

I yawned, stretched, and rolled over in bed to face the window, but it was still sunset. I hoped the sun would just hurry up and go down already. It was Noctnight, the beginning of the weekend, and I couldn't wait to go and just party like I did every Noctnight. The sun would probably go down soon.

I squinted outside. Was that a Sundweller? I couldn't really tell. It looked like *someone* was outlined against the sun, but I couldn't tell if it was a person. Nobody really understood Sundwellers. They usually slept during the night and were awake during the day, unlike the rest of us. They'd go outside during the day, too. Who would ever want to go outside in the sunlight?

I put any troubles from my mind and turned. I decided the sun was low enough that I could start getting ready for the night. I put on my best clothes and threw some water on my face, but I didn't really care. It wasn't like anyone would be able to see my face clearly.

Once it was a little darker, I walked outside. I didn't know where I was going to go, but I could just go into any house with dim lights on, as per the tradition of Noctnights.

When I turned the next corner I finally saw a house with dimmed lights. I walked up to the door and opened it, trying to make some noise so the people in there would know they had a guest, when the lights in the house turned out completely.

"What's going on?" I spoke uncomfortably into the darkness.

"Who's here?" asked another voice.

The lights turned back on. They were a little too bright for my tastes.

"Uh... aren't you having a party here?"

"I'm trying to get some sleep."

He wasn't a Moondweller. He was a tired Sundweller.

"Oh," I said, feeling more and more awkward. I opened the door and began walk back outside when he said, "Haven't you ever wondered?"

I slammed the door shut and hurried back outside, but his words felt like a spotlight, glaring at me and illuminating all the parts of me I wished could remain in shadow. I tried to put it out of my mind.

When I next went into a house with dimmed lights on, there *was* a party, and it was in full tilt. The top ten hits blared from a radio near the stairs, and I walked into the kitchen to find a platter laden with what looked like Noct soda. I grabbed a glass and took a long sip. It *was* Noct soda, and it was a lot healthier than the other stuff you could end up drinking on Noctnight.

I didn't like that party much, so I left after that. I walked along the streets for a while. Someone had set up a massive boombox that felt like it was rattling my bones. A few people were dancing right in the street. I danced for a bit, too, with a girl I could barely see, before she moved on to some other guy. I wasn't surprised. It happened to me all the time. It happened to everyone all the time.

As the night went on, I grew more and more tired. At some point, I drank something that definitely wasn't Noct soda, that was sour and I tried not to spit out, and all the while the music crashed against my eardrums, pressing me, pushing me. Someone slammed into me, running from something, and I nearly fell onto a passed-out body that had been shoved to the side of the street. I felt sorry for whoever was passed out. Imagine waking up in the day, outside.

I shivered at the thought but blamed it on the cold wind that seemed to bite at me. It was cooler now, and what with the sound and wind I sort of wanted to go home.

*Go home?* I thought. *It's Noctnight! Only losers go home on Noctnight!*

There was a loud thudding noise behind me. I turned as a brawl erupted in the streets. It didn't really matter how it started. Nobody seemed to care how these things started, but people started pouring out of houses, either onlooking or looking for a piece of the action. I started to hurry away when a piercing scream froze me in my tracks. That wasn't the sound of an wrathful adult. It was the sound of a terrified young girl.

I worried about her. Would she be all right? Would she... survive?

I was going to walk away again when I heard the scream again. I hesitated. I couldn't do anything about it, could I?

The girl screamed. It pierced my ears. It pierced my excuses. I had to do anything I could.

I whirled around, closed my eyes momentarily, and recklessly charged into the rabble.

Someone punched me as I crouched and attempted to maneuver through the mob. I didn't care at that point. I could see the child now.

She was small; squatting with her hands over her head. I tried to get close to her but someone kicked me in the ankle, and I stumbled, colliding with a rough-looking man. I quickly moved forward, and gently scooped up the girl, who let loose another piercing scream. I clutched her close to me and tried to make it out of the fray. I was roughly shoved and barely kept my balance, though I sort of stepped on someone in the process. I pushed aside a burly-looking guy, and I was almost out, but the burly-looking guy turned around.

For a moment I stared into what I could see of his eyes. He was wild, unconstrained, and he stepped forward and brought a fist crashing into my skull. I plummeted, holding out one arm to break my fall, while the other tightly held the screaming girl, and I collided with the pavement. I saw a woman dash forward and pluck the screaming girl from my arms and left. I felt a pulsating agony in my head and I wondered if I was going to die for saving the girl.

I tried to muster enough strength to move a few times, but whenever I tried, I felt an agonizing rush and dropped back to the ground. Nobody touched me. Nobody even got close to me.

After a while, I could see the first rays of dawn peer over the horizon, and everyone else had gone inside. I wondered if I'd have to bake under the sun all day. I wondered if anyone else would help me, even tomorrow night.

I was barely retaining consciousness when I felt someone lift me up. It was starting to get brighter out. It was painful to be lifted, but it had been even worse on the ground. I watched the pavement slide by, all I could do at the

moment, until I was carried into a house and I was gently put down on a couch. I was only aware of my back being supported until my body couldn't cope with the pain and I fell unconscious.

When I woke up, I felt at least a bit better, but I was extremely hungry. The room was dimly lit by the sunlight leaking through the drawn curtains. There was a table across the room, laden with a few boxes of cereal and some milk, and I couldn't imagine anything more delicious right now. I tried to sit up, but it brought an explosive pain to me head, and I dropped back down like a rock.

