

ELYSIA: THE WASTEWORLD

Skye Sweven

Chapter One: The Car Thief

Erik's POV

“Shame. That asshole sure did ruin such a pretty face,” a raspy voice popped up out of nowhere. A bewitching kind of raspy—but it startled me nonetheless. I wiped away a drop of blood hanging on my chin with the back of my hand and turned to face the owner of the voice. A brunette with heavy makeup and tan skin stood there with a light smirk on her lips. “I don’t mind it, though. I like ruined pretty faces.” She bit her lower lip and cocked her head to one side, as if to size me up before revealing her venomous fangs and swallowing me whole. But damn, was the girl foxy.

I gathered up saliva and blood mingling in my mouth and spat it on the ground, running my fingers through my hair to get rid of the sweat and blood-slicked strands stuck on my forehead. “You were watching?”

“*Everyone* was watching, jackass.” She crossed her arms and laughed like I was the most amusing thing she had seen. “No one wants to miss a good old bar fight.”

Although it wasn’t like I completely lost or won, slight embarrassment washed over me through the layer of alcohol and adrenaline coating my exterior. Blood was covering the left side

of my face and I could barely walk without staggering. The bouncer had removed me from the bar once the violent commotion became prominent above the usual boisterousness of the place. In other words, I was wasted, got beaten to a pulp by some jock, and thrown out without one company by my side.

“I don’t need sympathy or whatever it is you’re tryna offer.” I swatted my hands in the air and propped myself up against the wall. Sliding down, I closed my eyes.

“Boy, does it look like I’m sympathizing? Mugging would make more sense.”

My eyes shot open. I cast a lopsided grin in her direction. “Are you?”

“What?”

“Going to mug me?”

She twisted her short locks of curly hair with her fingers—adorned with chipped red nail paint—and stooped down in front of me. The fact that her expression was inscrutable, like she was actually pondering it, alarmed me for a fraction of a second. Then she huffed out another laugh. “I would have, if I didn’t fancy your face.”

I lifted one hand and gestured at my wrecked face. “I’ve been told I have fine features. And nothing else.”

“Nah, you got a car, too. Cadillac. A classic, black one. She’s a real beauty.”

My brain jumped awake from its misty slumber and clarity seeped in. I sat up, grappling the bricks for purchase. “How the hell do you know that?”

A familiar beeping noise from the parking lot caught my attention instantly. In the girl’s right hand, a silver key chain rested. *My* key chain. She wore a playful smile as she pressed the button

again and my Cadillac yelped in response.

“You bit---”

“Hold it there.” The mysterious car thief held out her hand in front of my face and shushed me. “Now, I was planning on driving away but I saw you and thought, why not drive away together?”

“Well, who the fuck do you think you are---”

“Shut the fuck up and listen first.” Something about her voice was authoritative enough to have me complying. “I know you’re headed to Elysia.”

My blood froze.

“I...I...how, what...,” dazed, I stammered. The goddamn alcohol was still messing with my head.

“You’re out alone in a big, wide world, honey. And in case you haven’t noticed, it’s an effin’ dangerous one. Better learn how to hold onto your belongings if you wanna survive a week on your own,” the girl sneered and took out a black leather wallet from her short flight jacket lined with dirty fur.

“Oh, I’m not even surprised,” I spat, sarcasm dripping from the tone, as I attempted to snatch *my* wallet out of her hand. But she was faster. The wallet was out of my reach, and another cocky smile snaked across her red lips.

“Not so easy, buddy.” She clicked her tongue. I watched helplessly as she fumbled through the wallet and shifted out a piece of small paper carefully folded in half. The thief chucked the wallet on the ground (I could easily see how it was already ripped of any cash I’d stuffed inside) and unfolded the paper, flashing it before my face. “A *crappy* map to Elysia. You circled your destination with a red marker—are you an actual dumbass or a stupidly naive kid?”

“Both. With a pretty face and a Cadillac.” I snatched the paper out of her hand and shoved it in my pocket. “And what may be your business about it, miss?”

“Well,” she started, standing up and pulling out a cheap cigarette from her pocket. She lit it up and drew in a breath, exhaling the toxic smoke in my direction. I coughed and shot a fierce glance up. Her amused expression annoyed me even more. Though I must confess, I was already curious about what her suggestion could contain and where it would lead me to.

“*Well*, what?” I asked. With some pathetic effort, I scrambled to my feet and stared into the light brown pupils boring into mine. It was evident that behind those charming eyes, her wily little brain was musing all possibilities and cooking up juicy stories that would hook me into some kind of perilous adventure. Her eyes were facing mine but she was lost in thought.

The girl breathed out a lungful of smoke—this time thankfully not directly in my face—and lowered her hand. “Unless you’re a complete dimwit, you’d know that getting to Elysia, and getting *into* Elysia, is practically impossible.”

“Yeah. And?”

“I know a way.”

“*What?*” I blurted out. Perhaps too loudly. To be honest, this girl-thief, hot and daring as she was, looked nothing like the kind of person who would know a path to the last hidden Shangri-La allowed to only highly prestigious, eligible individuals. More like a gold-digger type of woman who would rob a man of all his wealth after planting a knife in his heart on the bed. In. Cold. Blood.

“Don’t fuck with me, girl.”

“Oh, I’m not,” she giggled. “Fuck you, maybe, but fuck *wit*? Nah. I’m dead serious.”

“Prove it, then.” I narrowed my eyes, crossing my arms.

