



Chapter 11 - Quick Look

Sarah and Ellie woke up to the sound of birds chirping outside of the cave. "Let's get out of here," Sarah said to Ellie.

Radio was waiting for them at the cave's entrance. "What is that mark on your arm?" he asked.

"You tell me dude!" Sarah snapped. "We were just getting some firewood and this thing appeared. It could've killed us, but... It just... Looked at us. It was so weird."

"I was so scared Radio. It picked me up and held me! Where were you?" Ellie asked.

Radio buzzed around in the air, examining both of them. "What did it look like?" he asked.

"It was dark. It was hard to see its face, but I saw two large eyes. And it had a bunch of tentacles. It grabbed my wrist," Sarah answered.

Ellie looked at her arm and saw a row of small circular incisions from where the creature had grabbed her. "Oh my God Radio!" she screamed. "Am I going to die?" The marks on her skin were swollen and puffy, with a strange blue tint.

"I didn't even think to check her! Is that infection?" Sarah asked, looking at Radio. The robot didn't respond. "Ellie, you never said anything last night. Does it hurt?"

"No. It feels fine," Ellie stated.

Radio flew in closer and examined the wounds. "Ah, yes. I see." He looked over at Sarah and asked, "How many tentacles did it have? And was it white?"

"I don't know dude. Maybe ten? It was kinda grey and brown. I guess... I guess his face was white."

"I see. It's unfortunate I missed the encounter. Most likely, it was a Kaligua."

"A Kaligu-what?"

"A Kaligua. They are with the Andromeda team. It's rare to encounter one, let alone touch one. You... You may be the first."

"Why didn't you tell us about them?" Sarah asked. "Is Ellie going to be okay?"

"Like I said, you might be the first. So, it just disappeared? It didn't say anything?"

"Umm... It was a monster dude. I don't think it could've talked. It just made weird noises. It wasn't like us," Ellie said.

"Looks can be deceiving my dear. They're from Andromeda. Trust me. They have ways to communicate," Radio stated. "You didn't hear anything? Did it mention the crystals?"

Sarah shook her head in disbelief. "You bastard! Did you have us steal their crystals? Is that why you took off with them so quickly after we got them out of the cave?"

Radio smiled. "As long as you left some of the small ones, they'll grow back. It'll be fine. But yes. The Andromeda team is responsible for those types of crystals. I didn't know they were sending Kaliguas to the surface though. That's new."

"So, what do we do now? Is Ellie going to be okay?" Sarah demanded an answer.

Radio examined Ellie's wounds a second time with his electron microscope. "Just head back to the trailer. I need to scan the wound again later to see what the effects are over time. You both should be fine. I'll meet you when you get there." Radio disappeared in a flash.

"Fucking robot!" Sarah screamed. "He set us up to get attacked!"

"It'll be okay Mommy. It doesn't hurt. I'll be fine," Ellie said, smiling.

Sarah wanted to scream a thousand curses, but she fought the urge and settled for a sigh. "Okay, let's head back to the trailer. Got the compass?"

"Yep," Ellie responded before they started trekking back through the marshlands.



Chapter 12 - The Trail of Echoes

As Sarah and Ellie trudged through the dense marshlands, the sun began to rise, casting a golden hue over the wetlands. The chirping of birds was now accompanied by the distant sound of water trickling, a sign that they were nearing the end of the marshes.

"Mommy, do you think Radio is right? About the Kaligua?" Ellie's voice was tinged with curiosity more than fear.

Sarah kept her eyes on the path ahead, her mind racing with the same question. "I don't know, honey. But we've seen a lot of strange things since we started this journey. A Kaligua from Andromeda wouldn't be the strangest."

Ellie nodded, her grip tightening on the compass. "Do you think it's watching us now?"

Sarah stopped in her tracks, considering the possibility. "Maybe. But we have to keep moving. We can't let fear slow us down."

They continued in silence; the only sound was their footsteps squelching in the mud.

Suddenly, Ellie stopped, her eyes fixed on something in the distance. "Mommy, look!"

Sarah followed her gaze and saw a faint glow emanating from a cluster of reeds. As they approached, the glow intensified, revealing a field of crystals identical to the ones they had taken from the cave.

"Radio didn't mention this," Sarah whispered, her voice a mix of awe and suspicion.

Ellie reached out, her hand hovering over the crystals. "They're warm," she said, surprised.

