

The Sickness

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Before I tell you who I am, I have to tell you this:

I keep my promises.

Most people call me Sebastien, but I'll let you call me whatever you want, granted only that you get to know me first- at which point you'll most likely have agreed with me on a name a little more fitting to my character. Call me pathetic or call me crazy, it doesn't matter to me in the slightest. Both are nicknames I've coined for myself a long time ago.

I know what I am, and because of this, I try in earnest to let others know too. Pathetic, crazy, or whatever else I may be, I am yet an honest man. Because of the slight moral redemption that comes with such a quality, I still entertain the opinion that I am a good person. Despite everything, I still try to believe that I was in the right.

I wasn't.

Being wrong ruined something important for me that has long since vanished. I could start off by telling you that I can remember it as if it were yesterday, but really, I remember it as if it were eight years ago. Luckily I have an impeccable memory.

Though it happened eight years ago, I do remember it very clearly. Life seems to do this to your memory when spent solely on attaining a single goal. Though the circumstance in which my potentially lifelong goal was set made it almost impossible to achieve, my looming principles denied me the luxury of giving up on it.

One day I made a promise that I thought I could never fulfill, and I have spent the time since doing just that.

Sometimes if you ask me I'll say that it was time well spent.

It wasn't.

My life defining pledge was uttered during an era of intense obsession, paranoia, and grief, and because of the pledge, that era lasted for seven more years.

“One day I met a stranger
He was beautiful to me
I hoped to get to know him
I wanted us to be
I hoped that we'd be friends
Friends without a bitter end
And this is what reminds me that hope can be deceiving.”

Ophelia was her name. We met each other on a ship destined for the Mainland, both of us having left our families for the first and last time. Both of us having fled from the Sickness.

It was her birthday.

From one of the higher levels, I watched the new passengers disperse themselves on the deck below me. I watched them wave themselves away from the shore, as Blue Maiden chugged off towards the sunrise. I imagined their thoughts.

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Some of them were happy, some of them were sad. One of them was scared to be away from his family for the first time. Another was eager to start a new life in the Mainland. Many more were tired; having only their faith in the magic of a vague, distant land to keep them going. One last passenger was getting bored of watching the newcomers wander the lower deck. He tore himself away from his conflicting thoughts and tried not to think about the journey ahead. I realized that he needed a diversion.

The sunrise sounded beautiful.

Shortly upon noticing the sunrise itself, I saw what was making it so. A small distance off to my left was a woman singing a soothingly familiar tune. The rising sun almost made her a silhouette to me, but I could make out enough of her features to see that she was young, and almost as pretty as her song.

The girl didn't seem to notice me at first, but I didn't wait to give her any time after that. I would have been happy just to have stayed there for the song and sunrise, but I was afraid that she wouldn't. After spending a second more to reign in my senses, I unlocked my frozen joints from position, and approached her.

"Where it Rains," I opened, offering the name of the song when I got within talking distance. I realized a second after saying it that there were a million other things I could have said that were a lot less obvious, and thus less moronic. Everybody knows that song. Of course I knew what it was called.

"What was that, a pickup line?" She seemed more amused than annoyed. I studied her face and found that she had a very attractive smile.

"Nah, just call it an ice breaker. Ice breaker is a little less romantically charged." Ugh. Horrible. But at least she laughed.

"Either way, it's a pretty bad one. Everybody knows that song. Too obvious. Try another, or I won't talk to you." She laughed again, and shifted position on the railing, trying to get comfortable. She rested her chin on the palm of her hand and looked off towards the diminishing shore line. "Take as long as you want."

Now just because I realized that there were a million other things that I could have said, doesn't mean that I could think of any of them. After one look at the task at hand, I immediately gave up on trying to think of something clever, and reminded myself that it was early morning and I was very tired. Good, now I have an excuse for being a moron. I opened my mouth to explain myself, and her eyes darted up. I stopped.

"As long as I want?"

"I'll be waiting here."

I nodded to her and backed away from her, getting ready to walk back to my cabin. The girl took her hand from her chin and gave me a little wave, eyebrow raised. I smiled, and pointed at her before I turned around.

"I'll think of a good one after I wake up a little bit." I gave her one last look over my shoulder before I entered the inside of the ship, and she was already gazing off in to the distance again.

Let me interject right here to tell you a little about love at first sight: it exists –it just hides from you for a while.

I descended the stairs to the center-starboard living quarters that I shared with my buddy from back home. He should be awake by now, I decided, as I made my noisy entrance in to the

cabin. My entrance succeeded in its intention of waking Charles up, and he flopped out of bed with a curse, followed by a soft bump, then some more curses. I wasn't sympathetic though, because I am a bastard.

"Get up man, I need your help on something," I said, as I offered him my hand. It wasn't that my request was in earnest; I just needed to wake up a little.

"Sebastien, you bastard, I was having a really good dream. Oh yea, happy birthday." He took my outstretched hand and got to his feet with an exaggerated wince of pain. After sitting back down on the lower bunk where he had been sleeping, and after sufficiently blinking away the sleep from his eyes, Charles looked at me with an expression of something slightly less intense than annoyance.

"So. What do you want my help on?"

I explained to him my brief exchange with the girl on the upper deck, then Charles told me that he was going to go back to sleep.

"Nice legs; what time do they open? I hope you have a map, because I'm lost in your eyes!" He rattled off a couple more as he lumbered back under the covers.

"Those are pickup lines, not icebreakers! They're really bad ones, too!" I said, glad to have had the proper entertainment that I had come to expect from Charles. By this time anyways, I had woken up enough to go back up and have a real conversation with her.

"I'm not wearing any pants," he suggested.

She wasn't there when I got back up.

My first reaction was one of a little more disappointment that I knew I should have felt. Soon the disappointment receded in to a dull bother, only to be alleviated by finding her. So I put my hands in my pockets and started exploring, whistling my new favorite tune to myself. After about ten minutes of walking the outside of the ship, I started feeling a bit stupid –and cold on top of that. Of course she didn't wait for me to come back up. Why would she? All she knew about me was that I was bad at opening a conversation. I stopped whistling, and sheepishly made my way back down to the cabin where I planned on catching up on the sleep that I missed from getting up so early to watch the people board.

I didn't do much else for the rest of the day. After sleeping for a good portion of it, I finally got up and did some reading. I can't remember what else I did, but I can bet that it was a good amount of nothing. In any case, dinner time came very quickly. Tonight was another banquet, so I had to arrive dressed nicely or else they wouldn't let me in the ballroom. I had been on the ship for three banquets so far. One was held after each new batch of passengers from each of the Rim Islands. Charles and I missed the first one because we were unclear about the dress code, but from experience of the other two, I know that the food was definitely good enough to have suffered buying a new suit from the ship's clothier.

I tilted my head back to help myself straighten my bow tie in the small mirror. Perfect. Finally showered and ready, I left the cabin with Charles and we made our way towards the smell of hot food.

The quality of the interior increased dramatically once we got within fifty feet of the ballroom entrance. After turning a corner, the whole walkway widened a good four feet. The narrow corridors until then just looked so bland that if they weren't filthy, one might describe them as being sterile. Opposed to the undecorated hallways of the center-starboard living quarters, the space leading up to the ballroom was ornate with golden linings and a maintained paint job.

Compared to the hallways leading up to it, the large and lavish ballroom itself had the same effect on me as those hallways did compared to the smaller, blander ones.

After the great wooden doors were opened, we were confronted with a wall of conversation coming from every occupied table, which was most of them, in all directions. The entrance being opened especially for us had a rather grand feel to it, only adding to the sense of grandeur that radiated from the room. I followed Charles as we weaved our way towards a small cluster of empty round tables that he had spotted. They were all adorned with no less than a centerpiece of candles, white tablecloths with gold trims, and silverware that was quite possibly made out of real silver. We found a small two-seater and occupied it.

Before long, the tables around us started filling up too, and we had to raise our voices just to talk. The food had still some time before it was ready to be served, but there was music, warmth, and much to talk about.

“So Sebastien, happy birthday, my old friend,” Charles said, after returning from the restroom. He reclined as best he could with dinner chair that he had, his hands cupping the back of his head, relaxed. I thanked him, and we started talking of home.

I grew up with Charles as my best friend from the beginning. We were neighbors for as much of my life as I can’t remember, but his family died when I was three, and that’s where my earliest memories begin. My mom and dad immediately took Charles in after he was orphaned and we soon became like brothers to each other. Charles and I were of an age, with him being a mere three months older than me. We grew up together in our small town, happily living on the island. But then The Sickness started to spread among the other Rim Islands.

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One day it just showed up, and people all over the upper Rim Islands started coughing up blood and suffering terrible stomach pains, on and off. Then at age twenty-six they would die. There was no explanation; no warning but for the fact that the age of death was consistent. And if someone had died anywhere near you then you were very likely to catch it too. The doctors thought that The Sickness was transmitted through the air around the victim once he or she had died.

As The Sickness made its way south towards our home island, my parents got scared. Knowing that half of their community was to be eliminated from this disease, and that we too were at risk, they sent me and Charles off on the Ship with all of their money, and all of their love. We were to have left home soon anyway.

We halted our conversation soon after it began; worried that it would bitter the taste of our food. We sat there for a short while, biting back tears. And then, another short while, an interesting conversation, and the first course of our meal after that, I heard a pretty voice singing something close to my ear. The girl from the deck, it seemed, had come to sit right behind me. The beauty of her voice made me smile, for I knew what I wanted to say.

“That’s the best rendition of ‘Where it Rains’ that I’ve ever heard. You have a beautiful voice.”

“Yea, that’s what you should have said. That would have been really nice –not that I believe you.” The girl put her hand on my shoulder as support to get up, and she pulled her chair up to our table, bringing her plate of food with her. I looked behind me and saw that her table was now empty.

“Hello, my name is Ophelia,” she said, offering me a delicate hand to shake.

