

# DANTE

Thomas Monroe



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In Flanders Fields, 1915 John McCrae



*In Loving Memory of Marleen B.*



*Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds*

J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER





# PROLOGUE

**H**is body was aching with the stories of times past. Tired feet were dragging over the dirt covered floor, they were barely strong enough to carry him. The heat irradiated from the stainless-steel kettle. After filling up the cracked black coffee mug decorated with a pink star with hot water, he tossed in a bag of tea and let it soak. While waiting for the tea to be ready, he sat down on the backrest of the old leather sofa. His hands were trembling as his mind went back to his life. Everything he had seen, everything he had gone through, everything he had lost.

Staring at the green spreading in his tea, his mind eventually went empty. He was tired and sick of life. A deep sigh was followed by his eyes falling closed. His head tilted backward and when his eyes opened again, he stared up at the dark starry sky.

Thomas Monroe

"Listen, my beautiful son. I want to tell you a story of events long ago. A story of how insufferable people can be."

# CHAPTER ONE

## A Lonesome World

**T**he dark, thickly clouded sky was drizzling only slightly, but enough to soak people to the bone if they stood a mere minute outside. Half of the lights along the streets didn't work anymore, broken lighting tubes, ripped wiring, all different kinds of reasons. But since at least the other half of the streetlights were still working and turned on, there was a dim glow lighting up the dark streets slightly. Most of these streets themselves were barely two meters wide and had seen better days. A long time ago, they

used to be properly asphalted, but now they were a disaster, many of them had even become more grind road than actual asphalt.

Cold lingered in the air, drawing away the warmth of the people. The view was disgusting, broken streets, barely working streetlights, the few plants and trees having withered, abominable houses, which looked worse than they actually were.

But for Naota Dante, this view wasn't disgusting. It was normal, it was life. He was staring absentmindedly forward as the gravel under the wheels of his old scooter was crackling. Naota's mussed black hair stood proudly in the wind since he wasn't wearing a helmet. Circles under his black eyes showed how tired he really was after a long day's work. But it was the empty feeling in his gut which really bugged him. It wasn't a feeling of hunger, but a continuing feeling of boredom. Naota wasn't depressed, not really, he simply felt empty. The open, worn out, gray, buttoned shirt was soaked and stuck to the faded, dirty pink T-shirt he was wearing under it. The cold air entered his pants through the tears in the knees of the jeans he was wearing. Naota's jeans were in a bad state, but not as a fashion statement, rather due to the age and its role as working pants.

Occasionally, a motor bike passed him and even one car. Considering how small the streets were, coming across a car was rare. They normally only used the bigger streets in the town. The town in which Naota lived had about twenty-five thousand inhabitants and was small in comparison to an average city, but was normal as to the state it was in. About ninety percent of the inhabitants of the country lived in neighborhoods such as this one. His country was an average one, one amongst many in a huge world, which was divided in two separate sides.

Naota rolled his scooter in the hallway of his crummy house and sat down in the old leather sofa in the living room. His legs felt tired and his stomachs finally started to rumble in hunger. Just as he closed his eyes, a young woman of the same age as Naota sat down next to him and pulled him close to her. The woman had a delicate and pretty face and very long platinum blonde hair. The smile on her face radiated with kindness.

She was his wife, Sarah. They had met when they had just graduated from secondary school, she was still in nursing school and Naota was frantically

looking for work. A year later they were married with their first child on the way. Now they were ten years later.

With a plop, the boy sat down next to his father on the couch. He had a happy face as he turned on the old plasma television. He was only a third grader in primary school, but he was such a bright kid. The apple of his young parents' eyes. The boy's name was Eli Dante.

"Hey there little one." Naota said and rubbed the head of his son, "How was school?"

Eli simply shrugged and turned his attention back to the television. Naota was disgusted by everything on television, not just the brainwashing news feeds and other "informative" programs, but also the programs meant for children.

"Did anything special happen today at work?" Sarah asked as she placed her head on Naota's shoulder.

"How can anything special happen to me? I have quite a monotonous job you know," Naota said and gave Sarah a kiss, "How about you?"

"You know how it goes. Turning away sick and injured people hurts, but we can't help them all. I had to turn several of them away personally," Sarah said and her face turned sad. Naota's job might have been boring, but Sarah's job hurt her mind and her soul, "Just today ... I had to turn away this sweet little girl. She didn't even go to school yet. But there she was, sick, Asgari disease. How sickly pale she was. Her eyes were bloodshot and both of her stomachs were malfunctioning, about to give out completely. Her parents were begging me to help her and the little girl herself kept clinging onto me. But there was really nothing I could do."

Naota pulled her even closer and started petting her hair.

"I gave them some tips for what they could do to best take care of her, but in the end it was only false hope. I give her a week ... at most."

"False hope is still hope, people shouldn't live without it."

"They knew all too well there was no hope."

After consoling his wife for about ten minutes, she stood up and walked to the kitchen to make dinner in order to put her mind off the little girl. Naota didn't really know what to do, he felt too tired to do or say anything else.

"Mommy always seems so sad when she comes home from work." Eli said, "If she hates work so much, why doesn't she look for another job?"

"Mommy doesn't hate her job, she loves it. She loves helping people, but she hates it when she can't help them, it hurts her," Naota said and tapped his son's shoulder, "Mom's sometimes too good a person for this world."