Before Sarah could respond, a soft hum filled the air, and the crystals began to vibrate. The ground beneath them trembled, and a voice echoed around them, ethereal and melodic. "You have returned what was taken."

Sarah and Ellie spun around, searching for the source of the voice. "Who's there?" Sarah called out.

"We are the echoes of the Kaligua," the voice replied, resonating from the crystals. "You have shown respect by leaving the small ones to grow. Harmony has been maintained. What was taken, has now been restored."

Relief washed over Sarah, and she exchanged a look with Ellie. "Thank you," she said to the voice. "Is... Is Ellie going to be okay? Her arm looks really bad..."

The hum subsided, and the glow from the crystals dimmed. Sarah and Ellie knew they had been given a rare gift of forgiveness from the Andromeda team.

With lighter hearts, they resumed their journey, the compass pointing them towards new adventures and the promise of home.

As the marshlands gave way to solid ground, Ellie looked back one last time, the image of the glowing crystals etched in her memory. "Goodbye, Kaligua," she whispered, a smile spreading across her face.



Chapter 13 - Unstable Source

Sarah and Ellie arrived at the abandoned trailer just before sunset.

As promised, Radio appeared. He went to work scanning Ellie's wounds right away. "Does it hurt?" he asked.

"No. Not really," Ellie responded. The circular row of incisions had turned a neon purple color.

"They're getting good. I spoke with the Novas, and they said that there isn't anything we can do. Andromeda team's bio research game supersedes our own. We will just have to trust them."

"Trust? Look at her! At this rate she'll be completely purple by morning!" Sarah screamed. The marks had spread across her stomach and her entire arm.

"It's fine Mommy. It doesn't hurt at all."

Sarah was fuming. "We found some more of your stupid crystals on the way back!"

"Did you grab them?" Radio asked, hoping they'd scooped up more.

"No," Ellie replied. "They were hot. And small. Plus, they talked to us. They said they were the echoes of the Kaligua. They started resonating and we heard a voice... Like... Like a speaker. They were happy we didn't take everything from the cave."

Radio whirred in shock. "Another first," he said. "That's amazing. You two may be the first people that they've chosen to communicate with. They rarely even speak with us."

Sarah realized Radio had finally revealed something about his affiliations. "So, you are with the Novas? Who are they?"

"I like the name," Ellie said.

"I can't say much. But I can tell you, we've been through one supernova."

"What?! An exploding star? No one can survive that!" Sarah exclaimed.

Radio laughed. "None of *you* can survive it. We couldn't either, at least, then. We left before it took our planet."

Ellie's eyes widened. "Your entire planet is gone?" she asked.

"This planet will see the same fate. Just as all others. It's only natural. It's inevitable," Radio said.

Ellie saw a hint of sadness in the robot's face. She couldn't imagine somehow surviving after the entire world was gone forever. "It's okay Radio. You have us now."

"That's incredible," Sarah interrupted. "You are really from another planet?"

"We've been here for a very, very long time. Watching." Radio replied.

Sarah looked at the robot in somewhat disbelief. "Watching, huh?" she paused. "If you were watching, how did all of this happen? Why is the world as we knew it gone?"

"We've always watched. We've waited and waited, just to see what humanity would do. There was no reason for us to show ourselves. We've intervened, occasionally. In secret, of course. But this is a new age. We let you drop your own bombs. Your species would've been responsible for its own extinction, but we decided to intervene and save a few of you. At least, we are trying."

"Holy shit," Sarah said. "So, people are responsible for the Fall? It wasn't an alien attack?" she asked.

"We would never disgrace a planet the way your species has. Trust me. If we wanted to attack, we'd eliminate your kind in just a matter of seconds. Every single one of you. We let you spill your own blood, at least, most of it. We refused to let our species on the ground perish for humanity's greed."

Sarah's eyes widened. She realized Radio somehow magically appeared and disappeared before she even had time to react. And she'd witnessed him execute many people. There was truly no way to fight something that fast.

"It's okay, Sarah. Trust me. We love you and your daughter." Radio disappeared in a flash.

Sarah looked at Ellie's purple wound and shook her head. She wished she could help --antibiotics, neosporin, bandages-- but this was something beyond mankind's knowledge, something even beyond the Novas' capabilities.

"Here, baby," Sarah said after she pried open a metal can of Green.

