

There it is. Perched atop a dusty television set, the moon curled by my sneakers, and I watch as dusk wraps around the city. The city is all rectangular prisms and cubes and spheres mapped out neatly on graph paper, coated in sleek varnish, but somehow, it is alive as the sun sinks downward, lit aglow with twinkling lights that flit back and forth.

Every night-to-be, I watch the city.

I never belonged in it. I never belonged anywhere, except in this dump, with its mud-caked pearl earrings and boxes of glistening fake feathers and crumpled soda cans nestled together. It's filthy. It's beautiful. All the inhabitants of this dump are outcasts that live together in howls and peace and hallelujahs.

I live in the dump because it is the anti-city.

Somewhere inside the city, the bells of the clock-tower ring six times, letting out hoarse peals of triumph. And every night-to-be, it is at this time I wait.

There is a quiet pause. There is a sweet voice, singing softly:

*"Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.*

*Are you coming, asks the clock."*

Somewhere in the city, every night-to-be, there is someone waiting at the same clock-tower, at the same time, who sings the same verse over and over again. If I let myself go, I think about how lonely it must be, to be suspended in a waiting forever as the clock lurches onward and everything changes.

This is the supposed to be the part where I let the silence linger, and ignore the ticking and tocking of the clock until morning slips by.

Supposed to be.

But this time, the voice I hear is so very tiny, shrouded in layers of heavy silk. Listening closely, I can detect the faintest trembling of the song's notes, jarring discord leaping on little strings.

It sounds like the voice is crying.

Alone, waiting, but the voice has remained steady, lilting for the two years I've listened to it.

Tch! Curiosity killed the cat, and would I head into that accursed city? Just because of the tears of a stranger?

I remember the city days of the past, where I would climb to the top of my tired apartment to peer out at the shiny cars whooshing by, and imagine what the faces inside the cars looked like. I remember, I liked to imagine that there would be somebody watching and thinking about the little kid counting all the motorcycles and mini-vans that drove by on a stained rooftop.

It was nice, making up stories about people who cared.

I stand up on my throne, the dusty television set, and look out at my dainty, disgusting realm of Dumpsterland. Reluctance creeps up on me, seeping through my paper skin and lined veins.

But I must go. I arm myself with a plastic toy sword quivering in a heap of water bottles, and cracked sunglasses buried beneath a photograph.

I must return to the home I hate so much, to unjam the poor soul trapped in the whirring gears of a relentless clock before it blows the sunset up.

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I am a flitting shadow as I journey towards the center of the Earth. I do not have to hack away at lush vines sliding around my neck, disguised by glossy advertisements, or the grinning faceless crowds, surging past like vicious piranhas, stripping me to stark bones. I do not have to trudge onward, on the rutted sidewalks accompanied by indignant beeps and honks from the local wild cabs, or cling to the handles of a subway, crushed by swarms of flashing cellphones and sagging grimaces.

No. I left that behind long ago. Instead, I am *free*. From one place to another, I twist my heels into the ground, before launching myself forward, into the night dribbling ink all over.

With the sunglasses perching on the bridge of my nose, the sword at my hip, I leap, soaring above the heights of swooping arches, landing on elevated domes before rising again.

Reprieve comes when I find that I have arrived at the clock-tower, springing from the top of a glowing restaurant onto a rocky ledge.

As the stars drape themselves accordingly against the sky's backdrop, I watch as the sole occupant of the rocky ledge blinks up at me. She has a leaf hairclip nestled in the ringlets of her hair.

"Hey," I rasp.

She only quietly nods, as the roaring city is reflected across her black irises.

"I sound like a smoker with a cheese grater lodged in my throat." Her lips quirk up and I take that as my cue to settle myself next to her, dangling my feet over the ledge. We sit there in a burnished copper silence together, the amber winds entwining around us.

It is the shortest of forevers when she asks me, "Do you know where the fireflies are?"

"Fireflies? There's none here. In this city, everything lives to die."

"The city is covered in fireflies. Pretty, glowing, alive fireflies."

The city drips sickly neon, oozing toxic wax. If I squint, I can maybe detect the slightest flash of gossamer wings or the faint pulse of delicate bulbs. Closing my eyes will even bring out pudgy hands reaching out for those fireflies.

"They're trapped."

"Summer," she whispers. "They're the freest in summer. Can you make it summer?"

I shake my head no, and the sunglasses I pillaged from the dump hide my regret.

She only takes my hand and tells me, "I am Tessa. I've been waiting for the season to change into summer so the fireflies can come out. But you came. And that's enough for me."

"I came. But are you going to keep waiting?"

Tessa breathes in, the precious air rattling inside her small frame. “A long time ago, I died.”

Tessa’s translucent hand sinks through my palm and I watch as the murmuring amber wind tears at her. “I died, because I came up to the clock-tower to see the fireflies, and they were so beautiful, and I tried to fly. But I didn’t.” She looks down, humming thoughtfully as on the streets, everything surges past like the fall that has never ended.