She was, Naota knew. Sarah was a kindhearted person who wanted to help people, that's why she became a nurse and that was also why Naota fell in love with her. But that goodness in her heart was accompanied by fragility. It hurt her when she had to abandon people. In the end, it were the people with the most money who got help first. The poorer people had to wait, even in small hospitals like hers the same rule counted, the richest got helped first. When you were the middle class you had to be lucky. At least that was what they were officially called, middle class, because ninety percent of the populace was like that. But in truth they were more like the lower middle class, the poor people. But it was hard to call the rich bad in this case, they just wanted to be healed too, didn't they?

"So, what did you learn about today?" Naota asked Eli to put his mind off the matter.

"PLANETS!" Eli said happily.

"Really? Interesting." Naota smiled, "Tell me about it."

"Well, you have the star around which we orbit. The people call it Sun, the official scientific name is Anima. The first planet is a dangerous one, with a lot of volcanoes and stuff, useless to go to. It is called Anima One, known to the people as Ardoris. After that is this planet, Anima Two, called Earth by the people. After that is a normal sized gas giant known as Roseti, scientific name Anima Three. That gas giant is used for gas mining. After that you have the biggest planet in our planetary system Anima Four, known as Adamantis, still too far away for us to reach, also a gas giant. The last planet in our system is Anima Five, yet another normal sized gas giant, better known as Tenera."

Naota was surprised to hear his young son give such a speech, hear him say all that without stopping a moment to think.

"That was impressive." Naota nodded, "You're so smart."

There lived more than nine billion people on the whole planet and almost half a million in space stations, mining stations and moon bases. The people were called the chandra. The chandra were a people resembling humans, but only pertaining looks. Their chemical makeup and internal organs were

completely different from humans. Their society was quite an advanced one, reaching all the way to the nearest gas giant. It was also one with many of the classic problems.

Naota was lying in bed, with in his arms his wife. It felt nice to hold her, the day's hard work soon faded away. But he kept on thinking of something Eli had said earlier that day, as he kept on staring at the back of Sarah's head.

"Are you happy? Do you like what you've become?" Naota asked in a soft voice.

Naota waited for an answer, but none came, Sarah kept quiet. He held her a bit tighter and went to sleep. Unlike what Naota had thought, Sarah was still awake and had heard his question loud and clear. But the truth was, she didn't know how to answer it. Did she love her job? Yes. Did she like doing it in this fucked up system where the rich get helped and the poor abandoned? Of course she didn't, especially since they themselves were poor. The reason why she didn't want to talk about it with him rather came from the urge to protect him and not because she wanted to keep it a secret. The last thing she wanted was to make him worry, to show him her unhappy side. All she could do was carry on and hope it would get better in the near future.

That was what life was about. Living with all of the horrible elements, living through them, biting through them, waiting for life to become better, hoping for life to become better. But it was hard, Sarah often caught herself feeling down, almost depressed because of her enervating life. Having to take care of the privileged wasn't fun, even though they weren't bad people. But that didn't take away the fact that the whole system was unfair. A health system built around ridiculously expensive treatments only the rich could afford, as opposed to the shitty cheap hospitals for the poor, which performed dubious medical practices. While everything was paid for by the taxpayers, the rich got priority since they paid such ridiculous amounts of taxes. Did she like her job? Yes. Did she like working in those circumstances? Not at all.

Sarah was wearing a simple, scruffy white dress as she was riding with her bicycle to the hospital. On her back she was wearing a small bag with her blue nurse's dress, white nurse's apron and nurse cap in it. But before going

to the hospital itself, Sarah made a short stop somewhere else. She stopped at one of the shrines in town.

Not just in Sarah's and Naota's country, but all over the world, there was one certain religion. This religion was known as Kamism. Throughout the history of their world, there had been several religions, but in the end, only one religion survived. Kamism worshiped four basic spirits each representing one of the four Cardinal directions, one of the four seasons and one of the four elements. Genbu, the black tortoise representing the north, the winter and water. Seiryuu, the blue dragon representing the east, spring and wood. Suzaku, the red phoenix representing the south, summer and fire. And lastly Byakko, the white tiger representing the west, autumn and metal. In the center of those four spirits, there was the great arch spirit Oryuu, the yellow dragon of the void.

The shrine at which Sarah said a quick prayer was Byakko's shrine since it was autumn. Sarah wasn't a fanatic believer. She was religious because there was the hope in her mind that there were greater beings watching over them, hoping that they would eventually help their world out of the somber darkness. Sarah placed her circular religious amulet with the symbols of the four spirits and the arc spirit on it between the palms of her hands and said a quick prayer.

Unlike Sarah, Naota wasn't religious. He didn't have any problem with Kamism, he simply didn't see the logic in it. The world was dark and depressing, Naota refused to and couldn't believe in Gods or spirits that would allow such horrible things. A lot of people would claim that the spirits worked in mysterious ways, but Naota would counter this by saying that the spirits didn't exist and if they did exist, they were a bunch of sadistic bastards.

So Naota drove with his scooter straight to work. He worked in a small factory, about two hundred people worked there. The factory itself came across as quite random. It wasn't your typical factory with several assembly lines concentrating on some specific objects. This factory concentrated on both wood and metal productions. In this factory they made furniture, parts for large machines and other similar things. The factory was quite random concerning to what they produced, but everything was custom made. Almost everything they made was for the lower upper class. But this fact didn't make



it a well-paid job, after all the owner of the factory was from that very upper class. Low pay and high selling prices kept the profit margin huge for the owner.