Ellie reluctantly accepted the can with a disgusted look on her face. "Okay... Thanks Mommy."

They both sipped the Green liquid before calling it a night inside the decrepit trailer.



Chapter 14 - Special Contact

The night enveloped the trailer in a blanket of darkness, pierced only by the occasional flicker of stars that seemed to watch over Sarah and Ellie. Inside, the dim light of a single lantern cast shadows that danced across the walls.

Sarah lay awake, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts. Radio's revelations about the Novas and their long vigil over Earth left her with more questions than answers. She glanced at Ellie, who was sound asleep, her chest rising and falling in a peaceful rhythm despite the neon purple marks that now adorned her arm.

As the hours passed, Sarah's eyes grew heavy, and she finally succumbed to sleep. But it was a restless slumber, filled with dreams of distant galaxies and enigmatic beings watching from afar.

In her dream, Sarah stood on the edge of a supernova, the brilliant explosion of a star painting the cosmos in a kaleidoscope of colors. She felt a presence beside her, and turning, she saw a figure shrouded in light.

"You are not alone," the figure spoke, its voice resonating with the warmth of a thousand suns. "The Novas have always been here, guardians of the balance."

"Why didn't you help us?" Sarah asked, her voice echoing in the vastness of space.

"Some events must unfold as they are destined. The Fall was one such event. But know this, Sarah, your journey with Ellie is of great significance."

Sarah snapped out of her dream, the first light of dawn creeping through the cracks of the trailer. She looked over at Ellie, whose purple marks seemed to have faded slightly.

"Mommy, I had the strangest dream," Ellie murmured, rubbing her eyes.

Sarah hugged her tightly. "Me too baby. But it's a new day, Ellie. And we are still here."

They packed their few belongings and stepped out of the trailer, the fresh morning air filling their lungs. The compass pointed north, towards the unknown, and with a sense of renewed purpose, they set off.

As they walked, Sarah couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched, but this time, it didn't feel threatening. It felt like a silent promise that they were part of something much larger than themselves. And somewhere in the distance, a soft hum echoed, a reminder of the Kaligua and the Novas, the unseen companions on their extraordinary journey.



Chapter 15 - Divine Encounter

The journey northward led Sarah and Ellie through a landscape that seemed to shift with every step. The ground beneath their feet was no longer just earth and grass; it was as if they were walking on the fabric of reality itself, where the veil between worlds was thin.

Ellie's compass spun wildly, its needle dancing in all directions. "Mommy, it's broken!" she exclaimed, a note of panic in her voice.

Sarah took the compass, shaking it gently. "No, Ellie. It's not broken. It's just that we're close to something... something powerful."

As they ventured further, the air grew colder, and a thick fog began to envelop them. Shapes moved within the mist, elusive and fleeting.

Ellie clung to Sarah's hand, her eyes wide with a mixture of fear and wonder.

Suddenly, a figure emerged from the fog, its form shifting and changing. It wasn't a Nova. Sarah had only seen robots from their team. This had to be Andromeda Team, but it definitely wasn't a Kaligua, this being was unlike any they'd seen before. It was taller, its features more defined, and it radiated a soft light that seemed to pierce the gloom.

"Welcome, travelers," the being spoke, its voice echoing around them. "You have entered the Veil of Shadows, a place of great power and great danger."

Sarah stepped forward, her protective instincts flaring. "What do you want from us?"

The being tilted its head, considering her question. "We do not want anything from you. But you are seeking answers, and here, you may find them."

Ellie tugged at Sarah's sleeve. "Mommy, ask about the crystals!"

Sarah nodded. "The crystals we found, the ones that spoke to us. What are they?"

The Nova's light brightened for a moment. "They are the Echo Crystals, remnants of a time when our worlds were one. They hold memories, knowledge, and tremendous power."

"And the Kaligua? What will happen to Ellie?" Sarah's voice was firm, demanding.

"The Kaligua's touch is a gift, though it may not seem so. Ellie has been marked as a friend of the Andromeda team. She will be safe, and she will find that new abilities will awaken within her."

As the being spoke, the fog began to lift, revealing a path lined with Echo Crystals, leading to a structure that shimmered like a mirage.

"This path will lead you to the Archive of Stars, where the history of a thousand worlds is kept. Go forth, but be wary. Not all secrets are meant to be uncovered." With a final nod, the being faded back into the fog, leaving Sarah and Ellie alone once more.

