

The sun warms our skin. Vibrant reds, oranges, yellows echo across the horizon, sketching a painting comparable to a Turner. Scintillating all around us, light dances with the growing shadows.

Though the sunset is beautiful, it is not what I treasure the most.

Twirling a rose in front of Eveline's face, I ask, "Will you stay with me forever?"

She laughs, her periwinkle eyes glinting in the sunset glaze. Gripping her hand, I interlock and weave our fingers together until they can barely be told apart.

"Of course," she says. Her palm is flush against mine, heat warming us both. "Always."

Our heads lean closer together. I like to imagine we cut a romantic image, a couple with no worries in the world: idyllic, pastoral, completely at peace.

It is what I could live forever for. Young, successful, healthy, our lives together have just begun. We are living the fairy tale, expecting that happily ever after.

It is not to be.

## **1 year**

The symptoms come on slowly, almost unnoticeably before they accelerate with blinding speed. Later Dr. Mendeleev will tell us that is what makes the illness so absolutely frightening. "It is a killer," he says. "Waiting to strike."

Eveline is standing, reviewing lab statistics from her company's most recent trials on utilizing robot workers. Capturing a few rebellious locks of hair and tucking them behind her ear, she takes the time to smile at me before returning to her work. That smile is all I need to start my day. Grinning like the fool in love that I am, I make my way to the breakfast table.

On the floor lies a soft synthetic sheep skin rug that is blindingly white against her tan skin when she collapses. As I watch it enfolding her in its voluminous fluff, I am almost able to imagine that she is only sleeping.

If only.

Instead, I yell to the security system to contact the nearest ambulance and set off the necessary emergency alerts. Knocking the now unwanted bowl of cereal off the table, I rush to her motionless side.

Heart pounding, I activate her microchip even as my fingers search for the pulse in her neck. Eveline's vitals project into the air, where it reads an uneven, but existent, number for her heartbeat. Still, it relieves me more to feel a stuttering thump against my index fingers.

I crouch there until the medics arrive and gently pull me off. Fighting to stay near her, I ride with her in the holocraft to the hospital. Sirens blare and technicians take tests, but I notice nothing. My entire being is focused on Eveline.

A stout man, with beady eyes hidden behind sparkling contact transmitters, approaches me. Taking in the expression of solemn professionalism, I know he has not come to deliver good news.

"How long?" I ask before he even has a chance to speak.

It is a job he must do often because he doesn't even hesitate as he spits out the prognosis that will define our time together.

"One year."

### **8 months**

The room is stark white, sterilized and illuminated by a light that coats everything in an artificial layer. As if trying to make up for this coldness, an orderly has placed genetically modified flowers on the table. We have been in the hospital for two months. It is already too long.

At the center of the room lies Eveline, smiling weakly at me as I fiddle uncertainly with one of the clear tubes stretching from her arm to the monitor. I stare across to the wall, where a projection of Eveline's body with its vitals follows her movement.

"Adam," she says softly. "We need to talk about what will happen."

"No," I reply.

"Yes."

Turning to her and bewildered at her ability to accept the future, I want to assure her everything will be fine, that we will have our happy ending. Yet, when I meet her eyes, I know the unforgiving truth.

She will die.

"Sorry to interrupt," someone behind us smoothly breaks in. I have come to hate that voice because I know it can never bring what I want.

Dr. Mendeleev strides in. His transmitters are bright with information even as he waves at the projection screen, which fills with black data.

His lips stretch wide. "I bring hope," he says. "As scarce as it is for you in these desperate days."

## **6 months**

The robot orderly is methodical in its explanation of the double blind clinical trial, outlining the possible consequences, the medical risks, placebos, expectation effects. It took another two months to get to this point, to fill out the paperwork and ensure Eveline's condition fits the parameters. Time is ticking.

Our choice was made when Mendeleev, eyes dark with promise and an unspeakable knowledge, had mentioned that it was our best shot.

"I'll do it," Eveline whispers, grasping my hand weakly. "I need it to work. I need to try."

It is frightening how quickly she has degenerated into lifelessness. It hurts now for her to move, to breathe, and to smile.

I miss what we could have been. I dread where we are going.

The robot nods, having recorded her assent, and reaches for her hand to induce the first shot of what we hope could be the cure.

One week later, Eveline is able to walk again.

Dr. Mendeleev warns her to be careful as he adjusts the IVs that are now a common sight. Indeed, she soon has to be helped back to the bed. Yet I can see her eyes twinkling when before they were dead and her mouth curved up instead of down.

Dr. Mendeleev begins to ask her questions, writing notes on the scanner that he has transmitted into the air.

"Any new aches, pain?"

"No."

"Nausea, diarrhea, vomiting?"

"Less."

He touches his spectacles with his finger, "How are you feeling?"

Eveline smiles, that bright, illuminating grin that I have not seen for so long in its purity. "Better."

Dr. Mendeleev closes the scanner with a snap of his fingers. "I would cautiously say that Eveline is doing well on the treatment."

I could almost weep with joy.

## 2 months

And yet, despite all of my fervent hope, aside from the initial spike of improvement, Eveline's progress has died to a halt.

When I question Dr. Mendeleev, he looks at me over his glasses and says curtly, "I never promised a panacea."

In the hospital room that has become our home I wistfully program images onto the wall so that wherever Eveline turns, her eyes will alight on happier times. However, I know that whatever front she may put on, she is beginning to despair.

I take up old fashioned art to give my fingers something to do other than wring themselves in desperation. My favorite subject, unsurprisingly, is that of Eveline. I do not like to paint her asleep, the image too close to death, but instead prefer her on her best days.

It is through those few, bright moments that I believe that everything could be all right.

The door slides open with a hiss as the robot, face blank as always, shuffles in. It adjusts the IV bag, where for a moment I catch sight of the programmed identification even as the robot turns it black a second later.

### *Lorazepam*

I clench my fist, anger rushing through my veins. A momentary shock of cold fury that takes me by surprise until it gives way to infinite desolation.

"Placebo," I murmur, hoarsely, to myself. "Placebo."

All the progress that she made was nothing but a lie. A nonexistent hope dangling in front of us that we took to like fish to bait. I have less than two months with the woman I love and now there is nothing to stop her from simply declining until she is dead.

I had wished, wanted so desperately to be able to grow old with Eveline, to have a family, a life. Now, even the faintest hope of that is gone. I laugh brokenly, cradling my head in my hands, drowning myself in feverish agony.

"Adam," Eveline says, unknowing. "Look at me."

It is only her gentle touch that can convince me to meet her periwinkle eyes. It is astonishing that only a year ago we were living the life of the fearless, basking in the sunset glow. Now, though, Eveline is, for all intents and purposes, shadowed by a modulating and stricken light, a Rembrandt masterpiece of piercing emotion.

I consider for a moment telling her what I have discovered, that now there is nothing that can save her.

But then Eveline asks, vulnerable and breaking, "Will you stay with me?"

And I know, as I grasp her hands tightly, that sometimes all we can do is take life at each one of its moments. It is not acceptance, but an acknowledgement of time.

For that, for her, I reply with all the certainty and love that I can muster:

"Always."

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