“I can’t really prove it, but I can negotiate.” The thief shrugged. “There’s an old codger I once slept with and he happened to be a former Elysian. Committed murder or something and was banished from the place. But he bribed the doorkeeper and has been sneaking in and out of Elysia. I still got his number, and since he fancies me, he’ll help me in if I asked him, like he promised before. Plus I have his wife’s number for insurance.”

Irritated by the smoke she continued to breathe out right in my face, I took the cigarette from her fingers, flung it on the ground, and stomped the petite fire out. “Then why the hell didn’t you go already?”

“The fuck, bastard,” she cursed, glaring at me. The fire in her eyes was something remarkable. It struck me that once seriously pissed off, no one would be able to escape her hurtling fury.

“Just answer the damn question.”

Surprisingly, she sighed and answered. “There was one condition.”

“Which was?” I raised my eyebrow.

“A man. He told me to bring a man with me.”

“What kind of condition is that?” Suspicion immediately arose within me. It sounded absurd, and I could not see, even if I tried, how such condition would benefit the old man she was speaking of.

“He wouldn’t tell me. But that was the condition. Don’t pry anymore because I know no more than you about the goddamn reason.”

“Well, someone like you could seduce any *dimwit* wandering the streets and trick them to go with you. Why me? Haven’t you met a thousand lost guys before?” I was in fact genuinely curious above incredulous and skeptical.

“Hm.” The sly smirk reappeared on her complexion. “Sure, I’ve met loads of idiots. But a blond one with a pretty face *and* a Cadillac? Never.” I didn’t budge an inch when the surprisingly smooth skin of her palm slid up my neck and cupped my slightly mangled cheek. Though it burned up at the contact, I refused to wince. The change of tension in the brittle atmosphere was a bit too much for me to handle. She knew too well how to bewitch a dumb young ma---

Click.

‘What the hell...?’ I wondered, and then looking down, lost all words that had been hanging on my tongue. The gunpoint of a silver revolver was greeting my dumbfounded self directly under my chin.

“The safety’s off, boy,” the girl threatened. The way she used a very light tone, like she was telling me the stove was on or there was a mailman at the door, knocked the air out of me even though no physical harm was made. She was a dangerous person. Reliable? I had serious doubts.

“What are you up to?” I gulped, moving not a bit as to refrain from triggering the girl to change her mind and blow my brain out.

“Come with me and head to Elysia, escape this shitty part of the world, get a new identity, and live a new life. Or.” She tilted her head, scrutinizing every inch of my strained face. “Though that would be a pity, *die* now.”

Alright. As if she was giving me a choice.

“Either way, you can escape the Wasteworld. Make your choice.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Does it *look* like I’m joking, darling?” Her expression morphed to something sickeningly menacing within seconds. Beads of sweat joined with drying blood and trickled down my temple,

then past my cheek. My heart was pounding so jerkily I could hear the blood pumping in my ears. I opened and closed my mouth several times like a fish in a tank; all the saliva was dried up and only the nauseating aftertaste of blood was lingering in between the teeth and gum. Though caught in a quandary, I, of course, knew there was only one option available.

“Shit,” I cursed under my breath. “Fine. I’ll travel with you. But you gotta swear on your mother or great-grandfather or whatever it is that you love the most that you *will* get me to Elysia. If I ever find out that you lied, I’ll run you over and leave you behind to die.”

The expression she had initially approached me in returned at once. The playful smile, knowing eyes, and straightforward lips. “Like you have the upper hand here,” she scoffed. The revolver returned to the hidden pocket inside her flight jacket. “You’re bold, I’ll give you that.”

“Without me or my car, you won’t accomplish what you want.” I tried pitifully.

“Without your car key, you’re nothing, dumbass.” Right. The key was still in her possession. I had considered taking it back by force, but now with a gun involved, I assumed it was best for me to play along for now. A defeat was what this was.

“Fuck you.”

“Thanks, but maybe later.” She winked, and turned around to head for my car. Unfortunately, she didn’t see me rolling my eyes.

We passed several drunks picking a fight in the nearly deserted parking lot, and the girl flipped some of them off who catcalled at her without even casting a glance at their direction. From the several minutes I had known this woman, I could very well see what kind of character she had in her. She could do anything and risk anything to get her way. I guessed she had gotten her way every time to this day with the help of her shiny little friend hidden in her jacket and the dangerously

audacious air about her. And of course, her enchanting appearance.

“Hey, it’s my car. Mind handing me the key, now?” I said as we arrived before my beautiful companion, my charming steed.

“Rule number one: don’t fucking drink and drive.” She dismissed my request without hesitation.

“The world is already falling apart. Law hardly exists. And you don’t come off as the type to abide by rules,” I complained.

“It becomes my concern when I’m riding shotgun, jackass. I’m driving.”

And like that, she occupied the driver’s seat. The woman left me with no choice but to slip inside the car, tumbling down on the passenger seat. “I drive safely when I’m drunk, though.”

“Shut up, we’re going to a nearby inn, for now. You got first aid kit in the car?” she asked, shoving the key in the keyhole and turning it up to start the car.

“What for?”

“Take a look in the mirror and you’ll probably understand.”

“Oh.” Was I actually touched? Did this mean that she had treating my injuries in mind? “Yeah. In the trunk. I got lots of stuff in the trunk.”

“Good. Let’s fix your face up once we get there.”

The girl skillfully handled the gear and gripped the steering wheel with so much force her knuckles turned white. There was a pleasant smile on her lips. I could plainly see how much she was enjoying this situation, one where she could finally get to drive a Cadillac with a pretty-faced blond boy by her side. And to be frank, though I hate to admit it, somewhere deep inside my mind,

a part of me was already enjoying the start of this adventure, too. Jeopardous and deceptive, yes, but the girl was still a wonder.