I rolled over, falling off the couch and landing on my hands and knees. I crawled over to the table, and grabbed the arm of a chair and began to pull myself up. I pulled the back of the chair too hard and it tilted and fell, sliding off my back and falling to the ground with a clatter. I cringed, realizing for the first time that the house probably wasn't empty, but moved on to the next chair. I pushed it out this time and clambered onto the front of the chair.

A door opened and a woman in pajamas hurried out of a nearby door. I glanced nervously at the toppled chair, but she didn't seem to care.

She gasped. "Are you alright?"

"I... I think so."

"We were so worried- would you like something to eat?"

"I...yeah, thanks."

She grabbed a bowl and a spoon for me, poured me some cereal, and I ate vigorously.

For a minute she didn't say anything, but gazed at the drawn curtains as a man came out of the room and sat next to her. I saw a bit of glare from his finger, and I realized they were both wearing rings.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"I- well, so there was this fight."

"What about?"

I shrugged. People fought all the time.

"Were you in the fight?"

“No... well, sort of. I saw it start. I tried to get away, but then there was this scream. It was this girl, this young girl, and she was in there somewhere.”

“And you... just charged in there? How many people were there?”

I shrugged. “Probably twenty or so.”

She looked aghast, and looked like she was going to burst out saying something, but the man put an arm on her shoulder and said “Let him talk.”

I swallowed. “So then I pushed through them, and picked up the girl, and tried to get her out, but I got punched, and then some woman took the girl away but left me there, and then I couldn’t really move, and then you guys brought me in here.”

I sighed. No one spoke for a while, and I finished my breakfast. I guessed that it was around breakfast time, except in the day, which felt weird.

“Are you guys... Sundwellers?” I asked, hesitantly.

They both nodded.

“Oh,” I said. “I just... most people I know have thicker curtains, and their houses are darker colored. But if you’re Sundwellers, why’s the house so dim?”

“You.”

Oh. I hadn’t thought that they’d do it out of respect for me.

“I...thanks. Thanks for...” I glanced around. “For everything.”

The woman smiled. “Any time.”

“Do you... usually do this? To other Moondwellers?”

I felt weird. I’d never talked a Sundweller like this before. I don’t think I’d ever had a legitimate conversation with a Sundweller before.

“All the time,” she said. “We take you in, try to fix you up, and then you leave. What do you think happens to the Moondwellers who end up passed out on the side of the road?”

I shrugged. I’d never really thought about it before, other than assuming they were sort of... lost. I never considered they’d get a second chance.

“So... what do you guys...do?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” asked the man.

“What do Sundwellers do all day? How do you withstand the day?”

“Well, for the most part, we’re similar. We have jobs, families, and friends, like you. And what do you mean, ‘withstand the day?’

“How can you stand to be outside and see everything clearly?”

“What’s wrong with seeing things clearly?” he asked.

“Are you kidding?” I said. “I’d *never* want people be able to see me clearly. I don’t want everyone to know about me. I just want to be accepted.”

“Why do you need people to not be able to see you to accept you?”

I thought about that for a moment. “Because if they could see me, then they would guess about me. They could judge me, they could formulate opinions about me before I’d ever even talked to them.”

“But if they can’t see you,” said the woman, sounding gentle and inquisitive, “then how can they accept you? They can only accept another generic shadowy form.”

The words seemed to sink into my brain, landing right next to the words of the person who’d said “Haven’t you ever wondered?” to me yesterday. He never had the chance to elaborate, but now I was really starting to wonder without his help. I wondered if the woman was right. I wondered if I’d never been right my whole life. I wondered if anyone had really accepted me. I wondered if I’d ever be accepted. I wondered if light was really... all that bad.

“Well, we’re leaving,” said the woman, “to go to a friend’s house. We’ll back after nightfall, so you can leave whenever you feel comfortable, and feel free to take whatever you want from the fridge.”

I nodded, still staring at my bowl. They walked to the door and started to put shoes on.

I breathed deeply, and glanced up.

“Well... bye,” said the woman.

For a moment, I looked at the two figures.

“Can... can I come with you?”

For a moment, they just looked at me, then the man said, "We'll be going, you know, outside. And their house is lit up."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, I..." I took a deep breath. "I know."

I stood up and walked to the door. My heart began racing. They offered for me to walk out first, but I let them lead. They opened the door and a bit of light came. I shrank from it, almost involuntarily, and they walked outside. They turned around, looking at me expectantly. For the first time, light flooded into my eyes. I wondered if it was killing me, or if it was cleansing me. I could feel the light pressing against my eyes, but I wouldn't let it in. I stepped back, and stared at my shoes. There was a beam of light falling before them like a starting line. I squinted back outside, and began to see their outlines more. Slowly, my eyes started to adjust.

For the first time I could see them clearly. They looked kind, welcoming, loving. I tried to walk outside, but I stood frozen there, just on the brink. I stared at my own shoes for a moment, not really sure what I should do. I sighed deeply and teetered forward, then rocked back. I was about to deny everything I'd thought was normal for the most part of my life. Was this really the right way to go?

"How... how do I know that this is the right thing to do?" I asked, looking at them. I sounded panicked.

"I can't tell you whether it's definitely right. But no one can," said the man. "There's not always a clear-cut choice in life. Sometimes, you just have to trust your best judgment, cross your fingers, and make a decision."

I glanced the beam of light that fell right in front of my feet, glanced at the two figures in front of me, then took a deep breath and stepped outside.