They looked at each other, a new resolve in their eyes. Together, they walked towards the Archive of Stars, ready to uncover the mysteries that awaited them in the Veil of Shadows.



Chapter 16 - Pressure Points

As they walked into the fog, the air became cold. Ice cold. The fog intensified and before long, they could only see a few inches in front of their faces.

Ellie grabbed her mother's shirt, "I don't like this place Mommy. Can we go back?"

Sarah stopped and tried to look at Ellie, but she could only make out a ghostly figure. She wasn't sure what was happening, but she felt amazing. She looked at her own hands and they were almost transparent in the fog. "We can do this Ellie," she said. "Let's keep going. I want to know more about them."

Ellie pulled her hand back. "I don't like it here. I want to go back."

Sarah reached out to grab Ellie's arm, but her fingers couldn't grasp anything. Ellie was a ghost. Seconds later, Ellie disappeared entirely.

Sarah was terrified. "Ellie!" she screamed into the fog. "Ellie! Come back!" She tried to walk but her feet remained held to the ground with intense force. She became even more scared.

The air started swirling violently and three strange beings emerged from the fog.

"Ellie was not ready," one of the beings said. "Fear not, Sarah. You will be reunited with your daughter soon. She is safe, for now."

Sarah was totally confused. She didn't understand what was happening. "What is this place, and how did I get here?" she asked.

"This is a special place. No others of your kind have made it here and returned," another being said. "We are the masters of the universe. We brought you here."

"Is this still Earth?" she asked.

"Yes, and No. We occupy the same space, but this is the dimension we prefer. This is our dimension of safety from your kind."

"What in the hell? Am I dreaming? Are you Andromeda Team?" Sarah asked.

"Yes, we are with Andromeda Team. We are much older than the Novas. We brought you here for a reason, Sarah," the being paused. "Just beware. Although Radio is your guardian, you must use your own heart. You must make your own decisions. If you choose to follow his instructions unwaveringly, be sure it is of your own will."

There was a sonic boom, and, in an instant, the fog disappeared. Sarah fell down to the ground without having a chance to say a word.

Ellie was standing next to her. "Are you okay, Mommy?" she asked.

"I think so. This keeps getting weirder and weirder." Sarah stood up and dusted off her shorts. It was completely dark. She wasn't sure how much time had passed.

"What happened in there, Mom? It was so cold."

"I wish I could explain it to you baby," Sarah said. "It felt like a dream. They said... They said to be careful with Radio. I... I don't know. Let's just go back to the trailer for the night." Sarah was still trembling with fear.



Chapter 17 - Yellow Vials

The trailer's familiar confines offered a stark contrast to the bewildering experience Sarah and Ellie had just endured. As they settled in for the night, the events that unfolded in the fog seemed more like a distant memory than reality.

Sarah tucked Ellie into her makeshift bed, ensuring she was warm and comfortable.

"Mommy, are we safe here?" Ellie's voice was small, her earlier bravery waning in the face of uncertainty.

"We're safe, Ellie. That place... it was different, but we're back now, and I won't let anything happen to you," Sarah reassured her, stroking her hair gently.

Ellie yawned and closed her eyes, the exhaustion of the day's events pulling her into a deep sleep. Sarah watched over her, the protective instinct of a mother bear stronger than ever.

As the silence of the night enveloped them, Sarah pondered the words of the beings in the fog. 'Use your own heart. Make your own decision.' The advice resonated with her, a reminder that despite the guidance of Radio and the mysteries of the universe, her choices were still her own.

The next morning, Sarah awoke to find Ellie's arm restored to its normal color, the neon purple hue gone as if it had never been.

Ellie stretched and smiled, "Look, Mommy, it's all better!"

Sarah hugged her tightly, relief flooding through her. "It's a miracle, Ellie. Maybe those beings were right. Maybe you really are marked as a friend."

They stepped outside, the sun shining brightly, a new day offering a fresh start. The compass, once erratic, now pointed steadily northward. Sarah looked at Ellie, her resolve firm. "We'll follow our own path, Ellie. Together."

Hand in hand, they set off towards the horizon, the trailer shrinking behind them. They didn't know what mysteries lay ahead, but they were ready to face them, guided by their own will and the unbreakable bond between mother and daughter.

Radio appeared after they left the sanctuary of the trailer. "I see your arm has healed, Ellie."

