of support bars crisscrossing the structure.

The scenery flashed by quickly, only allowing Meri a few moments to take in each pocket of urban life before another mural-decorated building wall blocked her view and introduced her to the next one. Her attempts to snap photos of the wonders outside were thwarted by their speed of travel and the wispy streaks remaining on the glass from a recent cleaning. Ida tried to point out notable sights as the world whirled by – museums, government agencies, memorials to ancient wars and recent catastrophes. The only constant was the distant rim of the dome, veiled in shadow by the increasing depth of the royal-blue waters beyond.

When the train finally squealed to a stop, Ida and Meri hopped out to join the city's traffic. They were a few blocks from the brightest part of the city, where the dome began its gradual decent to the rim, and while waves of watery light still streamed across mother and daughter as they navigated the springy recycled-rubber sidewalks, the soft glow of the bioluminescent trees spaced evenly along the path supplemented points where visibility faded.

A few blocks more, and they arrived at Ida's office building. A plain sign above the revolving doors identified the inhabitants as the Consortium of Liable Enterprises Advancing Neotechnology, or C.L.E.A.N., though the handwritten signs littering the sidewalk and graffiti flanking the entrance preferred the terms "Murderers" and "Polluters."

The maintenance person frantically scrubbing at the graffiti sent Ida a nervous smile as they approached. "Sorry, we thought we got it all yesterday, but more came in the night. We were hoping the kids wouldn't have to see it."

"Don't worry about it, Mo," Ida sighed. "I know that you're doing your best. Anyways, this is supposed to be a learning experience for 'em, right? For better or for worse!"

As they picked their way through stacks of posters and flyers, with styles ranging from messy passion to outright artistry, Meri glimpsed slogans like "Justice for the Displaced!" and "Too little, too late!" Meri's gaze was particularly drawn to the simplest, neatly lettered in black ink on rough, unbleached paper with specks of recycled color embedded in its surface: "It didn't have to be this way."

The pair was quiet as Ida scanned them in with her ID and they crossed the lobby, with its somber signs depicting long-disgraced logos and tasteful memorials to floods and famines. They were the only ones to step on the elevator, and as they began to rise, Ida turned to Meri.

"Any questions about what you just saw? Ask now, because I promise the PR team won't be acknowledging any controversies during today's activities."

Meri stared at her shoes for a moment, then asked, "Does that happen a lot?"

"Yep, walk past it every time I come in."

"Does it ever bother you? Y'know, working for the..." Meri lowered her voice to a whisper. "...bad guys?"

Ida laughed aloud, then crouched to Meri's level, mimicking her softened tones. "Maybe they *were* the bad guys. The corporations that make up the Consortium certainly did horribly unethical things, but the worst were thoroughly tried for their part in causing the planet's degradation, and all are so bound by international regulation that I don't even think of them as bad guys anymore. All they do now is give people like me in C.L.E.A.N. the reparations funds we need to undo the hurt they did. I work for the world, not for them. I'm just leveraging the money from history's greatest villains to do it. Do you see what I mean?"

Meri nodded wordlessly, accepting a kiss on the cheek and a reassuring pat on the shoulder from her mother, but as the doors finally opened onto the building's rooftop garden, the words she had read were still burning in her mind: *It didn't have to be this way.*

Meri and Ida had arrived with just enough time to grab a few sandwiches and fill up their travel cups with fresh fruit juice, all of which boasted labels identifying the exact hydroponic plot on the roof from which their ingredients were sourced. They stopped to catch the tail end of a live demonstration of how hand pollination kept the jungle of produce flourishing, then moved on to grab seats for the morning presentation on the history of C.L.E.A.N. While the first presenter struggled to change the holo-slide from the banner welcoming them to "C.L.E.A.N.'s Action-Packed Take-Your-Kid-To-Work-Day Extravaganza!", Ida introduced Meri to some nearby coworkers and their families.

Meri did her best to be polite when speaking to strangers, and feigned thoughtful focus on the nervous intern fumbling through a narrative of the World Climate Trials, yet she was distracted – partially by the doubts that the protest signs had snuck inside her head, and partially by the premature dusk that had settled over the city. When she looked up, the waters above seemed to be churning more heavily, generating a haze of foam dense enough to block out the network of docks snaking out from the center city entrance. Though the climate-controlled air of the dome remained as still as ever, the unmistakable wail of a quickening wind outside meandered through the air, even over microphone static and the nervous murmur that arose when other people's heads began turning skyward as well. Meri glanced over at her mother and found her worry mirrored in Ida's face.

"No storms for the next week, they said..." Ida muttered, half to herself, as she scanned the dimming skyline. A peal of thunder startled the crowd into a simultaneous flinch, and Ida's gaze settled back on Meri. "You got your bag?"

Meri nodded, tilting the backpack out from under her seat using her toes while she brought her cup shakily to her lips.