“You ready for a ride, Erik?” she hummed.

“Whatev---*excuse me?*” With widened eyes, I frantically stared at her. “You know my n---”

“Wallet. Map. Name. Information. ‘Kay?” She rolled her eyes.

“You’re gonna pay for this one day.” I gritted my teeth but settled back down on the seat. I looked ahead while my hazy vision struggled to take in the cacophony of late night street luminance dancing beyond the windshield.

“Perhaps.” She giggled. “Oh, and my name’s Jessica. Thought you might wanna know.” She winked again.

Jessica pressed on the accelerator with a little too much enthusiasm and the car abruptly shot forward in the deserted street.

Holy. What the fuck have I gotten myself into?

Chapter Two: The Inn Room

Jessica's POV

It wasn't the neatest nor the safest place to stay the night, to say the least. The ceiling was slumping down and water trickled down the poorly painted wall, leaving forked trails of the ugliest shade of brown I had ever seen. Obviously, something was leaking. The faint stench originating from within the thin wall indicated that. But what was the point of assessing the quality of a temporary stay in this world which was already wrecked beyond repair? I had seen many things, witnessed the most appalling of crimes, and done some on my part. After all, that was how I survived in this heartless, breathless piece of endless land called Wasteworld. My methods hardly ever failed. They kept me alive to this day.

I threw myself on the bed, clothes and shoes on. Hands were clasped behind my head and eyes were shut. The mattress was of course cheap stuff; the kind that would inevitably make my back hurt like a bitch once I opened my eyes in the morning. For now, though, I could call this a decent bed. It was far better than having to sleep under bridges, in abandoned department stores, and inside stolen cars. Though those were my dark days, my bygone past and pathetic times.

“You...,” Erik started. I could tell just by his voice that he was still shaky from the incident

that had happened downstairs. “You just *shot* someone. And you can just lay down like that?”

“The bitch wouldn’t let us in. And don’t worry about it, she won’t bleed to death. It’s a shucking tiny graze, hon,” I murmured as a response.

“Still.” He countered. “You know how rare it is for us commoners to have a gun. And to use it? You’re a freaking terrorizer.”

Annoyance got the best of me. I snapped open my eyes and abruptly sat up on the bed, pointing my finger at the golden-haired dumbass. Erik jumped at the sudden movement.

“Listen up, pretty boy. You grew up in the Wasteworld. You know what kind of place it is. There is no real law, there is no such *thing* as this petty morality you seem to be damn fond of. The world falling apart, and to be the one that ignores that fact means *death*. To survive, you gotta do what you gotta do. If you stick to the weak side of yourself, you will lose yourself and lose to the world. You got that?”

Erik merely stared at me with a scowl. No response.

“You ran away from your ‘home’. I’m assuming you were pretty wealthy because no commoners these days drive a real Cadillac. And now, you’re headed to Elysia. The place everyone calls a fairytale simply because it’s impossible to get inside. Trust me, you have no sense of what kind of place you’re in.”

“I know damn well what kind of place I’m---”

“No, you don’t, you idiot. Getting whisked in a bar fight proved that you’re an idiot in the first place. So for a while, just shut up and watch me. Watch what I do to survive and get my way. Because if you don’t, you won’t even make it to the quarter point to Elysia.” I tossed my hair, shooting him a final sharp glance before standing up.

“Fine,” Erik growled after pondering for some time. “I’ll watch you and play along to your *grand schemes* for a while. But don’t think for one moment that you’re in the position to order me around because as far as I know, this...this relationship we share is based on a mutual agreement. We’re here for each other’s benefits and no one is the *leader*.” He turned around to see me fixing my hair while looking into the dirt-speckled mirror.

‘Dumb blond,’ I thought to myself, smirking. *‘You’re bound to listen to me under any circumstance.’* But I kept that thought to myself and looked back at the furrowed eyebrows of Erik. “Sure, whatever you say, darling.”

“And stop calling me ‘darling’. I have a name.” He grumbled, gently washing away the blood stuck on his skin with a cloth.

“Which one? Jackass? Bastard? Or was it Pretty Boy?” I laughed as I toed off my worn black high heels and plopped down beside the man struggling to treat his own injuries.

“Go to hell, *Jessica*.” Erik spat.

“Oh, I’m already in hell, *darling*,” I whispered.

“You’re really one to not listen to anyone, aren’t you.” He sighed.

I took the cloth from his hand and poured disinfectant on the clean side. “Nope. Remember what you just said? No leader. No one is forced to bend to the other.”

“You literally told me to shut my face do as you say,” he complained, although he stayed still while I cleaned off the nasty splatters of dark red fluid mottling his left side.

“And you’ll listen,” I ordered. “It’s a matter of life and death.”

“I don’t think *putting a bullet through* a person necessarily saves your life whenever a small

inconvenience comes your way,” Erik dryly commented. The cute little bastard would never agree to my ways, would he? I deliberately put force in my hand as I scrubbed his wounds so as to induce a grunt out of him. “*Om.*” Good. Success.

Choosing to ignore his last remark, I scrunched up the dirtied cloth in my hands and tossed it over on the desk beside the bed. “I’d bandage your cuts and give you ice, but you need to take a shower first, bud.”

“Do I stink?”

“Yes. Of alcohol, especially.”