"Yeah, it feels better," Ellie replied, happy that the strange marks had mysteriously disappeared.

Radio set two small vials of Yellow liquid on the ground. "Savor them," he said. "It only takes one sip per day. More than that is not recommended."

Sarah looked at him with curiosity. He'd mentioned Yellow before, but she hadn't had the chance to try it yet.

"What is so special about it?" Ellie asked. "Will it make me sick like the Green?"

Radio smiled. "I suppose everyone reacts differently."

Sarah shook her head in aggravation. "Why do you do this to us Radio? It's like you are always only telling half-truths."

Radio's sensors beeped. "I suppose you don't have to drink it. I thought you wanted sustenance, and protection from this harsh world. It is going to be a few days until I can give you any more liquids. This Yellow will be enough to sustain you until you get to the ocean."

Sarah's eyes widened. "The ocean? There is no way! It's over 40 miles away. Plus, we'd have to go through the ruins of Orlando. I've seen what that place has done to people. We aren't doing it. N.O."

Radio laughed. "You doubt my powers? You haven't even tried the Yellow. I promise your safety. This liquid will prevent all mutations. Plus, it will provide stamina and agility. You won't even need to sleep. Just remember. One sip per day."

Ellie picked up one of the vials and cracked the cap, smelling the neon liquid. "It smells like pineapple," she stated.

"Do you accept the task, Sarah?" Radio asked.

Sarah looked at Ellie smiling with the Yellow vial in her hand and grinned. She knew they were out of Green and Radio hadn't steered them wrong in the past. "We'll do it. As long as you promise that we won't be affected by travelling through Orlando." The memory of a group of mutated people on the interstate was fresh in Sarah's mind.

"You will be unaffected. Remember though, only one sip per day." Radio vanished.

Sarah shook her head again. "Looks like we are heading East."



Chapter 18 - Unlucky Resident

The morning sun cast a warm glow over the landscape as Sarah and Ellie prepared for their journey eastward. The mysterious Yellow liquid, with its pineapple scent, seemed to promise a new kind of protection, a new hope.

"Remember, Ellie, just one sip," Sarah reminded her daughter as they each took a cautious drink from the vials. The liquid was sweet, an unexpected delight in a world that had been harsh for too long.

As they set out, the ruins of Orlando loomed in the distance, a stark reminder of the world that once was. Sarah felt a twinge of fear, but the Yellow's warmth spread through her, bolstering her courage.

The landscape changed as they moved, the ground beneath their feet becoming firmer, the air fresher. They passed through fields of wildflowers, their vibrant neon colors a stark contrast to the desolation they had known.

Ellie's laughter filled the air, a sound Sarah hadn't heard in what felt like ages. "Look, Mommy, I can run faster!" Ellie exclaimed, darting ahead with a speed that surprised them both.

Sarah followed, her own body responding to the Yellow's effects. They ran together, their spirits lifted until they reached the entrance ramp to I-4. "This is where it might get a little sketchy," Sarah said. "If you hear anything, just stop. Okay, baby?" she asked.

"Okay," Ellie responded.

The heat waves reflected off the charred asphalt in the blistering sun. Although Sarah didn't want to take the interstate, it was the only way through polluted swampland without adding several days to their journey.

"Do you hear that Mommy?" Sarah asked.

Sarah instinctively put her arm in front of Ellie when she heard the shrill shrieks in the distance. "Be very quiet," she said, "Let's hide here for a minute." She guided Ellie to duck behind a burned-out SUV.

They waited in silence as the screams intensified. Then came the gunshots.

Sarah saw the fear in Ellie's eyes and held her finger over her lips, signaling her to remain quiet. She stood up and looked through the SUV's tinted windows.

There was a man with an assault rifle standing over several bodies. He stood there for a few minutes before he started rummaging through their pockets and bags.

Sarah crouched back down and whispered to Ellie, "Stay quiet. Hopefully he goes the other way. If not, we can hide under this truck."

Ellie's heart started racing. She noticed that the strange circular marks on her arm had returned, pulsating with her heartbeat.

Sarah saw Ellie staring at her arm and shook her head in disbelief. She wanted to scream in anger. This was not the place or time for Ellie to fall ill from an unknown alien sickness.

After several excruciating minutes, the man started walking toward them. Sarah signaled Ellie to crawl under the vehicle. She grabbed her shoe and helped her slide on the hot asphalt.