"Good. We may have to—"

A blaring siren split the air, startling Meri into dropping her drink and clutching her ears. The noise was so loud that the clatter of metal and splash of crimson liquid on the ground was inaudible, so loud that she could feel the siren's resonance in her teeth, so loud that she wondered why the glass of the dome didn't shatter from the reverberations. The metallic scream was punctuated occasionally by a message:

SEVERE STORM APPROACHING. ALL CITIZENS EVACUATE TO THE NEAREST FLOOD CHAMBER IMMEDIATELY.

For the next few minutes, pandemonium reigned. Meri instinctively started for the elevator, but Ida directed her towards the nearby stairwell instead, pushing purposefully through the panicked rush of the crowd.

"City will probably cut off nonessential power soon," Ida explained when the door closed with a snap that shut them away from the din. "Stairs will take us to the basement just as well as elevators."

They and a growing stream of other families trotted down the stairs, the slap of their shoes ringing through the narrow chamber as they spiraled ever downward. When they finally entered the red-lit basement, they were ushered through a set of heavy steel doors and checked in on a proffered tablet. The flood chamber's emergency lights were so feeble that Meri could not see the edges of the room, creating an illusion that the narrow rows of bunk beds that filled the space filed on eternally.

Ida led Meri down one of those endless corridors, past parents soothing wailing toddlers or reassuring stricken teens, until they found an empty lower bunk. Ida took note of its number and left Meri sitting cross-legged on the mattress, promising to return as soon as she finished helping her colleagues with lockdown preparations. Meri hugged her backpack to herself, the sensation of its bulk comforting against the gloom, and pulled out her phone. A few attempts at calling Aditi, texting friends who were also visiting the city with parents, or checking for news about the storm were all thwarted by the lack of signal, far as they were beneath both ground and waves. Meri took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and settled in to wait.

Ida returned exactly 56 minutes later, according to the phone that was now merely a smart clock, toting a jug of water and a handful of nutrient bars. Her jacket was tied around her waist and shirt rolled past the elbows, though the sleeves fell readily back down as she sat with a groan and described how she had been distributing rations from the storage room and setting up extra beds in the already packed space.

“They’re saying that they didn’t see it coming, and they’re saying this one’ll be a doozy,” Ida finished, brushing disheveled strands of hair behind her ear. “We’re gonna be here a while, I’m afraid.”

Mother and daughter sat in silence, then for lack of anything better to do, decided to sleep. Bathroom facilities were limited, with lines stretching out the door and along the wall, so Meri’s usual bedtime ritual was condensed to swallowing her pills and kicking off her shoes. After some shuffling to arrange themselves on a bed too small for two, Meri curled up next to her mother, uneasy at the touch of rough day-clothes on her skin.

Enough people seemed to be doing the same that the emergency lights were cut to save electricity, leaving only a faint chemical glow of panels in the floor available to lead the way to the bathrooms or exits. When Meri attempted to open her eyes, it was dark enough that she couldn’t see her mother beside her, though the even, warm breaths tickling her face provided assurance that Ida was still there.

The bed groaned under the weight of the father on the top bunk, whose little boy’s snuffles periodically threatened to turn into a crying fit. The room was filled with similar sounds – whispers, stifled sobs, the occasional wail of a fussy baby – and they all echoed off the reinforced walls and crashed into each other in a cacophony of misery that Meri was unable to drown out with hands (both her and her mother’s) nor headphones (music-less in an attempt to save battery).

Meri convinced herself that she could even hear distant booms through the soundproof walls, and her spinning mind conjured images of gray seas battering the dome above, illuminated by splitting bolts of lightning. Worse, though, were the visions of hairline fractures splintering under the deluge and turning the shining city of the afternoon into yet another sunken wreck, its inhabitants wasting away as they awaited rescue. Meri knew what disaster looked like, from news about city swappings and dome failures and desperate mass migrations, but never before had catastrophe seemed so close.

When Meri finally did sleep, it was dreamless, her imagination apparently exhausted by her waking nightmares. She drifted in and out of slumber, using her drowsy conscious periods only for shuffling to the bathroom or submitting to Ida’s insistence that she “keep her energy up” with the bland nutrient bars.

Ida next shook her awake with a forced smile that failed to mask the exhaustion on her face. “Meri, hun, grab your stuff!” she exclaimed. “We got the all-clear – we can go out!”

Meri snatched up her phone to check the time and was briefly confused – had their ordeal really only lasted an afternoon? The date corrected her, and she took a moment to collect herself before collecting her things. It was evening on the next day. They had been in the flood chamber for over 24 hours.

They followed the crush of people trudging up the stairs, as the elevator had been reserved for those with mobility issues, and listened to the chatter that had swelled from dull to shrill with anticipation of escape and the welcome snapping of frayed nerves. Meri almost swam with the masses out onto the main floor, but Ida directed onto the next flight, towards the interminable spiral climbing towards the roof.

“The streets will be full of folks trying to contact their loved ones,” Ida explained. “If we want to contact your Amma in any reasonable amount of time, we need to go up to get signal.”