“I’m Sebastien, this is my friend Charles. Charles, this is the girl whose acquaintance I met early this morning,” I said, making the appropriate hand gestures in introduction. “Now that I’ve

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broken the ice, all I need is something to talk about that's interesting enough to keep your attention," I smiled.

"Don't worry, I have that part covered. I overheard that it was your birthday. Well, it just so happens to be mine as well. I'm eighteen."

"Well how about that! That's a coincidence if ever there was one. I'm Seventeen."

Charles excused himself to get more punch, and Ophelia and I talked the rest of the night.

Ophelia had fled, like me, out of fear of The Sickness. She was an only child, and her lifelong passion had been singing. She was going to stay in Southeast Mixill, as was I, after the Blue Maiden dropped us off there. We were going to be good friends.

I could tell.

"So much can happen in a year
I met you when you were good to me
But when so much becomes your trust
Unrequited becomes what became your love
I met you when I didn't know you
Before I knew you as a fool
And this is what reminds me that apathy is the heart's best defense."

My descent in to madness started on her nineteenth birthday, where I was reminded for the final time that there was something dreadfully wrong with life if one did not feel like shit by the end of the day.

Oh, the time spent up until then had been fair enough. In a year both me and Ophelia had managed to find our own places in the city, me with Charles as a room mate. Charles and I were managing just fine, and between the two of us, the rent had been sustained each month. Charles was currently in between jobs, but he had been there before, and hadn't ever gotten stuck. My job was doing medical research for people with better things to do. The idea behind the gig was that I didn't get to do anything interesting, but that the decent wage was worth it. In truth, my standard of living could have gone to all hell and I would not have cared, just so long as I still had access to the medical labs. All I cared for was the advancement of my knowledge in the field, for I had open access as long as I didn't disrupt anybody else's work, or get caught digging through files above my pay grade.

All my life I had wanted to be a doctor. Back on the Island I had apprenticed for one, and had learned a thing or two. But there were a lot of things, I had since learned, that were far too interesting for lowly assistants quickly losing sanity to know about.

Money is no cure for madness, as goes the old saying. Besides, I would probably have been too damn poor to buy that cure even if it did exist.

Maybe I should have asked for a raise.

I had restlessly paced the night away, feverishly awaiting a call that never came. Morning did come, however, yet I was still not tired. Well, maybe I was a little tired, but sleep wasn't my primary concern at the time. By then, neither was Ophelia, actually.

I was scaring myself.

For many hours I had stayed up, guarding the telephone. I had attempted sleep at least twice that night, but my heart rate had refused to calm, a physical manifestation of my nervous thoughts. During one such attempt, however, the phone did ring.

When it rang, I practically jumped off of the bed. I hadn't bothered to lie underneath the covers, because I knew that sleep would never find me. It was either that, or I was afraid that it would, making me miss my important phone call.

"What is wrong with you man? You just woke me up again." Charles's yawn turned in to a snap as he said it.

"Be quiet man, it's the phone." I could feel him roll his eyes at my back as I grasped at the ear piece, and I could hear him sigh in disapproval as I fumbled it. The cord caught it before it hit the ground, but in my frenzy, I managed to hang up on the caller by slapping my hand down on the disconnect lever for support as I reached down to scoop it up.

"Fuck!"

I kicked the wall twice, and then backed away from it because I knew that I would probably break the phone that hung there otherwise. Breathing in manic burst, almost crying, I continued backing up until I plopped down on my bed. I sat there for a few seconds, trying to calm myself.

"Don't tell me to calm down, Charles." I hated being told to calm down. Rarely was it ever intelligent advice to me, for times were few and far between where my enthusiasm actually preceded my thoughts –these of course, being the only instances where calming down would actually be in my best interest. For the most part though, if I got angry then I'd have a damn good reason for doing so, and fuck Charles if he doesn't respect that.

Unfortunately, this was a situation where my reasons for being angry deserved no respect.

"Wasn't going to," Charles said. "But you really ought to chill out."

The previous day, Ophelia had been busy all afternoon with a voice audition. I had suggested that she sing "Where it Rains," and she agreed, which made me very happy. I was almost as excited as she was about her audition. Her singing had only improved since a year ago, and I could easily see her getting the part. Personally, I hated musicals, but I'd see one if she was in it. Like I had predicted on the boat, we'd become good friends.

She had told that she would call me back after she got home from the audition to tell me how it went.

She had promised.

I had paced the night away.

Was it her who called? I dared not call back because she may have just been sleeping. But that wasn't right –she wouldn't go to sleep before calling me back! And if it was her, then she would be sure to call me again. But maybe she didn't want to talk to me...no, that wasn't it. Why would she not want to talk to me? I was one of her closest friends; her first since leaving home for the Mainland.

But if that was true, why didn't she want to talk to me...

It was all Charles's fault. From the beginning he had treated me as if I wanted Ophelia as a partner. He had romanticized my relationship with her, even as I tried my hardest to keep those thoughts out of my mind. It was an icebreaker, not a pickup line. An icebreaker, damn it! Love had only ever done me harm –I had experienced my fair share of heartbreak before, and I really liked Ophelia. I didn't want her to break my heart.

But now she was all that I could think about. I needed to talk to her, just to keep me sane. I needed the sound of her beautiful voice.

I locked the front door behind me, because Charles was still asleep. I buttoned my jacket, and took to the sidewalk, walking towards the sunrise. The morning was rather chilly, but the sight of the sunrise warmed me with a fond memory. The rising sun was flanked by rows of houses that carried off in to the distance, made shadows by the contrast. They made the warming sky look more like a work of art, framed for an exhibition.

There were no automobiles on the road yet, no vendors or buskers in the gutter, and almost nobody around in general, so the sound of my shoes tapping on the pavement provided the only ambiance. Ophelia would be awake by the time I got to her house though, because I lived a couple miles worth of meandering streets away from her apartment.

Needless to say, I wasn't rich enough to own an automobile.

I calmed down a lot on my way there. I almost even came to my senses. Likewise, I almost decided to turn around and go home. Unfortunately though, emotions were in the way, refusing to step aside for the voice of reason.

The main one was guilt.

Then came the joy I had from having Ophelia as a friend. Then came uncertainty about that friendship. Then the sadness that came with such uncertainty, and then some more guilt, just to top it off; guilt for even doubting her as a friend in the first place. Realizing, not for the first time, that I was just being paranoid for no reason, I reflected on the past year I had spent getting to know her, and the joy came back to me.

By the time I got to her apartment, my heart rate had calmed down. At that point, all I wanted to do was apologize to her for my lack of faith; to promise her my friendship, no matter what happened. I ended up deciding not to tell her those things, considering she knew nothing of my distresses during the previous night. I didn't want to ruin her birthday with my petty problems, which I most surely would have done, had I confided.

As it turned out, she had her own worries.

Ophelia answered the door with a red face, struggling to hug to her body a blanket that had the look as though many years ago it may have been capable of keeping someone warm. Her gaze was blank, but for only a few seconds, after which she smiled as she recognized who it was who had come to wish her a happy birthday.

"Happy birthday Sebastien," she coughed. "I'm afraid I don't have a present for you."

"That's alright. The gift you gave for my seventeenth is still as wonderful as ever," I smiled, nodding at her. "Ophelia, you look awful, though. What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I'm just a little sick," she said, dismissing any implications with a wave of her hand. Still, I was worried, which must have shown on my face.

"Don't distress; I'm not counting my days –it's just a little bug. Doctor says I'll be fine."

Despite all attempts to quarantine the Rim Islands, The Sickness had somehow managed to reach the mainland. The only travel between the mainland and the Rim Islands now were the ships that carried the afflicted away from society. Even the crews of these ships were not allowed to leave their quarantine after transporting the Sick. So far there had been almost thirty isolated incidents. People were getting frightened. Scarier still, was that nobody knew what was causing people to get Sick, only that you got it from being near someone when they die from it. How far away counted as "near" was yet undetermined.

“That’s good.”

“Yea.” She coughed, and looked away. “Thanks for coming over.”

After waiting for her to finish whatever I thought she was going to say, I asked if I could come in.

“If you want.”

Yes, I did want to come in. She shrugged, and stepped aside, opening the door all the way to let me in.

“Aren’t you worried about catching my bug?”

“Oh.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, trying to laugh. “You won’t catch it. Do you want something to eat?” The pained smile that she had been wearing was off now. Even when she laughed, she wasn’t smiling. It soon became hard to think of a way to break the silence that then fell over the two of us. The only sound was of her moving around in the kitchen behind me while I sat awkwardly on her couch. The silence was a challenge, but eventually I decided on a way break it. It usually takes me a while to find the perfect thing to say.

“I’m afraid that I don’t have a present for you either,” I looked back over my shoulder and half-smiled.

“Oh.” She didn’t look at me.

...Ok, so apparently I hadn’t found it yet.

Something was wrong.

Fuck subtlety.

“What’s the matter Ophelia? Seriously, you are really acting weird,” I said as I got up. “You’re scaring me.” She still didn’t respond, apparently absorbed in my half-made breakfast.

“What’s the matter?!” I screamed. I cracked. “Why won’t you talk to me? Why do you just ignore me...?” I then proceeded to unload a speech on her, pretty much summing up my newly revived angst of the previous night. Well, at least half of it.

Halfway through my aggression, she stopped me, not with words, but with what would become one of my worst memories. She clutched her side, obviously in some horrible pain. Then she fell back in to the counter with a sudden scream. Oh god. Ophelia. Oh my god, what had I been saying?

Honestly, I can’t remember what I was feeling as I watched the girl that I loved wretch on to the floor in front of me. All I remember was the power that it held over me, and the sense of powerlessness that I felt. Even before I saw the blood, I knew that her days were numbered –but yes, there was blood. Too much of it: she was Sick.

We just stared at each other then, for an irrelevant amount of time. We stared, and I cried, and she clutched at her pain. At least then I knew the reason why she never called me back.

“I’m sorry.”