The world is strapped across my back, pressing heavily against my shoulders so that I can’t speak at first. “Wasn’t anyone there for you?”

“I had a brother with curly hair and lovely eyes. My mom was always so tired of being tired. Dad was always there but never here. They loved me, but I lost them a long time ago.” The amber winds are set aflame, whipping away her little voice but I can finally hear her. “I liked to dream, even if I was awake. You know?”

“Yeah...”

“I loved this city. It was my home. It was a place of happy memories. But the fireflies only lit up at night...” Tess trails off, gazing wistfully ahead at the line that stretches ahead into oblivion. “I wonder why everyone always rushed around then. Nobody ever stopped by. So, I wanted to show them it. I wanted to fly, so I could set the fireflies free. But I didn’t.

I died,” she says childishly, almost delighted at how simple it is.

“This is where you...tried to fly.”

She nods, the leaf hairclip bobbing up and down in curling waves.

“Okay,” I tell Tessa. “Okay?” I tell the moon. “Okay!” I tell myself. I am ready.

“C’mon, up you go.” I scoop Tessa up into my arms and stand up, faltering as we’re nearly blown away by the screams of a dying city.

I exhale. Then, I leap. It’s one bounding leap, from the ledge of the clock-tower to the glowing restaurant, but her shriek of joy crackles, skittering down my legs and spiraling into the abyss we’ve crossed. We are hoisted in midair by puppet strings but the momentum sends us

hurtling through, my sneakers skimming concrete and steel alike. Faster, faster, we fling ourselves into space and rip smoking holes through it.

“We’re flying,” Tessa exults, gripping my T-shirt while craning her neck to stare at her city woven with raven feathers and Christmas lights.

“Leaping,” I correct her. She giddily gulps and lets out a triumphant shriek of joy.

Snippets of the fond memories I once had sink into my skin, as we shoot past bakeries and hands plastered to the glass, traffic lights and howling tamed wolves, shopping malls and cameras chirring softly. Every place we travel to, Tessa flicks her hands out and the fireflies stir with a searing light that would’ve blinded me had I not donned the broken sunglasses. She’s the conductor of the orchestra and the fireflies are the violins, bows sliding smoothly against the strings, filling the air with thick sweet music. The fireflies too whiz by, their fluttering wings sending ripples throughout the air, and everything now resonates. Glistening orbs drift throughout the city, leaves dip into the windows, and resilient, throbbing people are rejoicing, tilting their heads upwards to feel the reddish breeze that glides along starry roads. And for once, the city is not like snow, so bland and perfect and nothingness, it has too much of everything and all the liveliness is wriggling out of its contour lines, spring flashing into fall flashing into rise flashing into summer.

We take a tour around the entire city, going even by the massive bridge and the abandoned merry-go-round and the quaint little church until finally, the soles of my feet tingle, singed by redemption.

There is a final leap. There was a final leap. There will be a---

Too late, we’ve reached the clock-tower, which has gone still in awe. We land with a crinkling thump like the leaf hairclip that’s tumbled out of Tessa’s hair.

Tessa smiles. Her palm presses against my cheek, and she murmurs, “I don’t have to wait for summer to free the fireflies. Turns out they just had to wake up. Tock tick.”

Her body is starting to blur, the transparency melting into me. I grab at her silhouette, her eyes with the shiny black irises, but she is vanishing into curling wisps of soft smoke and dissolving murmurs.

“You came. And that’s enough for me and this city,” are Tessa’s last earnest words before she completely disappears, swallowed by the echoes of the thirsty night.

I am frozen, a fossil entombed in a hunk of rock, the vestiges of ice creeping down non-existent scales. One hand has lifted to wave good-bye and one hand stays on top of the hilt of my plastic sword. My frost-bitten, frayed nerves cry out as I slowly move to painstakingly look down at the leaf hairclip resting by one of my untied sneaker laces.

I must move. I cannot remain here any longer because the clock will keep tick-tocking without the girl who dearly missed the fireflies and the twinkling city will continue shining without another thought for the king of the dump dumbly standing at the top of a clock-tower made of solitude. I inhale Tessa’s spirit as it floats through the anti-dump.

I have to free myself of the lingering silence. Slowly, jerkily, I lift the sword up. In the bleached moonlight, I can see the once invisible strings that wind around me, binding me to this aching oblivion.

My wrist flicks out as I slash the sword. The sword keens as it grates against the quivering strands, before the delicate strings snap in half and are blown away, tossed about by the winds.

The fireflies will have no trouble finding the strings. They will probably weave a bridge that connects the dump to the city, humming, “Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Are you coming, asks the clock.”

I remove the cracked sunglasses and pocket it, alongside the leaf hairclip. As Tessa’s fireflies light up the dead city, I take a deep breath. The moon nuzzles against me with a grin, rasping, “There we go, sweetheart.”