“I figured.” Erik shrugged, slipping off the bed. He rummaged through his bag and pulling out new clothes, headed toward the bathroom. However, he halted on his way and eyed me with oozing suspicion. “If you touch anything that’s mine---”

“Just go in and take a damn shower.” I snapped his sentence in half. Once again I was lying on the bed and idly humming to myself. I popped in a piece of raspberry-flavored gum as I did so. Erik refused to move for the next few seconds but soon sighed and stepped in the bathroom.

As soon as he was out of my sight, I jumped out of the bed, then approached his baggage and belongings. The idiot, of course, chose to trust someone who obviously should not be trusted. He had a lot to learn along this long trip that was yet to unravel ahead of us. *‘Consider yourself lucky,’* I thought. *‘I don’t mean to steal anything. Just check out what kind of person you are.’*

Most of his things were nothing worthy of attention; the basic necessities one needed for survival and hygiene. What information I could gather from looking into his bag was that he had for certain prepared for a long journey. Whatever his ultimate purpose or the reason that drove him out into the frangible reality was, Erik was more than merely determined to reach Elysia. At

first, I had no interest whatsoever in what his life was like, what his motivation and ‘dream’ was. Now that I had tossed some words back and forth with the guy, I thought, why not investigate a little more? We were bound to share space for quite a long time from now on. There would be no harm in trying to get to know him, whether that method be discreet or not.

I put everything back in his bag and moved onto his jacket. It was a khaki-colored one with a hood attached and pockets lined here and there. Seeing small smudges of blood blotched on the shoulder part and sleeves, I smirked to myself amused. The man was no fighter, though gallant nonetheless. Back at the cheap old bar, a boorish drunkard with a bushy ginger beard had approached him and spat out flat curses at him for no reason. Erik had tried to neglect the foul words from the burly douche being poured into his ears for five minutes but once the curses started to involve his family, he turned around instantly and hurled the beer mug right at the bastard’s nose. The loud noise of bones being cracked was the indication of the initiation of a fight well worth seeing. Objectively, everyone was aware of the fact that Erik was to get wrecked. And he did. But the way he didn’t back down, the way he showed his ire could swiftly engulf him, was what had impressed me. Well, aside from his pretty face and soft blond locks I had been informed about.

I sifted every pocket but found nothing interesting. As I was about to hang the jacket back on the chair, I noticed something---a rectangular shape vaguely traceable through the thin fabric right over where his heart would be. It was a hidden pocket. In between the zipper and the outer layer of the chest pocket flap, there was a tiny slit. I cautiously slipped my hand inside and took out the thing Erik was evidently, but poorly attempting to stash.

It was a picture of a girl.

I tilted my head, a baffled frown soon manifesting on my face. The girl in the photo had sleek

black hair, clear cerulean eyes, and cherry lips. The smile she was wearing was benign but somewhat faded. A beauty as she was, there was this air about her that puzzled me. Like she was a person from centuries ago or an artificial incarnation of a nonexistence individual. This was odd. Very, *very* odd.

Myriad thoughts crossed my mind, but nothing seemed to click. Girlfriend? Wife? Mother? Or just a random person? I could not fathom why, but this sole picture filled my skull with a million questions. But I could not ask about her now. Maybe later, when I opened him up a bit more. I quietly put the picture back where it was and hung the jacket back on the chair.

By the time Erik was out of the shower, I was clad in nothing but my underwear and sitting cross-legged on the bed. I was still chewing on my gum and blowing pink bubbles as I met his eyes on his way out. Erik nearly dropped every item he had in his hands the moment he saw my half-naked form.

“Jesus Christ,” he cursed.

“What? Never seen a woman undressed?” I cackled.

“No, I-I just didn’t expect you to be...” He hurriedly put his things on top of the bag and turned his flushed face away. Huh, so he *did* have experience but was shy about it. All the more adorable. I could still see the outline of his pants growing tight.

“I don’t mean to be intrusive, but I do have a personal question.”

“Well, get on with it,” he answered, still looking away.

“What’s your sexuality?”

“Am I obliged to answer?”

“No, you don’t have to, like we agreed. But I’m just being curious.” I spat out the gum in a tissue and casually threw it in the trash bin. Was I needy tonight? Maybe.

“I’m pansexual,” he confessed. Erik sat on the chair where his jacket lied. It was funny, watching him all mentally flustered but body reacting so honestly.

“Good to know. I’m bi, by the way.”

“Yeah. I really wanted to know that,” he responded sarcastically. Or *tried* to respond sarcastically because it was a failed attempt.

“Be ready by the time I get done washing, then,” I said nonchalantly, swinging my legs off the bed and entering the bathroom with my gun in hand. Couldn’t risk him laying his hand on my effective means of threat.

“W-what?” A somewhat panicked voice echoed from the room outside.

“You heard me.” I laughed before closing the door.

Thoughts about the mystery girl were still infesting my brain in the shower booth. The weak sprinkle of lukewarm water irritated me, but I kept myself distracted with various questions regarding Erik and obscure future plans. Whether he would be a liability remained unanswered, but there was something about that picture that gnawed at my intuitions. I couldn’t tell if it promised something good or not. I always hated my vision being clouded, and this point was where I was stuck in a mental maze. I hated it. I hated being confused. So I needed to get laid tonight to drive the obstacles in my mind away.

I quickly got out of the shower and stepped outside with a large white towel loosely wrapped around my torso. My hair was half-dried so I created small trails of water droplets down my back

on and the floor.