When it was said, I didn’t know what she was apologizing for. All I could think of was the number twenty-six.

Seven years.

Before I left, I made a vow to her that I would save her life. I promised an antidote –I promised to have it for her within seven years. I told her that I loved her, and that it was the reason why I would not fail.

Ophelia assured me that, although she did not feel the same way, my love for her would change nothing in our friendship. She was flattered, I’m sure.

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“An unbroken heart is an easy kill
All that I needed was your trust
A part of me I thought I knew
Was the side of me that knew how to hurt you
And as you start to speak your mind
A vicious whip in mine unwinds
And this is what reminds me that a word from the heartless is a voice to the heart”

A state of emergency had been declared over the radio broadcast, just minutes before the first use of Martial Law was demonstrated. Whole neighborhoods were suddenly claimed, as ruggedly suited men with gas masks collected up the afflicted in trucks to be carried off to Port. The once thriving Port of Mixill had essentially become synonymous with death, because in all public knowledge, it was the end of the line. There were no communications with the Rim Islands, in or out, since Martial Law. The city too, had become isolated from the rest of the world, although communications persisted. It was suspected that the authorities knew something more about how The Sickness was spread, because not even people over the age of twenty-six were free to leave the barricaded perimeter. Mixill would stay this way until every inhabitant had turned twenty-six.

Or until I found a cure.

In the months succeeding my visit with Ophelia, the looming epidemic had displaced many more to the Rim Islands- mainly Sick children. The young population was thinning. Everyone under twenty-six was at risk, and occasionally someone older than twenty-six would just drop dead for being too close to a fatality.

I witnessed one of these incidents once while walking home with an old microscope that I had found at a pawn shop. Surely such a thing should have costed more than just fifty dollars, but I suppose it was only fitting that for the only person actually in demand of such an object, fifty dollars was a real wallet-breaker.

The microscope was for me to study Sick cells up close. The medical labs had the same equipment, but better, but I was only needed there about twice a week. From staying late to lock up on the evenings of those infrequent summonings, I had found out enough in my own research to know that I would not get Sick by merely being close to a Sick Cell. The only known consistent transmitter was still the recently departed. For some reason, the cells would stop being contagious after a certain time. It was a mystery to me how the cells were made available to me. The locked cold-room that stored most of the research cells was not supposed to hold them. Then again, I wasn't supposed to have the key to it either. I never did ask Joseph why he gave me that key...

With cheap microscope in hand, I strode down the smoothly cobbled sidewalk of my street feeling rather confident. The sun had not quite set, but the street lamps were on. It seemed their only purpose was to make the expanse in front of me nice to look at.

Mid-stride, I was near knocked from my feet when a man ran in to me from behind.

“Move it!” was the only warning he gave me, just seconds before the offense. Luckily, I caught my balance as I stumbled in to a lamp post and grabbed it with both hands. Unluckily, I needed one of those hands to carry my purchase, and it fell to the ground. Having been saved the disorienting feeling one gets from being fully knocked down, it took me less time to figure out that

the microscope was broken than it did for the runner to get back to his feet. And when he tried to do so, I knelt and pushed him down again, with both hands.

“You broke my microscope, jackass! That thing costed me eighty five dollars!” the number I made up was the cost of the equipment I wanted to get, but couldn’t quite afford.

“Let me go!” he screamed, a lot more frantically than I had expected. Surely eighty five dollars wouldn’t kill him...

“Okay I lied, it was sixty dollars. But you just broke my microscope and you aren’t going anywhere until we work something out.” He started struggling at this point, but I had him pinned. Making him turn to face my loss, I told him again, and that unless he could fix it (as it was clearly broken in to at least four pieces), he would need to reimburse me. He stared at it, looking shocked. My arms were starting to hurt from keeping him still.

The loud clapping of boots on pavement swayed my attention to what he was really staring at.

From the direction he had come running from, a man in all black who carried a pistol was barreling down the sidewalk, presumably in pursuit. He was hollering something, which became “Don’t let that Sick man get away!” as he got in to ear shot. When I saw that he was wearing a gas mask, I identified him as a Sick Collector. Frozen with the thought that there in my hands was an inflicted man being chased by someone with a gun, I debated letting go of him and getting the hell out of there. Acting on general principle though, I decided to side with the man carrying the gun, and did not release my grip.

The Sick Collector slowed to a cautious trot when he saw that his prey wasn’t going anywhere. He brought his other hand up to grasp the pistol more steadily, and continued forward, aiming it at the ground in front of him. At only a few feet from where I lay, he raised his gun in alarm when my prisoner lunged up at him, escaping my hold. It took me a moment to figure out that I had been stabbed. By trying to move, I figured out that the wound was on my left flank, right where one of his hands had been pinned. Worried that my guts were about to spill on to the pavement, I pressed my hand on the gash so that the only things seeping from my body were sweat, and the blood that ran through my fingers.

The first sound that I heard after discovering my pain was a gunshot. One that apparently failed to pacify the aggressor, because the next were sounds of a physical struggle. When I rolled on to my back, I looked up just in time to witness the Sick man tackle the other to the ground, knife in hand. The gun lay in between me and the two of them, next to a splatter of blood and a broken microscope.

“Help,” I shouted, but between the fading footsteps and frightened screams, I could tell that any help to be had was running in the wrong direction. I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the pain. I figured that no matter what I thought about, it would not go away, but if I could face it right from the start then maybe I’d be able to deal with it. Trying to think loud enough to drown out the racket of the two fighting men at my side, I kept telling myself that the period of shock was over and that this was as bad as it was going to get. But my stomach continued undoing itself inside of me with increasing intensity. I did not even flinch at the second gunshot for I had already resigned myself to death.

“Don’t kill me,” sounded a voice that took out of my trance. It was masked by the filter of a gas mask, but the imminent mortal fear was obvious.

“And what were you just about to do to me, eh?” I looked over to see the second speaker straddling the Sick Collector’s stomach, holding a knife to his throat. He brought the knife up to cut loose the other man’s gas mask and then let it flop open.

“I wasn’t going to kill you. That would be too dangerous. You know—” the Sick Collector was halted mid-sentence by a smack to the head.

“I know that I would have been ported, that’s what I know. And you know what else I know? I know that you will die by this knife, and you will be helpless to the poison that it bears.” The Sick man continued to edge the blade closer to the other man’s throat, but relaxed for a moment as he paused at the sound of sirens. The sound came from down the street where they had come from. Whether they were for the Sick man or not, he could not have known, because they were so far off, but the Sick Collector took the opportunity to retaliate. He wrestled his arm free, which mustn’t have been too difficult considering he had already shot the Sick man in the shoulder upon his approach. In a couple seconds, he had forced the Sick man from on top of him. At that point I was really rooting for him, because if he won the brawl then that would mean possible salvation for me. But as it was, my vision was slowly fading along with the daylight, and the fact that my entire hand was coated in blood didn’t help the situation.

The Sick Collector scrambled towards me to retrieve the gun that lay between us. I suppose that even if he ended up shooting the Sick man a second time, the time it would take before his actual death would allow for him to escape, and hopefully take me along with him. But as it turned out, that death came a lot sooner than I had hoped.

Right before he reached the gun, his face cringed and he collapsed. As the black-clad body fell to the ground, the view entered my vision of the Sick man standing behind him, hand to his own throat. As soon as it appeared, his figure immediately tumbled down to once again be hidden by the human lump. But as I watched, I noticed the gaping red gash across his neck. The red was the last color before I realized that my vision had gone black and white. I really was fading out. I released my hand from my side and closed my eyes in resignation.

What a horrible final memory.

In the involuntary attempts that my body put forth to clutch back at life, I noticed a car pull up beside all three of us dead men. Must have been the police, but too late. Why did they turn off their sirens...?

A man in a trench coat stepped out of the driver’s side and knelt at one of the bodies and retrieved something paper from it. In my last blinking moments before I went under, I noticed him step over the body and walk towards me, large boots getting even larger as they approached my vision.

Now who would save Ophelia?

His face was rugged and familiar looking. I do not remember any features but for the deep set eyes that hovered over me as a bearded mouth explained that I was poisoned, but neither it nor the wound through which it had entered were mortal. I could not guess at how long I had been unconscious but for the fact that the sky was now completely dark. I figured that I was laying down some place when his face lifted out of view, presumably as he stood up. At about the same time, I realized that I could not feel most of my body. I tried to remember what the familiar stranger had told me about the poison, but what my intoxicated brain could muster was something a little more unclear than his face. A fistful arm reached out far above me and made a motion that told me there was a door behind my head. Before Charles opened it, I had passed out again, and the other man had left.

The world returned to me in hazy flashes, but as I blinked back into reality, the living room of my apartment became increasingly vivid. I tried to move, and succeeded a little, though it was painful. Having only ever experienced that sensation while I was alive, I assumed that I wasn’t dead, and so became very consciously intent on keeping it that way. My eyes wanted to close, but I

was still afraid that they might not open again at this point. I rolled back to the position where I had woken up in, and felt that I was laying on something soft and comforting. At that point, feeling started returning to me rather quickly, and as the pain increased, I discovered that it was covered by a thick bandage. I groaned, and decided that it would be better to try and fall asleep.

"Sebastien!" Charles called, alerted by my sounds of pain.

The inevitable shock from the experience finally hit me as his voice grounded me back to normality. What the hell had just happened to me? This kind of thing wasn't meant for a person like myself. The closest that I was supposed to come to death was when I was moping about, too lethargic to enact my depressive thoughts. Was I really just stabbed?

"Sure looks like it to me. Sebastien, what were you doing?" I wondered how long I had been thinking aloud.

"I was just walking home, just walking home. Why aren't I at a hospital right now? Wait, where did I get bandaged up, did you do it?" My speech made it clear to me that I was still a little out of it, but not to the point that would render Charles's hard to decipher.

"I just found you on the doorstep. I heard a knock, and then there you were, unconscious. I thought you had died. But you already had the bandages on, so I assumed you had been cared for..." was that nervousness in his voice?