After Ellie was safe, Sarah realized that she wasn't going to be able to fit underneath the truck. "Stay here, baby," she whispered. Without many options, she decided she'd try to creep around the vehicle as the assassin passed.

As the man neared, he stopped right next to the SUV and sighed. He wiped his brow and took another deep breath, encumbered with the items he'd looted from his defenseless victims.

Sarah took the opportunity to crawl around the opposite side of the vehicle and she slipped in some broken glass. The noise was enough to alert the man.

"Stop right there!" he screamed, strafing around the front of the SUV and aiming his weapon at Sarah.

"Please don't shoot me!" Sarah pleaded.

The man looked at her and saw the knife sheathed on her belt. "Bitch, please," he said as he clicked off the safety on his rifle.

Then it happened. The man went into violent convulsions and quickly turned blue. A white cloud appeared around his body before the lifeless meat dropped to the pavement. The cloud compressed and compressed, until it reached the size of a softball and exploded with a flash of light.

Sarah stood there in amazement, tears still trickling down her face. She glanced at his lifeless body. "It's okay to come out now babe," she said, before she noticed that Ellie had already crawled out from under the vehicle. She was standing just behind the SUV, trembling.

Sarah realized that somehow, Ellie was responsible for the man's death. The markings on her arm were still violently vibrating, emitting a strange high-pitched noise. She rushed over and hugged her daughter. "It's over baby. We are safe."



Chapter 19 - Dan Got Me Dead

Sarah and Ellie continued walking down I-4. It was a mess of burned and broken vehicles encapsulating the skeletal remains of unlucky travelers.

Sarah was nervous about encountering another looter, but they continued on, nevertheless. She couldn't stop thinking about the man mysteriously collapsing on the roadway. She wondered if Ellie was truly responsible. Could little Ellie have really done that to the man? She decided to wait until they were in a safe location before asking Ellie more about the incident.

The afternoon was extremely hot and humid. Sarah saw the massive courthouse in downtown Orlando towering on the horizon and estimated they were about two miles away. Most of the other skyscrapers had fallen, but somehow, the courthouse still stood tall. She reached into her pocket and felt the glass vials rub together with a distinct clicking noise. "Here, the bus stop. Let's rest there Ellie," Sarah said.

"What is \$400,000.00 Mommy?" Ellie asked. She'd grown up in a time when money was just useless cloth.

Sarah glanced at the sign and read, "Slip and Fall? DAN GOT ME \$800K - Car accident? DAN GOT ME \$400,000.00" She shrugged, wondering how to explain the old world to Ellie. "Well baby, that was the start of the Fall. People became greedy to the point where they were hurting themselves on purpose for money. When I was growing up, money started losing its value extremely fast. Just before the Fall, bullets became the new currency. And then, the bombs fell shortly after."

"Was 800K a lot of money?" Ellie asked.

Sarah sighed. "When I was young, 800k was a tremendous amount of money. But as I got older, things became so expensive so fast. Wages never went up. Then, we imported everything. Just before the Fall, 800k wasn't even enough to purchase a home in Florida." Sarah paused, still baffled by what had unfolded. "So, all of the people growing up, if they didn't inherit anything from their parents, they had to rent. Then after just a decade of that, people realized there was really no more American dream. It was destined to fail."

"Why though Mommy?" Ellie asked.

Sarah let out a long sigh, wondering how in the hell society let it get to that point in the first place. Maybe it was the boomer generation. Maybe they blamed the Millennials. Maybe the Millennials blamed Gen-Z. In the end, ninety-nine point nine-nine percent of people ended up dead. None of it mattered. "Corporations baby. Tied in with Governments. Late-stage capitalism. They took more and more for their own greed. They always wanted record profits every year, no matter the cost. They cut wages, fired people, used illegal chemicals, suppressed green technology, they even killed people. Whistle blowers. They didn't care about the people. They only cared about their executives."

"So, it's their fault? For the fall?" Ellie asked.

"It's hard to say baby. I think there might have been some Divine intervention. Regardless, they're all gone now. We don't need to worry about them anymore. Let these stupid advertisements be a testament to their fates." Sarah paused. She was spiteful about the past, but she wondered if it would be better to teach Ellie a different way. "I doubt it would've happened without their actions. Had they only been a little less greedy? Yet, America let it get to this point. We were all a part of the reason. The people were too scared to stand up. And the ones that did... They went to prison right away. The governments made the people so afraid, all they could do was complacently watch the country deteriorate over their lifetimes. Maybe we could've acted sooner. Who knows," Sarah stopped and pulled the Yellow vials out of her pocket. "You thirsty, Hun?" she asked.