The morning air had a fresh feeling to it, but also a certain irritating stench. As always the police drones were hovering high up in the air above the town, scanning it in search of crimes being performed and wanted criminals. When a criminal or a crime in progress were to be detected, a signal would be sent to the police droids, simple and slender built robots which acted as the police. But the police droids in Naota's town were old, rusty and faulty. This was in favor of the criminals, but also to the disadvantage of the normal people. But luckily for them, the police droids used plastic bullets, although every droid did carry normal bullets in case they encountered dangerous criminals. Fail safes would prevent the switching to actual bullets when malfunctioning. But there weren't many criminals. In towns such as Naota's, the crime rate was quite low, even with faulty police droids. The squeeze the police had on small towns was tight enough to frighten criminals away, even with faulty droids. The type of crime which did occur in such towns was of a completely different variety. The criminals there would be the factory bosses, using the normal people practically as slave labor. But the fact that it was a police state wasn't the only reason for the low crime rate. The upper class had the smaller towns under control with such force, crime in such towns wouldn't pay sufficiently. This was how criminals in these small towns got away from the police. They were seen as official businesses. So they left, the people with the more typical darker aspirations left for the large metropolises. This made Naota's town even grayer and made the police, their drones and droids even more focused on the little things that happened, simple things like traffic violations, squeezing the normal people into frustration. The double squeeze from the police and the factory owners made some people lose it. Thus the real crime appeared in the large cities, in some cities the fights between the criminal underworld and the police were the size of small wars.

"There he is, th' oncoming storm," a female voice said in a strange accent as Naota parked his scooter in the parking lot of the factory.

It was a woman with long red fluffy hair and a fair skin who had spoken to Naota. Her name was Amelia Rivers. This gorgeous young woman was ten

years younger than Naota, having graduated from secondary school only a year earlier. She was almost as tall as Naota himself. The jeans she wore were old fashioned, pale blue, skin tight above the knees and below it wider. The very loose sleeveless gray shirt, which was almost completely open at the side, had a big bright red heart on it and draped beautifully around her body. This beautiful girl might have been a lot younger than Naota, but she was his coworker and his best friend. It was this lively girl that made Naota's days at work bearable.

"It is more like the oncoming drizzle today," Naota said and yawned.

"Ah can tell, what's up?"

"Nothing, I just feel a bit woozy, that's all." Naota smiled and gave Amelia a friendly kiss on the side of her head.

"Well, Ah bought you this." She smiled back and gave Naota a big beaker of tea, "That should clear up yer mind a bit."

"Thanks."

The tea helped, but only a bit. Naota still felt sick, the haziness lingered persistently in his head, but this was not so strange. Naota could blame a bad night's sleep, but he knew better, he knew it was because of bad nutrition and too much work. It was nothing dangerous, his blurry head, it was simply irritating.

Naota's mind was drifting as he was sanding down the surfaces of the wooden armchair. The sanding itself was so repetitive and boring his mind had all the time in the world to drift. He thought about his son, how smart he actually was. But also about his wife, how sad and happy she came across at the same time. And his lively friend Amelia, who kept him sane during the day. But it was dangerous for him to let his mind wander too much, there was the danger he would start to think about the future, his future. If he started to think about it, he would start to see the meaningless gray future and how he would probably be stuck in that dead end job for the rest of his life. He could only hope his son was smart enough to wrestle himself out of that shitty town and that shitty way of life.

Amelia was wearing protective goggles as she was sawing planks out of wood to make new chairs after Naota was done sanding down the previous one. It was a strange sight, loose sleeveless shirt with heavy worker gloves. After sawing for an hour, Amelia's hair would be filled with wood shavings,

as was her shirt. Amelia placed the goggles on the table and walked up to Naota. With a smile she sat down in the chair Naota was sanding down.

"So, how's th' wife?" she asked casually.

"The same as always, slightly depressed due to shit at work, but good nonetheless." Naota said calmly, "I'd ask how your family is doing, but you don't have any family in the country."

"Aye, well, ah have ye at least," Amelia said and smiled at Naota in a pure fashion.

They went quiet again after that and Amelia got back to her feet to continue working. Placing her slender fingers on her goggles, she sighed and turned around again.

"Uhm, after work, wanna go fer a drink in th' pub?" Amelia asked shyly, something which was very unusual for her.

"Sure." Naota smiled, "Tomorrow is our day off anyways."

"Ye can call Sarah too. Ah bet she'd love to have a drink with us, might cheer her up."

"I think I'll do that, I'll give her a call after work."

Both of them sat on a metal staircase at noon, eating their lunch, Amelia four steps higher than Naota. While he was sitting in a little ball, Amelia, being about a meter eighty, almost laid down on the staircase, feet resting on the lowest step.

"So, all those plans you were making to study more and get a better job, when will you fulfill them?" Naota asked and took a bite from his apple.

"Oy, don't start preaching to me, ye numpty," Amelia said in her foreign accent and gave Naota a slap against the back of his head, "Ah wish it were easy, but Ah have to work 'ere fer at least three years to be able to afford a year of college, 'n' that is only if ah save half of tha money Ah earn, which is basically impossible."