"I also found a piece of paper in your front pocket. It's a warrant for your arrest, along with two other men; a man named Soren Evans, and someone named Joseph Selding." Yes, it was probably nervousness.

"Let me see that," I waved my shaky hand above me, waiting for him to guide the paper in to my grasp. The fact that I could focus my eyes to read the small print was reassuring, despite its disturbing content. Sure enough, it was my name on the paper, and I had a pretty good idea why it was there. I didn't know who Soren was, but I assumed it had been the Sick man who had killed himself. I knew a Joseph though.

"Warrant merited under suspicion of possession of illegal substances, and of illegal distribution," I read. My brain was working well enough at that point to formulate a likely scenario: Joseph had given me access to the Sick Cells, and Soren was his source.

"Warrant merited under evidence of illegal habitation while carrying the Sickness," if these two people were linked, then that must have been the reason of it. But why did I need to be involved? All I knew of Joseph was that he worked at the medical labs. I didn't even know what he did there, and the warrant that I held in my steadying hand nurtured doubts that it was anything at all. Maybe he didn't even belong to the labs. But if he had access, then why was I needed? Maybe he needed a scapegoat for whatever he was doing with those cells.

"I think I know Joseph Selding. I met him at the medical lab on my first day," I said this with the knowledge that I would soon have to explain to Charles about the Sick Cells. Whatever poison it was that I had been intoxicated with had worn off to the point where I was realizing a lot more than that. I began to tell Charles about the off-the-record research I had been undertaking, and explained up through the part where I got stabbed and passed out. It took him mere seconds after I related the experience to meet the same realization that I had come to: I had just been in close proximity to the death of a Sick man. We sat in silence, and my abdominal pain became noticed again.

"What are you going to do?"

"About what?" I sighed, and he looked to the ground, silent again. I closed my eyes. When I opened them he was gone, along with the memory of the dream that told me I had fallen asleep. For

how long, I did not know. I still held the paper though, reminding me that there was a more imminent threat to my life, one that would take more than eight years to catch up with me.

It was mid morning when I finally rose. I found that my injury was not nearly as scary as it was the previous night. In fact, I was convinced that most of the pain had come of the poison that the knife had apparently been dosed in. When I peeked underneath the mysteriously laid bandages, I was relieved to find little more than a scratch. It *was* more than a scratch though, mind you.

Anyways, I got up a few hours after my ability to do so returned, and in the mean time I had decided what next to do: find Joseph.

The only thing that I knew of the man was that he was at the med labs on my first day of work. He was the one who had walked me through how to use the equipment, none of them any more complex than my microscope before it had broken. I doubted now that his particular role in my initiation was quite needed. He was there to give me that key. In any case, the only lead I had was at the labs. Without bothering to shower, I picked up my coat from the side of the couch where Charles had put it, my key chain jangling in one of its pocket.

“Charles?” I hollered throughout the apartment’s few doors, both open and closed.

“Yep,” he was behind one of the closed ones.

“I have to go to the med labs.”

“Wait,” a door opened. “I’m coming with you. Look, I don’t want to be home when the police come knocking. I’m going to come with you, and you’re going to tell me what the hell is happening,” apparently my look of surprised innocence wasn’t enough to convince him that I had no clue what was happening. He grabbed his coat from the rack, and we left.

Despite the second half of Charles’s suspicious prediction, the better half of our frosty morning stroll was traversed in silence. I say better half because the lack of speaking, albeit imposed by tension, allowed my busy thoughts to work at full power, and I make this distinction because about halfway through our journey they were interrupted.

I felt very stupid at this point, because my full-capacity thoughts had gotten halfway to nowhere.

It had been raining at some point, and the stone streets were wet and noisy to the step. So it wasn’t long seconds after they appeared that I noticed a third set of feet walking parallel to mine and Charles’s.

After already having been thrown into a state of heightened suspicion by recent events and a recent document now crumpled in my coat pocket, the addition to ours threw me that extra foot into fright. The sudden bolt I entered into was non-noteworthy and short-lived. What should be noted is the embarrassing stumble that administered its end, and administered to my cautious hands a dose of wet pavement gravel.

Regardless of what physical inconveniences a set of cautious hands could administer, my brain functioned rather well on the edge of paranoia. I got up and ran a quick assessment of my situation.

“Who did you say you were?” Charles and the stranger had begun dialogue...

“...was my name. I’m a photographer. More...I’d say than anything else.” Their chattering was hard to process in my current state of rapid assessment. At a glance, I couldn’t tell much about the man except that he was holding a photographer’s camera. What sort of person creeps up on you with a camera and starts talking to you? A dozen perverted possibilities sprang in my head, but each involved malicious tricks and fakes, ones easily believed by one such as Charles. After a couple of seconds I let go of my paranoid focus after finding no useful information save for the fact that Charles was now talking to the stranger like a gullible fool.

A smarter man would have taken note at the newest milestone of my descent.

“Sebastien, watch out. Shit,” came a warning too late, a warning rendered more distracting than useful because it wasn’t Charles who was talking. Great, now the stranger knew my name. At least the result of his warning being a failure only took form in a minor trip, almost as noteworthy as the first.

“Don’t worry about it; he’s just in one of his trances. Does it a lot,” Charles provided with a level of casualness that could only be reached consciously at a time like this. Was he mocking me? My mind reeled for a moment in fear that he was mocking me before I suppressed any negative thoughts. But what was he saying I did a lot? Charles shuddered a cold sigh to the left of me.

“You haven’t said anything for about a minute. Henry here was just telling me something I think you’ll find intriguing.”

“Oh. It- didn’t seem that long.” Was I that much of a simpleton that I couldn’t even hold a coherent thought together without expending a full minute’s worth of energy? I wondered how such a person could ever cure an epidemic.

“My name is Henry, Sir. Nice to meet you,” said the photographer as he circled behind me to end up on my right. The man spoke with a heavy accent from some place out of town. He wore a full beard, and shaggy brown hair which all but covered an otherwise lean face. He extended a steady gloved hand which I took with caution. His face had the look of a man who would normally shave, yet hadn’t for a few days, but more importantly it was a face that housed calculating intelligence. Also obvious of Henry was the fact that he didn’t quite believe me that I had just been lost in my own head for so long that I had missed his entire first supposed introduction.

I’m sure someone who cared would have been embarrassed.

“I’m Sebastien,” I offered, in case it hadn’t already come up.

“I know,” he said. With his next words, his face hardened and his tone lost all casualness.

“I also know what happened to you last night, and so does this,” he said, hefting the camera that hung at his neck and chuckling. He furrowed his brows and asked, “Who is Joseph?”

God damn it. I felt like I was a kid back on the island again and some false rumor had gotten out of hand about me and some love interest.

“How is it that even strangers think I think I know this guy?” I directed this at Charles, who was just shaking his head at me.

I stopped, and the drizzle that had just begun was all there was to cool my mounting aggravation.

“Look, I don’t know who this man is but that he gave me a key to a room in the lab that in retrospect I probably shouldn’t have accepted. Joseph is a stranger to me.” I started with a heated whisper, but my anger quickly carried it to a shout. Luckily by the time I mentioned his name, I had reigned my words into a state of composure. Who knows what sort of creeps may be listening in a public setting.

I looked at our companion again. What kind of person goes around slummy parts of town like mine taking pictures of- no, *spying* on people like me? And what was in that backpack he was carrying... We stood silently in the increasing rainfall for a few seconds as I regained my composure.

“What are you trying to say about last night, Henry?” came the query at the end of a long trail of my thoughts. The point of his finding me now brought onto the table, Henry’s casual nature sobered into one I suspected of a wanted man making a deal.

“There is a man named Joseph Selding that I have been eh, tracking as of late, and you are my latest lead. Are we not going to the Medical Lab? Come.” Interested, both Charles and myself found ourselves compelled to follow his lead and continued walking.

Well, maybe Charles’s interest was one more grounded in keeping warm, but by this point I was more interested in the man than scared of him. The rain was becoming a downpour and Charles gave me an annoyed look, as if his discomfort came of my choosing. Aggressively, I rolled my eyes, directed more at my own discomfort than his.

“I am a freelance photographer from out of town, trapped by this quarantine,” he interrupted himself to add a globule of spit to the already pooling gutter. “As you may guess my foremost intent is to get home.”

“Then who is Joseph? Why did he want me to find those cells?”

“Those what?”

Shit. My paranoid half wanted to put a gun to my head for that leak.

“Yeah, what cells?” Charles chimed in, knowing full well that I wouldn’t want to tell this stranger any more about myself. His idea of irony was a pain to deal with when he was annoyed. I lowered my voice as I continued to talk, as despite the rain, our surroundings had begun the gradual transformation to the more trafficked area which housed the med labs.

“Well shit on me, I’ll tell him.” So I did. Everything I knew, sans any particular developments I had discovered about the cells themselves. At the time I figured that if Henry was in fact an undercover policeman, then withholding anything wouldn’t be a sound strategy. Besides, he knew too much already.

“Your eye is twitching,” Henry remarked, at the end of my speech. “We’re here. I will tell you more about this Joseph fellow after we’ve broken in and escaped.”

“Broken in?”

“You work here man, you should have known it was closed today,” said Charles with a comical sigh, turning a stiff shoulder and beginning his walk back down the street. I watched him in silence for a few seconds and turned around to see a large rock hurl across my vision and shatter the front window of the building’s lobby. The crash was loud enough for Charles to curse, presumably having stopped and looked back at the damage. I cursed. A woman walking her dog across the street shrieked.

I looked at Henry, and noticed his backpack open on the ground, and a second stone being lifted from it. I leaped in front of him and snatched it out of his hands, at which point he saw fit to raise his camera to take a picture of a scene. I knocked it back down with my free hand and another foul remark. Part of me should have felt pity, I know: the front of a dirty bachelor’s jacket had little market value compared to that same jacket, being worn by a man holding a rock before a government building with a smashed window.