As expected, Erik was sitting with his back propped against the headboard of the double bed. There was a nervous look about him but the man had already gotten rid of the thin white shirt he clearly had on him minutes ago. I eyed that fit frame with an entertained expression and scrutinized every curve of the muscles on his chest. There were clusters of moisture on his skin; it was impossible to discern whether it was perspiration or water left undried. Either way, I liked it. Not only was his face pretty, but damn, that body was unexpectedly pleasing to the eye. Almost overwhelmingly.

“Ah, you listened to me yet again,” I advanced him, polishing the gun with my hand. “I guess you were *made* to bend to me.”

“I’m not down for a chat,” he replied. His gaze was fixed on my gun, not my body. Which was unfair.

So I put the gun down on the desk and hopped on the bed, straddling his legs and softly laying my hands on his bare shoulders. “Then what are you down for?” I cocked my head with an arrogant smile.

His face reddened again. “You asked for it.”

“And you don’t want it? Fine, if you say so,” I started to get off his legs but a hand shot up and grasped my wrist.

“Wait,” Erik voiced. Was it desperation that I detected in his tone?

“What is it, darling?” I asked, sitting back down on his legs.

“I want it, too,” he timidly whispered.

“Want what?” It was just too much fun messing with him.

“For fuck’s sake, Jessica. You know what I mean. Just----.”

That was when I suddenly lunged forward and crashed my lips against his. It was getting nowhere, this talk. This inexperienced dumbass was never going to say anything I was looking for. Better get in action than wait.

My tongue found my way inside his parted lips and suckled the warm insides of his unique taste, exploring every inch there was to explore. The blond responded almost immediately to the kiss, one hand holding the back of my neck with surprisingly strong force and the other massaging my waist. The obscene sound of lips meeting lips and teeth clacking against teeth filled up the small inn room in no time. In the midst of the heated frenzy, I couldn’t help thinking how luscious his taste was despite indulging in alcohol but an hour before, which in turn made me wonder if he tasted nicotine and ash in me. I giggled into his mouth, hardly feeling sorry for the man.

Our position got lower and lower until Erik was lying fully on his back and I directly above him with my elbows planted on either side of his face. Already, his cheeks were tinged pink from the daze. My moist brown curls fell from one side and brushed against the undamaged side of his face. Erik bored into my eyes with such a ferocious look one would have mistaken the expression as a livid one. There it was again. The flame I had seen in him previously. I lightly chortled and traced his face with my fingertips.

“You gon’ be okay without bandages on, darling?”

Erik nodded without a word before pulling me down into a passionate kiss again.

To my pleasure, the night got wilder than expected.

Chapter Three: The Desert

Erik's POV

The car was speeding along the desolate highway, windows open wide and music blasting through the speakers. Jessica was stretching her arm out the window, letting the strong breeze whip her hair around, and hollering out the lyrics to the songs I had never heard before in my life. In her small little bag bedecked with garish little badges and antique keychains, there were at least a dozen cd's of albums from the 00s and 10s. She was in charge of the aux cord while I drove in silence. I couldn't sing along even if I wanted to.

"Wish we could turn back time...to the good old days;" she belted out, bopping her head and tapping the top of the car with her arm to match the slick beat of the song.

I kind of liked the melody, and the lyrics were sort of standing out to me considering we were close to being stranded in the middle of a desert road while the ongoing apocalypse deteriorated the world bit by bit even at this second. I could barely recall my early childhood, but the remnants of the faded memories swarming in my head were something nice and warm. Worthy of remembrance.

So I asked her. “What’s it called?”

“What’s that?” she yelled, a little pissed off. I had interrupted her in the middle of an important singing session.

“What is the name of the music?” I inquired again.

“Oh, you uncultured bastard.” Jessica huffed out a burst of incredulous laughter. “It’s ‘Stressed Out’ by Twenty One Pilots. It was a bop in the 10s. You seriously don’t know this classic?”

“No, I was never a music guy,” I responded. Really? This girl was shaming me for not knowing a song from decades ago. But I let it slide because the song was pretty neat. My fingers tapped the steering wheel to the beat and a smile began to form on my face. It was an entirely unconscious reaction.

“Pity,” Jessica commented. “You have a *whole* lot more to learn than what I thought.”

“Don’t think of this as a tutoring trip,” I remarked.

“I think we already shared lesson one back at the inn.” She giggled and poked my cheek mischievously. My face burned up at the thought. My eyes were glued to the bumpy road ahead and I refused to steal a glance at the brunette doing everything in her power to acquire my attention. *Drive away the thoughts*, I mentally screamed at myself, because once again blood was rushing to my lower stomach.

“Don’t worry, though, because you weren’t that bad. I’ve met worse.” Jessica heaved an irked sigh. She was probably recollecting her flamboyant past of intercourse with manifold bedmates. “You’re a quick learner, darling. So much potential.”

“Shut up.” I rubbed my face to scour out the red.

“Whatever, fuckboy,” she snickered.

The road stretched on for ages, it seemed. My beautiful Cadillac was eventually running out of gas, and I was concerned. The last time I had filled it up was at a tiny little gas station adjacent to the bar at which I had been beaten the shit out of. Though rotting away, that gas station was no different from an oasis in the Sahara for me at that time. Now that we were actually driving through a critically arid part of the Wasteland once called California, we were in dire need of an oasis, plus a literal one. Sooner or later we were going to run out of gas *and* water. Hopefully, Jessica was acknowledging that vital fact, too, as she had led me this way. Taking this road was not incorporated in my original plan.

“Never mind the gas, Erik, and drive on,” Jessica intoned in a soothing tone. A few hours had passed and she was peering out the now-closed window with her elbow rested on the windowsill. Had she just read my mind or was it just a coincidence?