"Yeah, it's hard to get somewhere when you don't have anything, or if you're a foreigner like you."

"I am not a foreigner." she said, suddenly speaking properly.

"Sorry, I mean of foreign decent."

"Much better." Amelia smiled and rubbed Naota's head.

"Must be nice," Naota said and stared down at the black cotton sneakers he was wearing.

"What?"

"Nothing, I was just babbling."

Amelia really did want to study. She wanted to make something more of her life than this, than working in a factory and making furniture. A life in a factory, gray and boring, monotonous and a drag. That's not what she wanted. When she was little, Amelia used to dream of becoming a police woman so she could catch the bad guys, or become an important executive in one of those rich companies. She even had the dream of becoming a doctor, saving the lives of people. But now that she was grown up and knew how corrupt all three of her childhood dream jobs actually were, she felt even more depressed about it all. When she was little, she used to have a romantic image of the world. She used to have the illusion that the world was a beautiful place. But from the moment she came even a bit of age, she started to see the disgusting side and the unfairness of it all. Right now she still wanted to make more of her life, but not out of some noble reason, but because she wanted to earn more money. It was as plain and simple as that. She wanted a better life than she had.

Music was blaring in the pub and the noise of the workers, drinking away several days of hard work, was chaotic. The smell of cheap tobacco and stale beer mixed into a sickening, yet familiar and soothing air quality. The wooden tables were wet and sticky, covered in all kinds of alcoholic drinks and sodas. Each table had two ashtrays, filled with ash, cigarettebutts, chewing gum and the likes. The glasses were wet on the outside and the beer and wine inside was perfectly clear. Staring at it, Amelia saw her glass of wine as one perfect entity in this world. She saw the beauty in it, the elegant drop of moisture running down the side of the glass, the perfectly clear color of the wine. This combined with the flickering of several candles standing on different tables made the wine sparkle.

"She isn't coming." Naota sighed as he sat down at the table.

"What?"

"Yeah, Sarah said she couldn't come, she needed to look after Eli."

"Come on, can't she put him in bed or drop him off with th' neighbors." Amelia protested, wanting to have a drink with the wife of her best friend.

"We don't get along with our neighbors and leaving him alone at night ... I don't know."

"Well, if ye 'n' her ever want to go out, ye can drop Eli off at mah place. Ah will look after him with pleasure." Amelia smiled and winked at him, "Even a married couple with a bairn can use some private time."

"Bairn?"

"A kid."

"Ah, I see. Well, thanks for the offer, I might take you up on that." Naota smiled and placed a hand on Amelia's hand.

"That's th' least ah can do for mah friend."

Naota felt the alcohol pressing in his bladder and stood up to go to the toilet. The smell was truly nauseating. The smell of the toilets was a mix of sweat, shit, pee, puke, the true smell of the everyday drunkenness of frustrated workers. Naota was not that type of worker, he had never been drunk in his life, tipsy at the most. But he didn't have any problem with people who did get drunk, after all, everyone had a way of coping with the everyday drag of life. Naota's way of coping with the stress at work was mainly Amelia, after work it was mainly his wife and kid. As Naota was peeing, he was looking at the wall only fifteen centimeters removed from his face. Absentmindedly, he was staring at the poster hanging above the urinal, a poster for some meaningless cultural festival. That was the kind of festival that served as an excuse for people to get drunk, the meaning of it having been lost ages ago.

After quickly having washed his hands, he went to the bar to buy another bottle of wine before returning to the table. Amelia was swirling her wine and stared with a strange smile at the television on the wall, her hazel brown eyes seemed tired.

"What a wonderful world we live in, don't ye think?" Amelia said sarcastically and pointed with her glass at the television screens.

"By the spirits, what now?" Naota sighed and turned his attention to the television.

"Tensions are rising again in the discussion of the ownership of Roseti III, better known as Bellator, the third moon of Roseti." The news anchor said, "Several of the major countries in the world claimed primary ownership, but it seems the Western Unified Nations and the Joined Central Government each are uniting the opinions of their countries and are now both separately claiming ownership of Bellator. The leaders of the JCG decided not to let the WUN steal away their rightful claim to settle on the moon and mine

it. While unjust, the WUN won't relinquish their claim and are threatening with sanctions against the JCG."

"Can ye bloody believe that?" Amelia yelled and emptied her glass of wine, "They are making problems over some moon around a planet millions o' kilometers away. They have enough problems in their own backyard, not just we, th' JCG, but also th' WUN."

"Raise your voice enough while you are talking bad about the JCG and you'll end up with one hell of a fine for talking slander about the JCG. Then you'll really be in trouble." Naota said, "Oh, and you just happened to be of WUN origin, a fine would be the least of your problems."

"What do ye mean?"

"Come on, you know that everyone arrested for slander against the government is put on a list and ... well you get my point. People like you are worse off."

"You're paranoid."

"Amy darling, I know I'm paranoid, but I'm also right. The world isn't a pink ball of fluff, it's fucked up." Naota smiled, "Oh well, you know the stories, the government doesn't care about the little people ... and so on and so forth."

Naota couldn't help but smile at the face Amelia was making.

"So ... do you have a boyfriend yet?" Naota asked and scooted a bit closer to Amelia.