“Sorry,” he said, with a shaky smile. “Habit.” Like a lunatic in true form, Henry stepped past me and carefully climbed through the hole, knocking away loose shards with his gloved hand.

I was starting to like the man. Surprised to find Charles at my side again, I followed him into the dark lobby.

“So tell me how you’re going to do it,” Charles said.

“Do what?” I responded, distracted by my thoughts. He sighed.

“You’re thinking of a cure, remember?”

“Oh yea. Yea, I was just thinking about that...”

Her twentieth birthday was approaching, and still I had come no closer to finding the cure than I was a year ago. It wasn't for lack of trying, though. For sure, countless others had tried everything I thought of, so even had I not acted upon those thoughts; it would still not have been for lack of trying.

I had asked around; I had looked through any records I could find. But without direct exposure to the recently deceased, there was nowhere I could go from there. That was where the key must lie. My inquiries certainly pointed in no helpful direction, as the Rim Islands were entirely out of my grasp.

Charles and I had helped Ophelia hide from the Sick collectors, but she could not go out in public any more for the symptoms were too severe, and thus too obvious. One step outside and people would notice her for what she was, and send her to Port. Because of this, she had been living within the confines of her apartment for almost a year, and would continue so until one of two things happened.

"Sebastien, it's been a year, and you don't even know what it is you're looking for. I mean, you've tried. You've tried as hard as anybody could try, and certainly harder than most. I'd tell you to give up, but then what kind of a friend would I be? Nonetheless, I'll tell you this: it's hard for me too, and it's even harder for me to see you destroy yourself like this. Look, she's my friend too, so don't you dare think that I don't feel it too. But it's time to give up man. You've tried."

"I'll do it. Don't ever ask me how again, Charles, but I will do it. I just have to keep looking." The reasonable part of me agreed with the frustrated footsteps, followed by the closing door behind me. I waited for that door to finish closing before I let myself cry. Alone, I repeated the question once more, and responded aptly with silence.

It had been a couple months since I had last seen Ophelia –I, having spent most of the time at the Public Archives, looking for answers, and she...well, Ophelia just wanted to be left alone. I couldn't really blame her. Her life had become misery, confined within the protective cage of her apartment walls. She was not able to go out in to the public, and I suppose she was getting used to the life of the recluse. It made sense that she didn't want to be social.

I couldn't blame her, and yet part of me did. Her distance ate away at my paranoia. I made up thoughts for her in my mind, and none of them wanted to see me. There had been a couple times where she had felt the need to see someone, but this would be when I was busy elsewhere, and thus she could not get in touch with me. Charles would keep her company in my stead during these times. Even though he didn't know her as well as I did, Charles would help her out, for he knew how much it meant to me for her to be happy. Charles has always been a good friend to me.

He was angry with me though. He was angry, and I couldn't blame him either...yet somehow I managed to do just that.

I cursed my best friend as I made my sickeningly anxious way down towards Ophelia's apartment. I don't even know what I intended to accomplish by meeting with her that morning. Although, all paranoid anxiety aside, and the fact that the mere thought of her made me happy, I still didn't like to see her Sick. And besides, she didn't even know I was coming.

So I walked. The silhouetted buildings on the horizon framed the sunrise beautifully, yet despite this, my emotion still responded with bitterness. The beauty reminded me of a bad memory from almost a year ago; it reminded me of a better time. One time I came to her house and I could hear her singing from outside. And unlike our first meeting, I wasn't afraid that she'd leave, so I had sat there on her front steps, enjoying every hour of it.

I eventually arrived at my old concert seat, this time flanked by a solemnly unkempt garden. I sat, and thought. The performers, I noted, were not nearly as pleasant as last time. They sounded

nervous and unprepared. Though they had rehearsed and rehearsed the upcoming event, it was apparent that the real thing was an entirely different challenge for them. They kept arguing amongst themselves, accusing the other of the fraud. On one side of the stage stood paranoia, and facing off on the other side stood reason, cowering in comparison. Luckily for him though, the forgiving audience had a bias towards the underdog, and reason ended up the crowd favorite. Although the obligatory ovation at the end was small and short lived, the show was still over, and so I left the theatre. I got up and knocked on the door, finally ready to face not a foe, not a stranger, but a friend.

But when the peep hole in the door slid open, it was a stranger's eyes that inspected me: deep set and surrounded by a shadowed red rash of puckered skin. After my passing the inspection though, the peep hole slid shut and the door opened a crack, only to be stopped by the chain lock. A stranger's hand fiddled with the newly installed lock, and the door finally creaked open to reveal a stranger's face.

Her face, which once had been radiantly evident with beauty, had suffered the same depravation as what I saw of around her eyes, and on her hand. Despite this, underneath her Sickened body, there was still Ophelia, and although not so radiant, her beauty was still clear in my eyes. I almost told her this.

"You look awful," I blurted, as sadness numbed me at the sight of her. My anxiety returned almost as quickly as the sadness when, in response, she began to close the door on me, without a word. Over the previous year, it seemed, I had since lost my knack for finding the perfect thing to say.

"Wait," I said, but having little faith in my clumsy words, I stuck my foot in to wedge the door ajar. "Wait," I said again, softer, and less forceful. I didn't really have any reason to be there but to talk to her, and even then, I had no particular subject in mind. I had just assumed that, being one of her closest friends, Ophelia would let me enter. Now though, I was on trial for a reason, else the walk was for nothing. I searched myself for something to say, hoping to find a trace of my comparative eloquence that I once possessed. After a couple seconds of this, Ophelia asked me what I was doing there, and thus bought me a little more time as she spoke. In this time, paranoia stepped out for an encore, and the now nervous crowd was quickly won over by his second performance.

Of what happened next, the details are unimportant; unimportant and painful, for these were the worst of my life. These details that I shall abridge for my sake as well as yours, I would rather not remember, and you would most likely find redundant of a year ago.

Oh, never mind.

Because that I am an honest man was one of the first things that I told you, I shall take this time to elaborate, for of the complete truth, I am a stalwart believer. So as I break down and continue the tale of my imbecility, I will not misplace any of the details in translation, no matter how convenient such an action may seem. I'll tell you just what happened, and of all of what happened. And I'll tell you in the same excruciating detail that I can only wish to have forgotten.

"What are you doing here, Sebastien?" What was I doing there? Why would she even ask?

"Does a good friend to another really need a reason to stop by and wish her well?" At this she sighed; a beautiful sound, had it been made at any other time but then. Despite all uncertainty, Ophelia remained a beauty to me, but there was a point about to be crossed where even I could not

deceive myself of her true feelings. Already, I was losing an internal struggle to keep my sanity, as calmness slipped away, along with any surety that Ophelia saw me as a friend.

“You do,” she said. A deep cut. “Sebastien, why do you insist that we are such good friends?” Why indeed? I knew that one day, those words would eventually escape her mouth, yet the actual utterance provided unexpected shock, for I had been telling myself the exact opposite of what she implied. Though obsession had fooled me, I never once thought we were close; not truly. But I somehow managed to convince myself that we were, despite every hint leaning otherwise. And now, the truth of it all was as clear to me as a rising sun. Framed perfectly, and centered in my mind.

The sort of realization that I suffered will always sting, at least a little. Such is the nature of the loss of innocence. But for some reason, this one burned fiercely, and cut to some deep place within me, piercing my heart.

Even had she not cut me speechless, I still did not get a chance to say anything, for she wasted no time in her advance to casually dismiss any hope in our relationship that I may have still retained from moments before. Still, I opened my mouth. Either she didn’t care to hear whatever she thought I had to say, or she recognized it for what it was: an expression of disbelief. For whatever reason though, Ophelia chose to ignore my open mouth, and not wait a second more to break my heart. And as she did this, I realized that the paranoia that I had previously tried so hard to quell from my mind was actually plain truth, screaming for my attention.

Oh yes, and the details:

“I am not the friend that you think I am, Sebastien, and I’ve had enough. I’m sick of you calling me. I’m tired of these random visits to my house. Why do you persist? Haven’t I made it clear enough that you will never have me? I’m not your girl, and I never will be.”

More shock. Is this truly how she saw me – a desperate suitor, clinging on to a hope of one day having her love? A part of me didn’t doubt her reasoning, but the better half of me was appalled. I think I shook my head a little in disbelief. I know for sure that my jaw was still gaping, and possibly had dropped even further, because at this point, I truly was searching for something to say. How could I respond to such harshness? She just stood there and stared back at me, disapprovingly.

“Sebastien. Listen to me. I don’t like you. I mean, you used to be fine, but then you got creepy with all of this love shit. I’m going to be dead soon, and I don’t want to waste any more of my life avoiding you.”

“You told me it wouldn’t change anything,” I said, after a surprisingly sobering few seconds of mutual silence.

“What?”

“You told me that it would not affect our friendship. No, you promised me that it wouldn’t. Remember? I made you promise! You promised. You fucking promised me!” I did not raise my voice with those last few words. If anything, it softened to a whisper.

“Enough. No more. Now get your foot out of my door so that I may close it,” she said, almost politely. I complied, slowly, defeated. For some reason she decided not to close the door on me quite yet.

“What is it?” I asked, as she sighed.

“I want you to halt this search for the cure, too. If it is on my behalf, then I don’t want it, and I don’t appreciate it. I am disgusted to see how pathetic you have become.”

“But...”

“Give it up. You’ll never find it.”

The Sickness

“I know I can do it though...if only I could have access to a newly dead body. Please! I know I’m on the right track! I can cure you yet.”

“Well you won’t have access to me. Go swim to the Rim Islands, if you really need your sample; I don’t care.” After her mocking response, Ophelia produced the cruelest, most satisfied smirk that she could muster. Such an ugly look was even complete with an unmistakable measure of disdain, shown clearly through her eyes. I swallowed back anything else I had to say, for it seemed that we were done.

Using what little dignity I had left, I turned on my heel, and walked away before she had a chance to close the door on me.