“How can I *not*? We’ll be marooned in the middle of nowhere at this rate. Look, the sun’s already getting low.” I pulled out a few strands of my own hair out of frustration. I didn’t like how Jessica appeared to be so impervious to any life-threatening situation unless it was *her* who was threatening life. She seemed so chill and confident in about anything. When she had pulled the trigger at the innkeeper a night ago, she couldn’t look more deadly and apathetic, but strangely avid, too, in some aspects. What if she had for real busted my wasted brain out last night? I could only shiver.

To prove my point, I pointed at the scathingly bright ball of blood red gas sinking lower and lower toward the flat line of the horizon. The sky had turned to a gradient of profuse hues, a vast palette of all colors one could pick out to carelessly paint on the boundless firmament. I would have stopped the car right there and appreciated the desert dreamscape in awe had not the car

been warning me of low gas with haunting bleeps. I was then on edge, sitting forward and gnawing on my fingernail out of habit.

“Chill out, bud. We’re nearly there,” Jessica muttered, words slurred and scattering everywhere. She was dozi---*she was dozing off!* In this horrible situation! But what did she mean by ‘nearly there’?

“Don’t fall asleep! You’re shotgun and you have the duty to be my extra set of eyes,” I snapped at her a little too harshly. No one could blame me, though. We were not on a nighttime promenade, or an evening drive through a quiet neighborhood. We were literally in the desert with seemingly no end. To my relief, Jessica shook her head to shoo away the sleep seeping in and sat upright. She yawned once, cracking her knuckles and lightly slapping her cheeks to drag herself up to a level of full consciousness.

“Sorry, ya know, singing and dancing take up a lot of energy.”

“You’re saying that to a person who’s driven for eight hours straight,” I barely contained my irritation sizzling right on my tongue.

“Hey, I’ve been a good company,” she smirked and nudged my arm.

“That’s not even important right now. Where do we stay for the night?” I could sense the anxiety building up in my tone. I hated letting it show, but my body always chose to candidly display my mental state in front of anyone, which made it hard for me to ever lie or conceal something...though there were exceptions.

“What, you want a second go already?” Jessica didn’t even bat an eye throwing that dirty joke in my face.

“Can’t you be serious for *once*? We’re out of gas, we’re short of water, and we’re not getting anywhere,” I barked. She kept on getting on my nerves. The fact that she was unmoved by my

attitude or the circumstances we were cast in annoyed me even more. The girl was the one who told me to come to my senses and confront the shitty reality. What the hell was she doing now? What the fuck was wrong with her?

Just then, two faint lights blinking from about a mile away caught my attention. Lights? Headlights? In this freaking portion of a colossal wasteland? Another car in this world could either portend a peril or help. The latter was *always* the less likely. Still, I hoped for the best. Maybe it was because of the naïve side of me, or the desperate situation we were stuck in.

“There they are,” said Jessica, lazily. I slowed down the car and turned around to look at her, wide-eyed.

“You know who they are?” I couldn’t lie. A mild feeling of betrayal washed over me. Why couldn’t she have told me about them before?

“I told you to watch me and follow me for now. I didn’t tell you to take this road for no reason. I have friends here,” she rolled her eyes and gestured at me to go on. I held my tongue and did as ordered but with reluctance. It was a relief to find safety in this godforsaken place at night, but that didn’t stop me from feeling bitter at the girl for not saving me from the hours of agony spent floundering in the sloughs of terror and anxiety. Had she just told me *one* reassuring sentence. *One*.

We pulled up right beside the large camping van parked on the roadside. There was a man already outside, waiting for us to come out. Though the dark had settled and he had on a loose t-shirt covering all of his upper body, I could still observe the fine contour of his well-built frame behind the thin fabric. ‘DAMN’, the gray t-shirt read. Yes. Damn.

“Heyo, Sica. How you been?” the buff man greeted Jessica with a wide, pearly grin hanging from ear to ear. ‘*Sica?* Really?’

“Fine and dandy, Jos.” Jessica ran up to him and gave him a firm hug. I stood there awkwardly and studied the rocks and grains on the ground like they were suddenly the most interesting items in the world. They were more than acquaintances; I was the odd one out, a mere stranger.

“So this’ the plus one you’ve told me about?” the man Jessica called Jos pointed at me, not in a rude way, but just to get assurance. I stepped up to him and offered him a hand for him to shake before Jessica could speak in my stead.

“Yes. I’m Erik Becker.” I tried on a smile. It must have looked hideous because I was eagerly attempting to hide the nervousness behind it and was failing miserably.

“And I’m Josiah. Josiah Nolett. Nice to have you here, man,” he responded with a good-natured smile. But oh, the grip he had. He must have meant to give me a short, quick handshake but my bones felt dislodged after it happened. I cracked my hand behind my back, putting on a placid face just to hide the embarrassment and some kind of admiration.

“Good, good! We’re all acquainted, now. Let’s get inside, folks.” Jessica came up to us two and grinned.

Before entering the van, however, I turned back and whispered to her: “When did you contact him and why didn’t you tell me?”

Jessica lightly slapped my back and uttered under her breath, “You passed out after round two, remember? Weak-ass. But you’ll make progress.” She pinched my cheek impishly.

My face reddened for the millionth time. “Don’t you mock me like that.”

“Baby steps, darling. Baby steps.” Then she disappeared behind the door. I glared at the stray beam of light streaming from the crack in the door for a few seconds, and then forcefully swung it open.