"One moment ye talk about corrupt governments, th' next moment ye ask if Ah have a bloke yet."

"So, do you have one yet?"

Amelia laughed loudly and put her arm around Naota.

"Ah have ye."

"Yeah sure, tell that to Sarah, she'll love it." Naota laughed.

Amelia was wasted, asleep, sitting on Naota's scooter, head resting on the handlebars, snoring slightly, while Naota was pushing it along. There was something endearing about seeing Amelia like that. Their relationship was one of tight friends. Naota knew Amelia's comment from earlier had been a joke. She didn't mean it in a romantic way, but as a close and trusted friend. They had known each other for only a year, but their relationship felt rock solid, from both sides.

Amelia's pale skin felt icy cold, and a trickle of drool was running down her cheek. With her hair in a jumble and her feet dragging along the street, every single person who passed them on the streets knew she was heavily drunk. Every time a police droid passed them, or a drone flew over, Naota's heart would stop in fear that they would fine them. According to the letter of the law, being drunken outside wasn't illegal. But many droids gave drunken people fines for disturbing the peace. Trouble with the police wasn't something Naota wanted at that moment.

After laying Amelia down on the sofa and placing a blanket over her, Naota went to bed and pulled Sarah as close as possible. He didn't feel frustration in the slightest about having to take care of Amelia, having to take her home. As he thought about it, that was all his life was, Sarah, Eli and Amelia. Unlike Amelia, there was no way for Naota to change the direction in life. So, if he had to take care of Amelia once in a while, he did it with pleasure. Right there, his whole life was contained in that small, crummy house. A distant moon of some distant planet, global politics, the welfare of the JCG, it was all meaningless to him. His whole life was these three people.

Sarah smiled and crouched down next to the old leather sofa in which Amelia was still sleeping, drooling slightly on the pillow. She pulled the blanket covering her a bit higher and rubbed several of the red hair strands behind her ear.

"What's she doing here?" Sarah asked as she stood up again, still staring at the sleeping Amelia.

"She got drunk, I had to take care of her and since bringing her to her apartment would take a bit too long, I brought her here."

"Naota, come on, I don't mind you bringing her here, she's a good friend after all. But you shouldn't let her get drunk for two simple reasons." Sarah said, "For one, neither she nor we can afford to get fined, and there is also the fact that it's not healthy."

"Come on, don't complain. It's not like she gets drunk every day."

"I know, I know, but my point still stands."

"AUNTY AMY!!" Eli yelled as he ran in.

With a lot of enthusiasm, Eli jumped on the sofa on top of Amelia. She let out a loud moan and with a lot of effort, opened an eye.

"Oh man, what a way to be woken up." Amelia mumbled and looked at Eli, "Hey champion, what's up?"

"I got a nine on my last test," Eli said, smilingly.

"Only a nine? Come on bairn, ye should go for a ten ... at least." Amelia smiled and started to tickle Eli.

Eli sat down at the kitchen table with his parents while Amelia was taking a shower to freshen up. The bread was stale, and the cheese was borderline moldy, but that was normal for them. That was how it was every day, shitty breakfast with cheap coffee or tea. Naota himself preferred tea and Eli would drink milk, Sarah from her part didn't care what she drank in the morning.

"Oh laddie, A'm feelin' peely-wally," Amelia said as she sat down at the small kitchen table.

"I wonder why," Naota said sarcastically.

"I like Aunty Amy's funny talking." Eli laughed.

"Naota, you're taking care of Eli today and tomorrow, right?" Sarah asked carefully, staring down at the bread on her plate.

"I remember, don't worry. So, Eli, what do you want to do?" Naota asked with a big smile.

"OOH, I know, spooks-ville!!" Eli said enthusiastically.

"Spooks-ville? What's that?" Amelia frowned.

"Oh, yeah, he means an abandoned town several kilometers to the south of here." Naota explained it to Amelia, "Hevloski it was called, it's been abandoned for about thirty or forty years."

"O' course, that place, never been there to be honest, only heard th' stories," Amy said as she leaned backwards.

"I think it is fun there, scary, spooky, but fun ... especially at night," Eli said with a big, amused smile, "Aunty Amy, you should come too!"

"I don't think Amelia wants to come with us." Naota smiled and rubbed Eli's head.

"Actually, Ah wouldn't mind, Ah have nothing special to do anyways."

"Sure, it's good for both of you two to spend some time away from this spirit forsaken town," Sarah said and nodded at Amelia.

"Yeah, because Hevloski is such a high-grade town," Naota said sarcastically, "Oh well, it will be nice to be out. I'll start packing. Eli, Amelia, we'll leave by ten."



"OKAY!" Amelia yelled with childlike enthusiasm, "This should be interesting."

The air was cold, close to freezing. The old asphalt was overgrown with stubborn weeds, able to grow in the dead, infertile ground of the decaying old city. All of the trees in the city and around it were dried up and dead. The color of the houses and apartment buildings had faded the city into a sad, pallid painting, with the dominant color being gray. The persistent stench of emptiness and nothingness, the smell of a dead city, weighed heavy.

There were tons of cities like Hevloski over the world. They were cities, which had died out due to people leaving and a lack of funding to sustain it, its factories and its citizens. In the end all that was left in these cities were old people, and when they died, only an abandoned shell was left behind. A city filled with dusty indications of histories and scars of battles long since forgotten.