“One time I met a stranger
He used to be a friend
I wanted to forget it all and let him stay at end
But recollection doesn’t leave as easily as planned
I wish he could just let me go
I prayed his heart to mend
And this is what reminds me that love is forever
And once a heart is found, love’s home it shall always stay

No matter how brief it may be
No matter how much it seems to have gone away
Love will never leave

My friend will never leave me”

What a fool I had been. What a damn, stupid fool.

But even after a week of incapacitating depression, I still thought that I loved her. Hell, at that point I just knew it. For whatever it was worth, and for all the hurt that it would cause me, I still loved her. With this thought in mind, I was assisted in finally getting out of bed one early afternoon. That bed had been my home for a long and miserable enough time that one could easily justify it as being a whole era of my life. I swung my feet off the side of the bed and stretched my arms, this being the most vigorous motion of mine in many days –a harbinger of a new era if ever there was one. Yes, at that point I must have undergone some sort of epiphany, because I once again had somehow been provoked in to caring about life. Apparently Charles heard my ascent in to compassion from the other room, for he popped his head in, presumably to see who the hell was making the floor creak. It only ever creaked when someone was standing on it, you see, and at the time, that wasn’t an activity I particularly frequented.

“You look a week younger than you did yesterday. In fact, you look rather happy with yourself! What happened? Does this mean that you’ve finally reached your week-awaited epiphany?”

Charles waited for a response from me, and flashed that contagious smile of his in the meantime. At the point when his smile would usually pass on to me, I realized that I was already grinning on my own accord. The effort to set my face straight only increased the effect. It’s amazing how one’s outlook can so thoroughly invert in one quick moment. That whole week it felt

as if I was slowly slipping off in to an abyss. But when I got there, it turned out that it was no abyss, but merely a dark veil, shrouding my view on life for the worse. It was on that afternoon that I finally fell through the veil, and remembered one or two reasons to smile. I said so much to Charles, and he congratulated me. He didn't even seem disappointed when I told him that I would indeed continue my search for the cure.

But as is only appropriate for any good spirited moment, it was cut short all too soon. This happened in a rather anticlimactic fashion, as Charles flashed a disgusted look, wrinkled his nose, and backed out of the bedroom to continue whatever business which had previously occupied him. I realized that I probably smelled exactly like whatever odor Charles had just wrinkled his nose at, and I made my humble way towards the shower room.

It wasn't really a shower; just a cheap bathtub with only one setting: cold. But cold was good at that moment, for to compliment the effect of my rejuvenation, its temperature dispelled any lingering drowsiness from my week in bed. Pouring cold water over my back with a bucket, I contemplated my epiphany. I sat there in the tub for what must have been a long time, because the cold water ran out, giving way to colder water –such to the point where I was just about ready to hit the towels. Hell, I would have done just that had I felt I had gotten anywhere with my contemplation, but I figured I'd wait a few more, and, all thoughts of cleanliness aside, see if I couldn't make that bath worthwhile.

Up until that point, all I had worked out was that whatever epiphany that induced me to get up, could only be described as subconscious. I felt content, and I didn't know why. Even as I tested the strength of my newfound happiness with unhappy thoughts, it did not waver.

“Sebastien, are you okay in there? It's been an hour.”

Yea, I was fine. I told him this.

“Alright, just checking –smelling good, man.” Okay, I admit, his humor can get a little stale. This, probably being due to the sheer constancy and quantity of it. I knew I smelled good though, because we do like to indulge in the small luxury of scented soap.

“Thanks,” I laughed.

“Alright, well –have a good swim then.” Have a good swim.

Swim.

Go swim to the Rim Islands, if you really need your sample...

In my new state of mind, Ophelia's snide remark was starting to look more like a viable option than an insult.

I then knew why I was so content, for I realized that I had developed a genuine acceptance for my situation. My final exchange with Ophelia had been an eye opener. And with any reality check, of course, comes shock. I dumped some more freezing water on my back, which succeeded in its intent to fuel my train of thought. Shivering and eyes wide, I continued to realize myself.

I was out of shock, and all of the paranoia had washed away, because at that point, I knew that it was all true. With no negative emotion remaining, everything had turned in to facts: Ophelia was not a friend to me, yet I still loved her. I had made a promise to her, because I loved her, and because I loved her, I would fulfill that promise at any length. It was all just facts: I loved her. I also knew that I was a damn, stupid fool for all of this, but even so, this knowledge did not conflict with my resolve to find the cure. Feeling I had contemplated enough, I climbed out of the tub. I almost considered getting right back in, when I realized that I had no clue what sort of endurance and guile it would take to swim to the Rim Islands...

“Well I don’t know anything about endurance or guile, so I can’t really give you any input on that...but I know a great deal about stupidity.”

“I’m serious, Charles. Look, I know you’ve learned by now that you can’t waver me on this. All that’s left for you to do now is help me, so to make sure that I don’t kill myself in the process,” I said, as I pulled some old tome down from one of the dustier, upper shelves. It was a large compilation of maps, from all over the world. I skimmed the table of contents to see if it had a map that included the Rim Islands and the Coastal Mainland.

Charles sighed, shaking his head, which looked more like a gesture of pity, rather than anger or annoyance. It was true what I had said about my unwillingness to waver though. I felt a wave of pity wash over me, as I realized that Charles could do nothing to stop his closest friend from destroying himself. Yes, at this point I made no delusions as to what I was doing. I lifted my gaze from the map book for a moment, and for a second, our eyes met. There was so much to say, but not a single word to be had. And so he stared at me, in his final attempt to return me to sanity. Charles broke the trance, in resignation, and silently agreed to help me. An empty triumph on my part.

We sat down together at the table we had chosen to be a home base for the morning’s research.

Public Archives housed a large enough study chamber that even while the early morning offered us a welcome atmosphere of near-desertion, I still did not feel happy with our level of privacy. The study chamber was protected by only the illusion of walls. In reality, its borders consisted of dozens of rows of bookshelves, and the dozens of consequential isles that they provided in between. In fact, most of the Public Archives building consisted of the single large warehouse-room, where which we sat in its center.

In that center sat two other people, who sat at two different tables. There were about twenty tables in all, so it wasn’t difficult for Charles and me to position ourselves far enough away from them so as not to be bothered. But the chamber carried our voices pretty far.

We both seated ourselves again at our table, and I pried open the aging map book that I had picked out. Luckily, the condition of the map itself was very good, considering the books lackluster exterior. Charles opened up a book on prison security.

“Sebastien, you’re doing it again,” Charles warned, tilting the large book down to look at me as he spoke.

“What?” I groaned, preparing myself for his humor.

“You keep looking around and behind your shoulder. And you’re quite obviously, and deliberately, covering what you are reading,” he beckoned, his waving hand indicating the table on either side in front of me. Indeed I had surrounded my reading with stacks of books.

“The most suspicious thing you can do right now is look overly inconspicuous. And that means acting suspicious, which is what you are doing.” But he whispered those sensitive words as slowly and quietly as he could.

“With the city under martial law how it is, there’s really no point in trying that hard not to be noticed, because they will scoop you up off your feet and Port you for doing absolutely nothing. You’ve seen it happen. What do you think your chances are while you’re being so obvious?” I chose not to bother myself to argue with him, because I knew that it would bother him more- or at least almost as much. After all, he did agree to help me on this, against his willing judgment, and his advice was intended to help me too. Not only would I feel guilty to second guess him on this, but, considering I was not in agreement, I knew that he was probably right.

So I dispersed the towers at my forward flanks. Despite the secret onlooker who I knew was almost certainly spying on me, I did this without looking over my shoulder. After a good half hour of reading and calculating, the stranger had left me, disinterested. I knew this, because he wasn't there when I finally looked behind me. It seemed as though Charles's advice was coming in to effect. I debated making a joke about it, but my grave determination left me in silence. And so, to this mood, the morning wore on. We hardly talked but to exchange books or to reference the odd factoid. All energy was focused on finding a way for me to get to the Rim Islands. And so the week, and the following weeks wore on.

We discovered that the North most island lay roughly nine and a half miles seaward from the Continent. I knew that no matter how hard I trained within the timeline that I had given myself, such a swim would surely kill me. Despite the disheartening news, we did not give up search that morning until we had found a more in-depth map, detailing a host of small rocks in between, the nearest of which lay a mere two miles off-coast. Doable.

The next obstacle to climb then became to escape from the Mixill quarantine zone, for the passage that I desired was ten miles due North. Luckily, over the following month, the intervals in my physical training allowed for time enough to devise a ladder for such an obstacle.

I walked down that same straight path that I had come to loathe, which stood alone amidst the windiness of the surrounding residential maze. But the more I walked the wet stone of the sidewalk, the more comfortable I felt with my surroundings. The memory that usually came framed within the houses that rose on either side of me was somehow rendered as murky as the houses themselves, as they were obscured by the dense rain and heavy nightly cloud cover.

Despite that I had been hugging to the shadows for a long time, the level of lighting brought on by the flickering streetlamps only contrasted Henry from the darkness when he was close enough to cause my heart to jump in my chest. We hadn't set a fixed rendezvous point, for we knew that if one of us got there early and had to wait, if even only for a few minutes, it would seem more suspicious than two figures passing each other on the street. I knew it was him right away though, from the package that he carried.

"The song?" The man spoke with a heavy accent from some place out of town.

"Where it rains," I said, in secret confirmation, as I brushed past him, and the package that he held became mine.

We had met Henry in the Public Archives. After an long assessment of encoded small talk, we both decided the other trustworthy to conspire with. He was a photographer, trapped away from his faraway home by the quarantine, and since quarantine started, he had accumulated an impressive number of behind-the-scenes photographic footage of the powers behind it. Or so he claimed. But regardless, the man had jumped at the chance to help us recon the border security.