The inside of the camping van was far more snug and well-decorated than anything I had expected. To be honest, the buff guy---Josiah---didn't seem like the one to keep his place nice and tidy, much less ornamented with delicate wooden horse carvings and flower paintings. *Never judge a book by its cover*, I rebuked myself. Until, well, someone new emerged from the back of the trailer that could be the explanation to all this candied homeliness.

“Well, hello, there.” A pale boy with a slim frame and raven black hair sluggishly came up to us. He was wearing an oversized burgundy cardigan that reached down almost to his knees, and a pristine white shirt underneath. A little shorter than myself, the boy of east Asian heritage seemed around my age but with a more fragile look about him—the bags under his eyes did a huge part. Ah, a fellow insomniac.

Josiah immediately wrapped his arms around the boy's thin shoulders. I could assume their relationship right away. Either boyfriends or husbands. Which meant Josiah was taken.

“Erik, meet Soeun. Soeun, say hi to Erik.” He introduced both of us to each other.

“I already kind of did, but yeah, if you wish.” Soeun shrugged Josiah's arm off and held out his hand. “Hi.”

“Um...hi,” I answered awkwardly. Jessica hardly showed any effort to hide the laughter simmering from within her.

“I'm Soeun Jeong. You? Jos didn't tell me your last name so I'd like to hear it if you don't mind.” The black-haired boy shook my hand once and promptly retracted his hand, stuffing it in his cardigan pocket like he'd touched something he was hesitant to touch. He was one haughty guy.

“Becker. But please call me Erik.” I scratched my neck and averted my eyes. Whatever this guy was like and known as, the first impression I received from him was definitely not a pleasing

one.

“Sure. I’m happy to meet ya, Erik.” He didn’t look happy.

“I’m sorry, he’s actually a sweetheart, but meeting strangers sets him off, sometimes.” Josiah shook his head with an apologetic expression, though Soeun’s ravishing face behind him morphed into a mask of something in between chagrin and disconcertion.

“Shut your mouth, Josiah Nolett.” Soeun punched the big guy on the chest. I was taken by surprise for a moment, but Jessica hummed in my ear:

“They’re always like that. Don’t mind it.”

“Baby, I get bruises, you know that?” Josiah complained, but his face was filled with pure affection plainly readable by anyone with functioning eyes. *That* was what sincerely surprised me.

“Okay, stop your love bickering and let’s sit down and have a talk. We have some matters to discuss.” Jessica clapped her hands, successfully winning the attention of every man aboard the trailer. I obliged and found myself a spot on the couch to plump down on. God, did it feel so ethereal to sit on a cushiony sofa; driving eight hours straight did no good to my ass or spine. The peculiar mixture of acute pain and numbness dissolved instantaneously as I leaned on the back of the couch and let out a blissful sigh. Jessica sat right next to me, arms crossed and legs also. Josiah and Soeun chose the other side, on two green armchairs apparently made for the two of them.

Soeun chucked an apple my way out of the blue. I would have seized it with the bones of my nose had my reflexes not been swift enough to catch it in my hand mid-air. Jesus, what was wrong with that guy?

“Eat it, you look famished,” Soeun half-ordered, throwing another at Jessica and then taking a bite out of his. It was out of good will, but the method induced serious doubts out of me. How

a man like Josiah Nolett came to fall in love with the guy was a wonder. Though I must admit, his face was that of a celestial creature's. Perhaps the process was similar to how Jessica had approached me and threatened me to take her with me to Elysia---out of physical attraction.

Elysia. Yes. I remembered. We were here for Elysia.

I sat forward, sudden fervor flashing in my pupils. "Thank you for letting us in, thanks for taking us in. But I don't quite grasp the situation here because Jessica hasn't even told me about you guys."

Soeun gulped down his lump of apple and shrugged. "Simple. We give you fuel, water, supplies and anything else you might need on the trip, and we say our farewells."

"*And* let you stay here for the night," Josiah added.

"Jos, I have not agreed to that." Soeun shot a hot glance at his lover.

"Guys, you can go one day without screwing, alright? We'll stay quiet and we won't take up too much space. Erik and I...", Jessica suggestively eyed me. "Can do intimate." My ears rang.

Soeun narrowed his eyes at us and exchanged glances with Josiah. Then they simultaneously broke into a knowing grin. "You always had a thing for blonds." Josiah chuckled.

"Hey, that's not the important part." I shattered the uncomfortable atmosphere. "Why do you even help us at all?"

"Well, that's a long story, kid." Josiah sat back and pulled out a cigarette. "Mind if I...?"

"Yeah," I frankly replied. "Not indoors, please." Josiah nodded and put it back in his pocket. Soeun and Jessica turned to look at my face like they couldn't believe what I had just done. *Well, I'm not a fan of smoking. So what?* I avoided their questioning stare. "But tell me everything."

Josiah cleared his throat once and began to tell his story. “As soon as the actual government began failing due to the War, the provisional government employed supply runners for the citizens in the evacuation shelter. I was one of them. But my job didn’t last long because the War destroyed just about everything and all the shelters became the target of the hostiles. I still kept doing what I did, though, as practically a non-profit freelancer. I knew where the canned goods were, where the water was, where all the gears for survival were, so I used that knowledge and strength to help people. Along with my...my ex-husband, Troy.

“Troy was a good-hearted man. We were truly in love with each other, and what we did. But one night...a missile from the hostiles hit his area and he was found dead the next day. In *pieces*. I was utterly devastated, body and soul.” The solemn glint in his eyes served to mute me at once. This man had profound hurt within himself, and spilling that past out at this moment had to be burdensome beyond words.