The stairs would have been exhausting in any scenario, but after a day of minimal movement, Meri’s legs burned and her chest heaved all the worse. She considered strapping her respirator on again just for the added boost of albuterol to ease her strained breathing; she feared that it may become urgently necessary regardless.

When spots began to swim in front of Meri’s eyes, she couldn’t take it anymore. “Mama,” she gasped, “can we take a break?”

The resolute march of Ida’s shoes ahead stopped, making the rattle of Meri’s wheezing painfully audible, so Ida immediately agreed and helped her to the nearest corner landing, where they sank to the floor. Ida shoved her own water bottle into Meri’s hands and rummaged around in Meri’s backpack for her respirator while the girl took shaky gulps of lukewarm liquid. As Ida secured the familiar weight on Meri’s face, her own was red, but evidently not from exertion.

“Mama, is something wrong?” Meri asked as her mother turned away and dropped her head into her hands.

“I’m sorry, Meri,” Ida said in a trembling voice. “I just wanted to call your Amma ASAP so we could get you home. I should’ve paid more attention to how you were doing...” She sniffed and leaned back against the wall, tilting her head towards the remaining rings of flights left to climb. “I’m sorry I got you into this mess. I love this city, or at least, what’s left of it. I wanted you to love it too. I always forget the worst parts until I’m trapped in yet another stinkin’ Flood Chamber.”

Meri noticed Ida’s watering eyes beginning to overflow, so she flung her arms around her mother. “It’s okay, Mama! It’s been an amazing trip – really!”

“And now it’s almost over,” Ida said, chuckling wryly, yet still squeezing her daughter back. “Three hours of commuting, half an hour of Take-Your-Kid-To-Work-Day, and thirty hours crammed in a fancy basement.”

“What was that you said when we arrived at the building again?” Meri asked, pulling away and striking a thoughtful pose, finger tapping her mask and eyes crinkling mischievously. “This is supposed to be a learning experience for ‘em, right? For better or worse!”

“I do not sound like that, you rude little monster!” Ida cried with mock indignation, grabbing for the giggling Meri. The lines around her mouth and along her forehead softened. “I suppose you’re right. Let’s keep going. We’ll take breaks as often as you need them, and when we get up there, I’ll sort out our next moves with your Amma. We’ll have a long wait ahead of us if we try to leave now, but I doubt we’ll be able to get our hotel room back after missing a day...”

Ida rose with a groan and set off up the stairs again, rehearsing her conversation with Aditi all the way, while Meri gathered up her things and trailed behind at a safer pace.

After one more quick break, Ida and Meri reached the roof. The site of the ill-fated event was in disarray, with chairs scattered where they had been kicked over by the rush, and trays of day-old sandwiches being picked over by roaches. The rows of plants stood serene, with some minor wilting from the power cuts to the watering system.

Ignoring the buzz in her pocket as her phone received a day's worth of frantic alerts at once, Meri drifted through a tunnel of foliage to the edge of the building. Behind her, she could hear Ida attempting to soothe Aditi's sobs over the phone, an interaction no doubt being replayed a thousand times over in the sea of people down in the streets. The building was high enough that Meri could barely make out individual features or sort through the babble, but the way the colorful stick figures shifted and bobbed and spun spoke of reassurances and reunions and the shared relief of reemergence, no matter the new troubles that the post-storm world may hold.

Despite the clamor, the true chaos was above, rather than below. A blanket of debris shrouded the dome in twilight gloom, though slivers of orange and gold shining through the shallow center suggested that it was barely sunset on the surface. Most of the garbage seemed to be silt and decay, with shiny fragments of plastic speckling the oozing sludge with cheerful colors. Near the rim of the dome, large objects lay jumbled in piles – splintered tree trunks, flaking rusted vehicles, even sizable chunks of broken building. City drones continued to uniformly scour the interior of the glass surface for unnoticed cracks, while their aquatic counterparts scrubbed sludge from the exterior. Meri even saw what looked like a massive submarine, which she took to be one of Ida's "sharks," toting away a large piece of scrap with a robotic claw.

Meri looked out over the mess of the skyline and could easily see why Ida loved this city, despite the terrible commute and the weekends spent in Flood Chambers and the constant reminders of the places and people that could no longer share its name. In her short and tumultuous time here, Meri's world had expanded dramatically, but now that she stood upon the very precipice, she wasn't quite sure how she felt about it yet. The dome-capped urban ecosystem that stretched away beneath her feet was strange and wonderful and dangerous, and as much as she longed to explore it all, she now feared what else she might find.

Ida's voice wafted to her ears over the din of the city, calling her to come chat with Aditi and discuss their next steps, but Meri hesitated a few moments more at the dizzying vista. The promise of the future was tantalizing, albeit tinged with terror, and Meri longed to taste a few more breaths. Ultimately, though, she turned back, because one sour thought continued to nag at the back of her mind: *it didn't have to be this way*.

Even so, Meri ran back to her mothers to make the best of it.