When I got home, I poured out the contents of the folder. I infolded the kitchen table, and sat down at it and closed the door, so as not to wake Charles. Luckily, it was only the outside of the folder that was dripping wet, and the photographs were intact. There were dozens of them. Most of them were blurry, but all of them were helpful, and those blurry were not to a degree as to make them unreadable. I flipped through the pile, and slowed as I got to the last few. I came to one that was exceptionally unclear- all that I could make out at first were dozens white lines, all piled together.

But as I flipped the picture, to see if I had it right side up, I skipped a breath. Through all of the black and white fuzz, I finally noticed that those lines were the limbs of people, all heaped together in large piles. A man in dark clothing stood in front of the corpses, holding what must have

been a rifle. I didn't even need to check the caption on the back, nor did I need to notice the ship waiting in the background to know what this was a picture of.

"The only conceivable way for you to even get close enough to the border to attempt an escape would be to become part of the Border Guard." The Border Guard was a selective militia, trained, and then garrisoned all around the outskirts of Mixill. This particular chapter of the armed forces was a new development since the Sickness arrived. To apply, one must nearly have walked through the doors of one of the many public recruitment buildings. The foreboding thing was that once past the second set of doors, where potential recruits were taken, and supposedly evaluated, the people who entered would not return, for there were no tales of the insides of those offices. And I doubted that the Border Guard had a one hundred percent enlistment rate.

"Or, at least to work for them. Become a janitor. If you could get close enough to swipe a high enough security key, then you could past the barricades. At that point, to escape would simply become a matter of getting through the wide-open quarter mile of almost assured sharpshooter fire, then clambering across the ten-foot, guarded barbed wire fencing, which, as we we've deduced from the photographs, probably has a mine field on the other side." As Charles mentioned the photographs, he sobered a little, as did I. Henry had died for those photographs, and for our obscure little cause.

Yes, shortly after the night where he had given me the photographs, Henry was ported. He was to meet us at the Public Archives the following weekend, yet he did not show up. And he would not reply to our messages that we wrote on scratch paper, and left inside the books there. Three times he had not shown up, and even more messages went unanswered, until we finally gave up hope. Though I barely knew the man, I could not shake images of him lying among the other corpses at, waiting to be shipped off to the Rim Islands. But his legacy found itself in his photographs, and would help me find a cure.

"Well I should be able to handle the guards, if I get detected. It would be just like when we were kids, and dad took us hunting..." I trailed off, as fond memories rushed back to me, seeking to break the dams at me eyes

"Yea, just like old times. Except these will be people, Sebastien." He didn't need to remind me. I knew full well what I had committed myself to. And if I did end up taking a life, the voice in the back of my head would assure me that to cure the Sickness was a righteous enough cause.

The recruitment building stood tall and daunting, ahead of me. This is where me and Charles would part ways. This whole time I had know the time would come for me to say goodbye to him, but never had it hit me that this could be goodbye, forever. Regardless, I doubt that anything could have prepared me any better than I already was, for I had grown accustomed to loss. I told him as much, as I left for those first set of doors.

"If you chose to go home, remember, mom and dad kept the spare key under the planter," Charles called back to me, as I walked up the steps. His voice cracked. And I was glad that he wasn't thinking about the fact that others could hear him, because at that moment, I did not care.

Before I entered the building, I double checked my pants pocket too see that I still held my notes regarding the cure.

"One time I met a fool
I meant everything to him

The Sickness

He would throw away his life
But of me, he will never win
He thinks that he's in love, but I don't think he is right

I wish he could just forget me
I wish he had never known me
Damn that stubborn fool
I wish I could break him free"

The doors of the recruitment building were heavy, but as I pushed them open, my burden transcended physicality.

The lobby was almost stark empty, but for three or four people, and a front desk, at which sat a clerk. The clerk referred me to a stack of application forms which resided untidily, and overstuffed, in a metal container hanging on the wall by itself. I walked over towards it, my shoes clapping loudly on the messily timeworn floor. I wondered how such an unclean place could give off such an empty atmosphere. Truly, the room gave the apt impression of having left something behind. I noticed a trash bin in the far corner.

After wrestling an application from the unsolicited box, I strode over to the bin, so that I could use its flat top as a surface for me to write. I down the application, and scanned over the fields. Halfway through, I remembered that I was all out of ink, and had to ask the clerk. He gave me the only threateningly wrathful look of annoyance that I would expect from a worker at such a place, and handed me an inkwell from behind the desk.

When I was finally summoned to behind the second set of doors, the other people had left, and the temperature hinted at evening. From where I had been sleeping against the wall, I got up and followed a uniformed man who held the application that I had just turned in. I followed him through the gray door of the second set, unmarked but by scuffs and stains. The room that it opened up to turned out to be a long, dark corridor. But the corridor was not so dark that I could not see a light at the end, and was not so long that I couldn't tell what the light was illuminating. I made my way down to the metal door, and my escort opened it with a key, and nudged me inside.

At this point I was starting to feel the first pangs of worry, as the feeling grew on me that I would never see the outside world again. The room that I had been brought to evoked the daunting mental likeness of the inside of some great beast which had just swallowed me. Nothing, it seemed, would have been able to make the butterflies in my stomach more raucous, not even the sound of a metal door locking behind me.

"Why are you shaking, son?"

"Hello?" I replied, stupidly. Why indeed was I shaking? This was an army recruitment station, not some sinister enemy fortress. I was probably just being paranoid. And with a look to an open door at my left, I noticed that the middle-aged man who had greeted me looked friendly enough. I wiped the moisture from my brow, and then with my other hand, I held out for him shake, which he promptly gripped.

"I don't know, sir," I said, as I noted the silver bead on his collar which meant that he was of some rank. "They say that nobody is heard from again after they enlist." I blurted out the explanation before he could reply, as I remembered the overstuffed application box.

"Do they? Well, to be fair, nowadays it is not uncommon to never be heard from again. Walk with me," he said that with his tone of voice such that I could tell that, had he been in a more

candid setting, he would have complimented it with a chuckle. He led me to another room, where I was instructed not to lie, and then promptly interviewed. Considering the obvious reaction that my body displayed to entering the building, I decided it would be smart to just tell them the truth for as much as my plan would allow: yes, I could shoot a gun. Besides, I was sure that in either case, I would be read like a book. As it turned out, I was fit to do more than janitorial work, which I had been expecting to be my assignment.

And so began my training to become part of the Border Guard.

It lasted nearly month, and had I not already been conditioning my body for the swim, it may have taken longer, and would have been a lot harder. But before long, I was standing sentry at one of the barricaded roadways at the edge of the city. There were two other guardsmen on duty with me, but apart from them, there was no one in sight. Snow sprinkled down from the night sky, but so sparse that it made no difference in comfort. The roadway ahead of us was dangerous with ice, but it wasn't like anybody used it nowadays. The only thing that felt uncomfortable to me was the gun at my belt.

At first I was reluctant to hold a firearm again, but my fears subsided when I learned what sort of ammunition the guns carried. All Border Guard weapons carried darts dipped with paralyzing poison. This was because if a Sick person tried to illegally cross, their death would infect anyone near by, and the Sickness would spread. Paralyzing the criminal would prevent this scenario. This should have been enough to quell the dead that I felt from fear of dying when I finally made a break for it, but being caught still spelled death in my mind.

"I'm going to go take a piss. And damn it, wake up Pat for me, the bastard is dozing," huffed one of my companions, before he grumbled off to find some place private. I looked around me, and noticed that indeed, Pat was asleep. But instead of waking him up, I took the rifle from where it lay at his feet, and walked off in the opposite direction that the other man had taken.

Tonight was as good a time to die as any. I knew that if I died that night, then it would save me a good five and a half years of definite misery. But if I lived for long enough to endure it all, I did not know what I would do if I failed to save her.

I did know, however, that it was nearing midnight, and that night my post was due for a quick inspection from one of the senior officers, probably carrying a security key.

There were lampposts intermittently spaced along the border, and I planned on using the light from one of them to get a clear shot when the officer walked past. I lay down in the snow, near enough to get a close shot, and far enough, I hoped, not to be easily seen. I lay there for a long time, and while the sprinkling of snow did not intensify, I began to get very cold from not moving. But still, I did not get up. Although I kept my eyes on the lamppost, I did lie there long enough to let my mind wander.

Ophelia...

...Okay, I admit that it didn't wander very far from the norm, but all the same, I should not have been distracting myself from the moment.

What would she think if she had known that I was lying there in the snow, freezing for her? Risking my very life for her? How disgusted she would have been, had she known what I was intending to do with that weapon. Somehow, somewhere inside of me, I could feel that disgust. My target walked in to view, which concluded the bringing me back to the moment at hand. The man moved very slowly, with his eyes to the icy ground. Luckily, he looked like he was putting more effort in to ignoring the biting cold than to paying attention to what he was looking at.

The more I personified him by imagining his thoughts, the more I considered not going through with this. I told myself to stop thinking about him and just shoot. So I did.

Standard procedure was to only shoot someone once and then once more if they could still effectively move after eight seconds. Five darts consistently carried poison enough to kill a person flat out. When I shot the gun, not one, but six darts hit the officer in the face, as I squeezed the trigger repeatedly. With each shot came a blow to my moral inhibitions. The man made hardly a sound as he fell.

All my life I had wanted to be a doctor, to cure things. Although I became a quick natural at it, I never really liked the hunting trips that dad brought me and Charles on. All my life I had wanted to help and at that moment, my conscience was banking solely on the wad of notes that I held stuffed in my back pocket; a vague hope for a cure that might not even exist.

Quickly, I searched the man I had just murdered for a Security Key. On my first sweep through, I found nothing. But for my sanity's sake, I quickly started to double check everything, not giving my guilty thoughts any time to fully take shape. I found what I was looking for on my third go-through, in a secret pocket attached to his belt. The key looked like any other key, but that it was rather small. I hastily fit the silver metal object in my back pocket along with my notes, and continued on my way. I figured that if either one of them were lost, then so was my mission, so I might as well keep them in the same place.