Naota placed a finger in one of the old bullet holes. The concrete at the inside of the bullet hole seemed to instantly crumble on contact with his skin. The bullet holes of some long passed uprising or rebellion far beyond the memory of any living person who cared, were to be found all over the city. The ground under the soles of Naota's shoes crunched loudly, echoing through the void streets and against the concrete walls. The scratching of the glass shards under his feet gave off a high-pitched crackling sound, giving him goose bumps. The aura of Hevloski weighed heavily on Naota's shoulders, making the large bag he was carrying on his back seem almost too heavy to continue carrying.

"This place ... it ..." Amelia mumbled but couldn't finish her sentence.

"It gets to you, I know," Naota said and smiled sourly.

"Our home is depressing. But this place ... it frightens me." Her voice now showed faint signs of disgust, "Ah don't know why Eli loves comin' 'ere."

"Eli's smart, very smart. He sees everything as we do, but he's also a kid. The things that frighten us, it's that fear which actually thrills kids. A lot of kids love it, as does Eli. It's only when they grow up, they start to see and understand the bigger picture, the truth. It's then that the thrill disappears, and nothing but fear is left behind," Naota explained in a dark, matter-of-fact tone as he was staring at Eli, happily running around from door to door.

"Ah see what ye mean, Ah guess yer right." Amelia sighed and shifted her gaze to Eli, "Ye don't mind th' creepiness factor as long as he enjoys himself."

"Something like that, yeah."

"Damn, you are a great father." Amelia smiled and shook her head.

"Maybe you'll be a great mother one day."

"Aye right, first Ah will have to find a bloke who can handle all this" she said and jokingly placed her hands on her hips.

"I see, so you're doomed to live your life by yourself."

"OY!"

Naota was by himself, having left Eli and Amelia so the two of them could look around together. He was walking through the hallway of one of the apartment buildings, his feet dragging over the floor. In many places the wallpaper had come loose, peeling off due to old age and mold. The stench of the mold lingered only faintly in the hallway, but enough to get noticed. One of the doors opened with slight difficulty and a loud creak as he pushed it. A cheap metal bed, covered in dirt, was pushed into the corner of the room. Its mattress had thin white and blue stripes and the white paint of the metal bed frame was peeling off. An old beat-up dresser against the wall looked horrible but had a certain charm to it. At a lot of places, the wooden veneer was peeling off and the metal handles were rusted. As someone who worked constantly with wood, Naota could see the relatively decent quality of the dresser, even if it was only veneer. With his finger he traced the border of the dresser, making some of the wood crumble off. In the corner of the room was a cheap dressing mirror, with the reflection of the mirror being very hazy and dull, several cracks were apparent at the borders. What was left of the curtains was swaying in the icy breeze entering through the shattered window.

When Naota sat down on the bed, it let out a few loud snaps, making him fear he would fall through, but nothing happened. Staring at his own blurry reflection in the mirror, he started to rub his hands through his hair in an attempt to make it nicer. Slowly his gaze shifted from the mirror to a framed picture on a small nightstand next to the bed. The glass cover had long since shattered and the colors of the picture had faded badly, but what was on it was still as clear as day. A young, cute blonde girl with her parents. This

family moment seemed a pleasant one, one small happy element within the dead, gray city. Naota couldn't help but wonder if the smile of that girl endured. Whether she was still alive and happy. If she was, she would be far older than Naota himself, probably twice his age. But if she had survived, the loss of that smile would have been inevitable. Not once in his life had he seen such a pure smile on the face of an adult. Only within a child could such pure happiness exist.

Coming across a bigger room, Naota's legs felt shaky. With the wind passing clean through the room from one side to the other, it was easily as cold as outside. The room was almost completely empty, except for one single upright piano. Of course, it was old and beaten up, but it had a mysterious beauty to it. Slightly scared, he sat down at the piano. Slightly shivering, his index finger and middle finger walked over the keys. Naota could easily tell by the sound the piano was out of tune, but not as much as one would expect after several decades of abandonment. Naota took a deep breath, closed his eyes and let his fingers do the walking.

The sound of soft, painfully sad, jazz piano music started to flow through the ruined apartment building and the city. Even being out of tune, the music somehow sounded perfect. This city, which already came across as depressing and sad, under influence of the jazz sounds, became heart crushingly painful to be in. Even more than before did the city feel like a symbol for how dead the world had become. It wasn't a surprise to Naota religion was more popular than ever, people wanted to get away from the truth and used religion as a form of escapism, believing in the spirits.

The fire was crackling intensely, and the small embers flew all the way to the ceiling of the temple in which they were staying the night. The temple was a normal sized one devoted to Oryuu, the arch spirit. It had enough open space so the smoke of the fire could easily escape. Amelia was lying on her side, staring absentmindedly at the flames. Her loose T-shirt hung to her side, lying on the floor. Her breast was half uncovered, revealing the milky white skin of her medium sized breasts. Naota had noticed it but didn't even think of this as sexy or alluring for the slightest second, even though she was so very gorgeous. Amelia probably knew Naota's attitude about that too, and thus didn't act too uptight about things like that. Comfort came first.

"A'm feeling so empty, 'n' a burning feeling in mah gut makes it feel as if Ah drank acid." Amelia sighed.

Naota looked at Eli, sleeping, his head pressed against Amelia's soft chest.