“That was when Sica found me. She could have just passed me by, but she stopped in the way and handed me a handkerchief to cry into. When no one else was giving a damn about a man who had lost his other half. She gave it to me without a word and then left. But I couldn’t let her go just like that. I had to reciprocate this gratitude I felt for her, so I volunteered to become her personal runner.”

That was a whole new side of Jessica I could not have known without the story Josiah had just told me. So far, I only knew her as a car-thief, gun-bearer, and a heartless psychopath who exuded extreme sexual air like a winged creature emanating pheromone. What I had just heard *did* change my view of her as a human being. Jessica *did* have compassion somewhere tucked away inside her heart covered in icy, sometimes fiery, armor. I gave my attention to Jessica, who was studying her chipped red nail polish with an uninterested look on her face.

“That’s not all. Jess introduced me to Jos.” Soeun took another bite out of his apple and before chewing it, shared it mouth-to-mouth with his lover to break it in half with his teeth. *An unnecessary excuse for a kiss*, I mused to myself. A triumphant smile, for some reason, was adorning his face. I raised my eyebrow, unable to comprehend the meaning behind the action. “I was one of the citizens that survived the bombing. Jess found me stuck under a fallen column and helped me out, even when she could have just left me to die and stolen my things. My cooking pan, my handy lighter, some food I had in my bag and such. I used to be a chef apprentice, so, yeah.”

“But you’re a thief.” I eyed Jessica, quizzical.

Jessica pushed my face away with her fingertip and spat: “Only selectively to rich boys, jackass.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, she linked me with her supplier four years later, which happened to be Jos, and we’d been in love ever since.” A bashful glow of pink rose under the dark shadows beneath his eyes. “That’s why we owe Jess. We’d do anything for her if she asked.”

“Alright, then. That’s one new thing I learned about this mystery woman,” I sent an inexplicable glance at Jessica to which she playfully bared her teeth.

“Speaking of which, how have you been doing, Sica?” Josiah asked with interest twinkling in his eyes.

“Nothin’ much exhilarating aside from meeting this dork.” She pointed at me with her thumb. “I’ve finally found a partner for the journey to Elysia, so I guess that’s good news.”

“Congrats on that, Jess.” Soeun nodded. “Though our *Erik* here should prove himself if he can withstand such a long, tedious journey.” That son of a bitch was getting on my nerves again. I hated that arrogant look on his face.

“He’ll learn.” Jessica laughed it off before I could protest in anger. “Like he did quickly on the bed.”

“Are you fucking seri---”

“Fine, fine, I won’t talk about it.” Jessica tapped my shoulder twice to assuage my skyrocketing embarrassment and plummeting reputation.

“Well, would you like some tea? Or coffee? Snacks? We’re short on nibbles right now but for special guests, I can manage.” Soeun got to his feet and looked around the three of us, seeking for an answer. Huh, who knew this boy could be so hospitable.

“Just water, thanks,” I replied dryly.

“Coffee sounds lovely.” Jessica winked.

“One for me, too, honey. And I’ll bring the bread.” Josiah followed Soeun down to the kitchen. It was kind of obvious what they were going for, so I leaned back on the couch, closing my strained eyes and consciously curtaining my mind from the distant sound of the two making out in the kitchen area. Jessica tittered softly and shifted her position so that her elbow was on top of the headrest and her face was looking straight at my profile.

“Aren’t they a cute couple?”

“I don’t understand how Josiah stands that Soeun guy. He’s a pretty face with a hell of an attitude,” I grumbled.

“Are you describing yourself?” she tilted her head, amused.

“You’re kidding.” I glared at her.

“Yes, I am.” She giggled and leaned in closer until her soft fruity breaths tickled my cheek.

“You’re a half-pretty face because of that bandage covering your left side.”

“Aw, fuck off.” I swatted her away with my hand. She was just messing around. The rather wild night we had shared before left my face in an even more aggravated condition, and when I woke up, there were bandages cleanly stuck on my face thanks to Jessica’s work while I was blacked out and splayed out on the bed. “But thanks for taking care of me,” I timidly added.

“No problem, darling.” She pecked a bird kiss on my ear and blew air into it. I yelped and winced; it was...it wasn’t uncalled for, but not expected.

While everyone on the trailer was distracted by some type of romantic act, there was another car approaching them at full speed. At a menacing velocity, the white sedan was advancing on the two parked vehicles full of people with no idea in what kind of brand-new crisis was about to befall them. Brand-new to everyone except for one individual.

“I see ‘em,” he murmured as the distance between his car and the two blinking yellow lights became narrower and narrower. It was time. Finally a chance to seize the moment, seize the bitch. *His* bitch.

“After all this time.” The woman sitting next to the man gritted her teeth and glared straight at the lights in front of them. “I get to meet my ex.”

Letting the car come to a stop a few hundred yards away from the camping van, the man jumped out of it and loaded his rifle with the rarest and most precious ammunition he had obtained at the black market. The rifle itself was a picturesque rarity, too. He grinned to himself, certain that he wouldn’t fail this time.

While the woman stayed in the car for a while, assessing the situation, the man approached the vehicles in long, proud strides and halted when he got close enough. Then he held up his gun, aligned the scope with the left back tire of the black Cadillac, and fired. A thunderous noise boomed from the machine, and he nearly stumbled back from the hefty recoil. A hole the size of a fist was marked on the tire. He watched pleased as the car sat down, tilted uncomfortably to one odd angle.

Then the man laid his eyes upon the big trailer ahead of him. He bellowed on top of his lungs,

“I’VE COME FOR YOU, JESSICA GARCIA!”