You know what they say about murderers; once they've killed, they'll do it again.

When I killed my second guard, I told myself to think about the hundreds of people who would benefit from my cure.

By the time I had killed my last, all I could think of was the woman I loved. She would never love a killer, but she didn't love me in the first place, so what was I losing? But by the time I had crawled, bleeding, to the other side, I was crying.

The snow had slowly decayed in to rain by then, and the ground I trod was both icy and muddy. I had emerged in to a forested area, and what was left of the leaves from fall had mixed in with the mud, which gave me at least a little traction. My body needed rest, but I knew at that point, that I could not. The border Guard would surely pursue me. Or worse, they would contact the outside officials, and set them after me. Either way, staying at the edge of Mixill was not a good plan. I considered a number of options, including heading straight for the coast, but decided that it would be best to put as much distance between me and the city before sunup. I soon realized how hard it was to keep a straight direction in a forest at night, and prayed that I was still due North. I figured I'd find that out by the direction that the sun would appear from when it rose in a few hours.

I awoke to a noon sky, and cursed. But I considered myself lucky, considering all the unfortunate things that I could have awoken to. Already thankful that I had not been caught, I soon became even more thankful when, after another ten minutes of walking, I smelled salt, and noticed the sound of water on rocks. Border Guard equipment included a small knife, with which I used to cut off any incriminating insignia that my uniform displayed. The jacket I wore was black, with nothing on it to begin with, but I decided it safer to do this to the rest of my garb all the same. Leaving my gun behind with the stripped cloth, I left the forest, following the sound of the sea...

“Losing a friend is never easy
To lose that friend to a lover is defeating

The Sickness

One time he met a friend
Surely now that one will end
One time I met a friend
He was beautiful to me..."

Miraculously, the rest of my journey pretty much went without a hitch. I found luck enough to hitchhike on a freight automobile carrying grain up North. Even the weather lightened up by the end of my ride. As for the swim, the rocks in the strait were dispersed frequently enough to provide adequate rest. I had stored my notes in a waterproof bag for that part of the journey, which I had attached to my waist. It was about a quarter of a mile offshore from the Rim where I started having trouble.

It may have turned to clear skies back on the mainland, but a storm had been brewing in the East. I had started to notice the darkening clouds in the distance shortly after I started island hopping my way towards the Rim. Hoping to beat the storm to the shore, I pushed myself, and hurried.

The rocky shore was in sight. It was when the sky above it became overcome by a wash of rain pouring downwards that it first dawned on me that I might be in trouble. It was, however, when the waves in front of began cresting high enough to obscure the land from my view that I started to worry. Still, I carried on swimming for a distance long enough to impress myself, before the waves became unbearable. It eventually became very hard for me to keep my head above water, and I could feel the bombardment of rain beating down on my head at each breath. I don't know if it still counts as breathing if all you get is water, but I could still feel the rain on me at those as well. Both sensations of unwelcome water blended in to one flurry of discomfort, as my vision faded, and I began to sink. It seemed like a long time before I actually lost consciousness, but that whole while I was focused on making sure the bag with my notes in it was still secure on my belt.

I figured that that way, if some likeminded renegade stumbled upon my corpse, then he or she would be able to continue my work for me.

When I came back to life, my thoughts were more of amazement than thankfulness for the familiar face that was bent over mine. I was awakened where I had left off, and the sensation that accompanied those thoughts was that of my lungs being flushed of water. I tried to say something, but I just sputtered more bad tasting water. My savior got out of my way as I sat straight up on the pebbled beach and looked around. The lack of waves and presence of an unmoving ground was disorienting for a moment or two. Well, however many moments it takes for one's body to decide to throw up. By this time, the storm had passed over the island, because the sky was clear.

When I had gotten my bearings, a second amazement greeted the initial one, when as I looked up at the man who had just saved me, I saw that it was still Henry. He stood there, soaking wet. Presumably he had swam into the ocean to save me.

It was then that I almost accepted that I wasn't dreaming, as that meant that reality was consistent. And it still wasn't raining.

He offered me a silent hand, holding the bag that held my notes on the Sickness. Apparently it had fallen off somewhere between then, and the last time I had been conscious, and I was doubly thankful that Henry had found it. I took it, wobbling to my feet. It took a few minutes of walking the beach with him before I finally accepted the fact in full. At this point, I had finished telling him mine, and Henry was telling me his own story.

“Nah, I wasn’t ported at all. Well, I suppose I was ported, in a technical sense, depending on how you look at it...” I respectfully allowed him to tangent on for a little bit, until he brought himself back on track. “...Well in any case, regardless of what constitutes being drunk, I was still able to stow away on the transport ship heading for the Rim Islands. Luckily, I managed to position myself in a safe enough compartment, but that was still not contaminated with the stench of death, so the ride over was decent enough. Anyways, I apologize for not telling you my plans before leaving, but to be fair, they only started being my plans mere minutes before I set them in to action. I mean, I had already gotten myself in to Port, what was I going to do, come back another night and hope for another unguarded ship to arrive? Anyways, I found what I wanted on the islands, so I figured that I’d come up here to meet you, since I knew you’d be here anyways,” at this point we were making our way up the rock face towards where Henry had allegedly slept the night before.

“What exactly did you find?”

“Oh, it was a lot worse than I was expecting. On most of the islands there are vast stockpiles of bodies, more bodies than could possibly be accurate with the current death toll for Mixill alone. This means that the Sickness has been spread outside the city limits. And the bodies were red, and showed other symptoms, so I could tell that there people were Sick”

“But why the quarantine still?”

“That’s what still confuses me, but I do have a hunch. I told you that on most of the islands there were piles of dead people. All of them except this one. Instead of dead people here, there are alive people, walking around, and wearing government uniforms! They have a base set up just a couple miles from this point. And it has the look as if its been here for quite some time, or at least that they intend it to stay here.”

“This is where the Sickness originated, the north-most Rim Island,” I observed. Maybe if I helped Henry pursue this trail, as he would surely want to, I might find out something important to help my own ends. We stopped abruptly, and it took me a few seconds to realize that we had arrived at Henry’s island home. All that separated this place from the rest of the grass and rocks was a blanket that lay underneath a mildly overhanging slab of grey rock. Henry told me that there was an inland building, hidden by trees, where the people supposedly worked. Sure enough, he intended on going there to find out what he could. I decided to go with him.

Besides, Henry had a fantastic knack for staying alive, and maybe some of that talent would rub off on me. I was sure that up until then, I had been relying on luck to do the job.

That night, despite my exhaustion, I could not manage to fall asleep. The ground that I lay on was comprised of wet mud, and wet rock, neither of which I had thus far accustomed myself to sleeping on. Not that I had been accustomed to sleeping on much better, over the past month and a half. But even the paper-thin Border Guard cots were more comfy than what Henry had provided me.

Then again, he did provide me a chance at life again. I still not could believe how he was able to rescue me. And yet to approach the government building, as we were intending on doing in the morning, was to plunge myself in to another world of peril. But a convincing voice in the back of my head kept telling me that it would surely further my research. The more and more I thought about the whole situation, the more I decided that there must be some sort of conspiracy behind the Sickness, or at least intertwined in some way.

But as I opened my eyes to the starry sky, and achingly sat up in the mud, I wondered whether or not that voice was just a product of my mind jumping to wild conclusions, desperately trying to connect the random and confusing threads of life. But by then I had cordially accepted my suspicious nature, and decided to go with it. If I couldn’t be myself, then who else could I be?

At that moment a second voice emerged out of my subconscious, and reminded me, that instead, I could choose to be happy. I tried to recall the last time I had truly been happy, but in a sort of horrified disbelief, I kept trying to imagine that it must have been sooner. I turned my mind to the cheerful future. The antics of the following morning should be able to benefit me in my journey towards the cure. Even though I had not actively tried to progress my research in months, the end of the tunnel seemed somehow closer to me that night.

The morning woke me again to the realization of exactly how dangerous a situation I was in. Henry was already up, I could tell from the empty blanket rumped beside me. I got up, the ground slightly dryer than it had been a few hours before, and looked around me. I followed the natural path around the other side of the rock face, and was surprised to see more trees. With every sense I could see that the trees below the jut of rock that we had slept on were more than just a patch, but a full-fledged forest. Off in the distance I could see the government structure that Henry had mentioned, shining white in the sun's reflection. Apart from the fact that I had never been here in my life, nothing seemed abnormal. In fact, I didn't get a chance to fully notice that Henry was gone before I heard him trudging up the pathway again. With nowhere to hide had it been military personnel, I simply turned around and greeted the approaching noise.

"Where were you?"

"I was getting this," Henry replied as he appeared into view, carrying a very large weapon. He presented it to me, holding it firmly with both hands. I recognized it immediately as a sniper rifle. A younger version of me would have been shocked at the absurdity of it all, but the inflections of my next question hinted at nothing along those lines.

"Did you just steal this?"

"Yea. Well, I stole it, but it was a while ago. It's from the ship. I was hiding this somewhere else in case I was caught. Having one of their weapons wouldn't have helped me weasel my way out of getting shot with one of them."

"Where exactly did you hide on that ship?"

Henry merely smiled and lifted up his over-shirt, revealing four revolvers strapped around his waist. "The armory."

Fair enough.

Together we stood, looking down at the army building. Somewhere down in that expanse of trees, I thought, surely rested my destiny. And if it was not the cure, then it would be my grave. Be it mortal or intellectual, after this day I knew I would have some form of peace.

After our dramatic moment of silence passed, it was time to figure out a plan of attack, so to speak- one hopefully not deeply involving guns. By then I had lost any care for the lives of those that I might take, but I made no delusions about my own ability to kill veteran soldiers. Besides being light on ammunition, I had the disadvantage of being driven mainly by passion, instead of learned skill. And Henry, well, he was good at staying alive and all, but his inherent talent was matched to these veteran soldiers as they matched to my passion...and I intended on taking out at least one of them before I died. There was only one Henry though.