"I know the feeling, but that's life. We have to march on"

"Ah see." Amelia smiled, "Everything for th' ones ye love, ye simply want to make Eli happy."

"What else do I have to live for than my son?"

Naota had fallen into a semi slumber, occasionally still opening his eyes. But Amelia still couldn't fall asleep. Her body felt weak, and her muscles ached, but somehow, she felt restless. With great care and tenderness, she gave the sleeping Eli a kiss on the forehead. Feeling sadness well up again, she squeezed Eli as tightly as she could against her chest.

As she stood back up, she pulled her T-shirt back straight and covered Eli, who didn't let go of her immediately, with a blanket. Silently she went outside. The outside temperature was quite a bit below freezing, even though it was only autumn. Thin flakes of pure snow were dwindling down, but it was barely enough for it to form a millimeter thick layer of powdery, loose snow. It took her only a minute to start shivering uncontrollably due to the cold, especially because the icy wind passed freely through her loose shirt. Each time she took a breath of air, the freezing cold hurt her lung slightly.

"What to do? Seeing Naota like that, it makes me realize, Ah can't live a life like that. Ah can't keep a tedious life of workin' in that factory up, Ah really need to ... A'm needin' to achieve more. If not for mah sake, for Naota's sake, he's stuck in a life he hates but can't escape," Amelia said and started rubbing her trembling arms, "At least he has his wife 'n' bairn, Ah don't even have those. But Ah do have them. Ah can't even start to imagine being in this world alone. Ah have no one 'ere, no parents, no siblings and no family. Ah need him, Ah have to be with him. Ah need that warmth he can give me, that warmth all three can give. If ah didn't have them ..."

Amelia was squeezing her own arms so badly she almost pierced her skin with her fingernails. She was oblivious to the fact that her body was going numb from the cold, resulting in the seizing of the trembling. What caused her hands to squeeze so hard wasn't the cold, it were the painful emotions welling up in her abdomen which caused the reaction in her hands. The feel-

ing slowly crawled its way up in her belly towards her chest. She could feel her lung struggle to take breath and her heart started to ache intensely. It forced its way up her throat, but it didn't proceed. She was filled with a dark emotion but had no way of letting it out. She had no way of letting it go. How badly Amelia wanted to cry, but she was all cried out. In this somber life, she had no more tears left to shed.

Amelia was sitting on a massive rock in front of Naota's house. Only ten minutes ago, they had returned. Eli was bustling with energy after such a fun, two-day trip. Naota on the other hand had been quiet, always with his mind in a faraway place. Amelia was staring at the occasional bicycle or scooter that passed by. Deep inside her gut she had a sick feeling, a pushing sensation haunted her. She knew she had to do something else than go on trips with Naota and Eli, she had to find a way to find a brighter future, find a better life. She somehow had to achieve the things Naota would never be able to. Ignoring the pulling sensation, she didn't only have a sick sensation in her gut, she had a feeling of disgust about herself. Her own lack of motivation and her laziness made her feel depressed about her own pathetic being.

Without saying anything to Naota or Eli and without saying a quick hello to Sarah, she started walking. Dragging her feet along, they made a grinding noise against the crushed asphalt. Even thinking about having to work in the factory again the next day gave her an additional mental beating. But she didn't care anymore, however it was, she didn't really care anymore. She would simply drag herself forward. She had decided on a new future.

While Eli was running energetically around the house, Naota was sitting on the couch tiredly staring at another news report. Everything was going to hell in the world, but Naota didn't care, as long as he could live his life in peace with his family.

"The leaders of the Westerns Unified Nations are keeping up their illegitimate claim of Bellator and as a result they are massing their troops at the borders, hoping a show of force would impress the Joined Central government." The news anchor said, "But our leaders have stated they are not intimidated by the tough attitude of the WUN and are not planning to let Bellator fall unfairly into their hands. While our leaders are still looking for a diplomatic solution, the WUN keeps up the aggressive attitude."

"That's some bullshit." Naota whispered with eyes half closed, "As if we have more right to that stupid moon than they do."

"Not only that, but I also don't think they are actually looking for a peaceful solution. Our side is definitely massing their armies too," Sarah said as she sat down next to Naota, "How are you feeling?"

"Tired and depressed," Naota said.

"Where's Amelia? I expected her to come inside and have a drink."

"She left; I think Hevloski was a bit too much for her."

"I can imagine."

The next day, both Naota and Amelia were very quiet, barely saying anything. When they did speak, it felt empty, no words of kindness or support towards each other gave them energy and motivation. This continued for the whole day, it was when they were finishing their second wooden chair of the day that Amelia suddenly started to talk in a surprisingly energetic tone.

"A'm gonna do it!!" She suddenly said, "A'm going to borrow money and take my chances by going to university. Ah will make something of my life, Ah swear."

Naota smiled as he placed a hand on her cheek and caressed her soft skin with his thumb. The feeling he had was one of pride, the pride he felt for her was as big as the pride he often felt for Eli when he did something impressive.

"I'm so proud of you." Naota smiled as he ran his hand through her hair, "I was afraid you had given up and after you looked so depressed when we returned from Hevloski yesterday ..."

"Aye well, it came as a shock, but it did put things in perspective."

"Well, just be careful who you loan money from, you know how nasty some loan services are."