"Sure," Ellie replied. "I really like the Yellow."

Sarah smiled. Radio said one sip per day and the sun was going down. "One sip, Ellie." She was happy that Ellie wasn't complaining about the Green. Plus, there was something special about the Yellow. The energy that it gave them wasn't like the other liquids. She had a feeling there was some type of special stimulant included in the mixture.

Ellie took a sip and twisted the lid back onto the vial. "Thanks Mommy."

"I'm happy you like it. Radio said we wouldn't have to sleep with this one. Let's rest for a few more minutes, then we'll push on and get through Orlando after sundown."

As they walked past the first skyscraper, Sarah couldn't help but remember what the city was like when she was growing up. Orlando was never the best city, but it was her city. Seeing the leftover remnants after the bombs fell hurt her soul.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" Ellie asked. She could tell her mother was upset.

"Nothing baby," Sarah replied. She knew Ellie didn't know what life was like before the Fall. The desolate ruins were home to the child.

"Are you getting tired at all?" Sarah asked. Staying awake for multiple days was new to them both.

"Nope. I really like the Yellow. I still feel good." Ellie replied.

Sarah smiled. They'd been walking for almost the entire day. She glanced at Ellie's arm and noticed the strange markings had subsided. She wanted to ask Ellie more about the encounter with the evil man, but she figured it would be best to get through the city.

"Mommy, what is DeLand," Ellie asked, after seeing a sign.

"Oh, it's just a small city. It was known for skydiving. We will pass by it on the way to the ocean. You might even get to see the racetrack in Daytona. We'll see if it's safe when we get closer," Sarah answered.

The moon was the only light as they continued walking through the wreckage of I-4. Surprisingly, they made it through Orlando without encountering another person. Then Sarah smelled the smoke, a sure sign of life. "Alright, let's stay quiet for a while. There are probably people ahead. When there's smoke, there's people."



Chapter 20 - Old Wishes

The smoke on the horizon was a signal that life persisted, even in the most desolate places. Sarah's instincts kicked in, the need to protect Ellie from the unknown dangers that lay ahead, but they continued forward, nevertheless.

The ruins of Orlando stretched out behind Sarah and Ellie, a haunting reminder of a world that once thrived with life and energy. The skeletal remains of buildings stood like tombstones, marking the death of a city Sarah once knew. The air was still, as if the city held its breath, and the only sound was the crunch of debris under their feet.

Sarah glanced back one last time through the shadows of the fallen skyscrapers and her heart ached with the memories of her youth. The laughter that once echoed through these streets was now just a whisper in the wind. Ellie's hand in hers was a lifeline, a reminder that not all was lost.

"Mommy, what's that?" Ellie's voice broke the silence, her finger pointing to the remnants of a once-grand fountain, now dry and filled with the dust of destruction.

"It used to be a place where people made wishes, Ellie," Sarah explained, her voice tinged with sorrow. "They'd throw coins into the water and hope for better days."

Ellie's eyes widened with wonder. "Did the wishes come true?"

"Sometimes, I think they did," Sarah replied, squeezing Ellie's hand.

As the sun dipped lower, they stopped under a bridge that offered a momentary refuge. The 411 PAIN advertisement painted on the windows of a city bus caught Ellie's eye-- a relic of a time when money was the measure of success, a concept so foreign to her.

Sarah's earlier explanation of the Fall was a history lesson wrapped in a cautionary tale. The greed that led to the downfall of society was a stark contrast to the world Ellie knew, where survival was the only currency that mattered.

As they pressed on, Altamonte Spring's silence was a heavy cloak around them. The smoke grew thicker, a sign that they were not alone.

Sarah's grip on Ellie's hand tightened, a motherly promise that she would keep her safe, no matter what lay ahead.

The night continued, and with it, a blanket of stars shifted, a reminder that even in darkness, there is light. Sarah and Ellie moved like shadows, their presence unnoticed, their journey through the silent city a testament to their resilience. The chapter of their lives that unfolded through the ruins of Orlando was one of many, each step a story, each breath a hope for a future where the mistakes of the past would not be repeated.