"Ah know Ah know, but if Ah would want to make something of mah life, Ah have to take a risk."

"Now that is true." Naota said energetically, "Why don't you come home with me after work. We'll drink something on your decision, this time together with Sarah of course."

"O' course o' course."

In the end, their working day ended with a relative smile. As the two of them arrived back at Naota's home, he instantly froze as his eyes met Sarah's tearful eyes, both of their smiling faces dissipated.

"Sarah sweetie, what's the matter?" Naota asked, feeling fear instantly enter his heart, "Did something happen? Is Eli okay?"

Sarah didn't speak, no, she simply handed a letter she was holding over to him. Naota's heart sank all the way into his shoes.

"Dear Naota Dante, I am honored to inform you that you have been conscripted into the glorious JCG army. You will be picked up by an army bus and transported to a training facility where you will receive a two-month speed training. Rejoice in the honor to represent your country in the JCG army against our foul enemies. Sincerely, JCG military division."

Naota was speechless. He couldn't believe his tedious and boring life would come to an end like that. It was overly obvious to Naota that the peaceful attitude of the JCG in the media was nothing but a smokescreen. Even before the war started, they were conscripting normal citizens, let alone preparing their normal armies.

Without saying a single word, Amelia dashed off. At first Naota didn't understand her extreme reaction, but then he realized why she ran off. As a foreigner, Amelia was someone who was on the top of the list to be chosen as conscript. Naota looked over to Sarah with a worried face.

"Go, go after her, see if she was conscripted too, I'll break the news to Eli ... somehow," she sighed.

## CHAPTER TWO

### This New Life

Carrying a duffel bag filled with clothing, he got off the bus at the training center, Amelia right behind him. The uncertainty of what would come next haunted his mind. When a hand grabbed his upper arm, he felt uncertain and confused, but smiled when he saw the hand belonged to Amelia.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"A'm sorry, A'm just ... afraid."

"I know what you mean. I don't like this either."



"Good thing we still have each other."

The training complex they were brought to was huge, Naota guessed there must have been thousands of conscripts present. His gaze shifted towards the main building and the Joined Central Government flag on top of it, a white flag with a black lotus on it.

Naota, Amelia and the other new conscripts were led to a wide and open space. With soldiers marching and training everywhere, this was the perfect location to address new conscripts for the first time.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" the drill sergeant yelled out in a forceful voice, "Over the next two months you will be whipped into shape. At the same time, you will also be schooled in the use of the most modern equipment, basic tactics, first aid, transmission codes, survival training, and the enemy's common tactics and equipment."

"Well, that's a great sign, calling th' WUN th' enemy. Talk about looking for an enemy," Amelia said with a sigh.

The drill sergeant came walking up to Amelia.

"ALSO!! In the JCG army, we speak PROPERLY, no banana talk." He yelled, his face blood red as if it were to explode at any moment.

"Banana talk?" Amelia said with one eyebrow raised.

"YES! The key to a clear transmission in combat is proper speech."

"Oh boy, she's screwed." Naota mumbled between his teeth.

"You will all report to the barber. The hair of the men will be shortened to ten centimeters and has to be laid back properly. The women's hair has to be shortened to jaw length. After that you will receive your training uniform and go to the barracks. Your training will start early tomorrow morning."

With an unhappy face, Naota touched his new properly laid back, sleek hair. But Amelia was even unhappier, her once long and fluffy hair was now flat and not even shoulder length anymore.

"A'm feelin' dowie." She sighed.

"Hey Amy, you heard the man, you have to speak properly." Naota said, trying to bring a smile to Amelia's lips.

"Sorry dear sir. I meant, I feel sad," Amelia said as she over pronounced each word.

"Well, at least we're both sleeping on the top beds of the bunk beds standing next to each other, makes it easier to speak with each other. It'll be like at camp back in primary school."

"Aye, that's true." She laughed, almost giggling like a little girl.

"Amy," Naota said with a sudden flare of serious emotions.

"Aye?"

"I've never seen Eli cry that much. He was really upset."

"He lost his father, he's afraid he might ne'er see ye again. He's smart, he knows what it means to be conscripted."

"Yeah, but he also lost you, that's two people he cares about at once."

"Let's just hope Sarah doesn't get called in either. She's medical staff, if war breaks out, she might be called upon."

Naota was sitting with his legs crossed on his bed, calmly flipping through the huge textbook filled with all the information he would be learning over the following weeks. Battle armors, assault rifles with rail gun technology, plasma cannons, military tactics, first aid, plasma shielding, protocols, every single bit of information an average soldier would need to perform his or her duties was present in that textbook.

"This tech we will be using is so amazing." Naota sighed as a smile appeared on his face, "This for example. Plasma shielding, present in most tanks. A thin layer of plasma suspended in a magnetic field. How do they come up with this shit?"

"These full body battle suits seem cool. It says 'ere they can even be used in th' vacuum of space, but only for short periods of time," Amelia said. "Crazy."

The morning was still very young when a sleepy Amelia and Naota were woken up to start their training. With a thick layer of fog covering the training grounds and an icy cold freezing the tips of their fingers and toes, all the conscripts were awake in mere moments.

"After some morning practice to wake up, you will start your vigorous physical training until noon. After a short lunch break, you will go to the classrooms where you will start your lessons on everything you will need to know. That will be until dinner is ready. After that you will be free to review