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**When Tomorrow Comes**

Dull beams of sunlight filtered through the dusty shades that covered the kitchen windows. Due to the mildly cold temperatures and slight humidity, the windows were partially fogged up. However, one could still get a good look of the landscape by getting close to the glass and peering out.

The environment outside looked quite miserable. It was one of those days with scattered clouds and persistent light rain. Dust and dried leaves flew in circular patterns, agitated by the cold wind. The patches of dried grass growing on the cracked dirt ground appeared unsaturated in color. Built on the uneven ground, clusters of old looking homes were situated in a scattered manner. A few withered trees that surrounded a dried pond cast gloomy shadows across the swampy land.

Ellary Porterfield, a slender teen with dirty blonde, shoulder length hair, sat perched against the chilly glass, listlessly staring off into the distance with her blue eyes. Her breath added fog to the windows which glowed white from the reflection of her wool sweater. The interior of the aging home was considerably warmer than the outside; the glass windows providing a protective barrier for Ellary from the distant world beyond the four walls.

Quite suddenly, large beams of sunlight broke through the clouds and cast a glowing circle on Ellary’s neighborhood. The bright sunlight brought a revitalizing glow to the previously depressing scenery. Excited, Ellary awoke from her quite daze and dashed towards the dining table.

The table was occupied only by Jimmy, Ellary’s childhood friend, who was sprawled out, quietly dozing. His navy blue flannel shirt loosely defined his hunched outline as he leaned over the table, napping. Ellary’s excited kick sent Jimmy flying onto the table as his eyes opened in surprise. The chairs that he had been sitting on fell to the floor with a resounding boom.

“Let’s go!” Ellary exclaimed. “Now’s our chance!” She straightened the chairs and grabbed a brown canvas knapsack. “The sun’s out and the rain’s finally stopped,” Ellary said as she slung the knapsack onto her back and raced out of the dining room.

Jimmy, not quite fully conscious, pulled himself together before downing a half empty mug of coffee that was sitting at the edge of the table. He sluggishly followed Ellary’s lead through the kitchen room and out the front door.

Outside, Ellary shivered from the slight chill as she trudged across the small puddles of rain water in her padded boots. Behind her, Jimmy’s warm breath could be seen in the air. Despite the cold, the two happily basked in the bright sun as they trudged up the hill towards the neighborhood’s orchard.

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The neighborhood was situated on the outskirts of Aggron, the main city. Aggron was the first zone that had been established out of a total of a hundred zones. The zones had been created after an event that had nearly wiped out the human race.

Ellary distinctly remembered her grandfather repeating the story about the Catastrophic Event which had happened about 300 years ago. In the year 105 BCE, Before Catastrophic Event, or 2341 CE (common era), the earth had almost been devastated by a serious of disastrous occurrences. Ellary’s grandfather had recounted tales of a massive droughts, countless diseases, and hundreds of ‘natural’ disasters that had occurred in the course of a few months. It wasn’t too long afterwards that the earth had become nearly uninhabitable. Fortunately, humans had been able to execute a Solar Radiation Management plan at the last moment, in a desperate attempt to save the planet, which prevented the extinction of all life on planet Earth.

Unfortunately, the lack of scientifically sound evidence regarding the effectiveness of Solar Radiation Management had resulted in countless further disasters. Several geo-engineering techniques that had been implemented caused undesirable side effects that resulted in more disasters. Eventually, somehow the humans had been able to find a balance which allowed them to control and prevent the disasters that would follow. A new plan, STEP, for Save The Earth Plan, was established which called for the implementation of many different techniques to reduce global warming and prevent further natural disasters.

A part of STEP was the creation of a hundred zones. The population of Earth at 0 AD, After Disaster, was less than a million. The habitable land was divided equally into a hundred zones and families were randomly assigned to the different areas. However, the creation of the zones had taken the course of roughly a hundred years to complete. As a result Aggron, the first zone to be created, was considered an ‘old’ zone, and was a century behind the newest zone, Milano.

Ellary’s shabby neighborhood and home were a product of the lack of maintenance and care for several decades. With only sixty five people living in the rural neighborhood area, it wasn’t exactly a top priority for the government to provide support to the community. Recently, however, new acid-rain shelters had been constructed as toxic downpour had been becoming more frequent. The local community had also worked together to provide everyone with air-filter masks, for when levels of dangerous particles in the atmosphere became too high.

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Jimmy and Ellary walked past an acid-rain shelter, marked with bright yellow neon lights, and entered the orchards. Their community had attempted to develop a sustainable method for producing food. With such a low population in the neighborhood, it hadn’t seemed like a problem at first. However, producing crops and raising animals in such miserable conditions turned out to be extraordinarily challenging. Every family was expected to farm an acre of land that had been assigned to them. In times of difficulty, the families of the neighborhood shared extra supplies with one another. Yet there were also times when there was simply not enough food to share. Fortunately for Jimmy and Ellary, this year had provided their families with more than enough sustenance to last through the oncoming winter.

“Catch.” Jimmy grabbed a basket from one of the supply shed that stood at the corners of every plot of land and tossed it to Ellary. “If we work quickly, I think we’ll have time to harvest enough to distribute to the others at the neighborhood center.”

Ellary glanced at the slowly setting sun and the looming clouds. “Walking here took half an hour, but it looks like we’ll have another hour before it gets too dark or before the rain comes again.”

“Let’s go then,” Jimmy grinned as he hoisted a small metal ladder onto his shoulder and grabbed another basket. He kicked the supply door shut and began marching down the dusty path.

Together, they trekked to plot 18 and began filling the baskets with vegetables and fruits. They worked quickly, having become efficient from years of practice. Working in silence for the first few minutes, they listened to the whistling wind that blew over their heads.

“Do you think that things will ever be different here?” Ellary paused momentarily in her harvesting work.

“Ellary, we don’t have much time,” Jimmy noted. He looked in Ellary’s direction, “What could possibly change anyways?”

“Right,” Ellary continued. “This year hasn’t been horrible for us – we have enough food, and we haven’t been hit by any freakish disasters. But what about next year, or even next month? How do we know for sure that things will always be the same?” Her voice lowered to a whisper as she tried to imagine the unthinkable. “When will ‘tomorrow’ stop coming?”

Jimmy, without stopping to unearth several clusters of brown potatoes, pondered for a moment. “I don’t think we’ll ever know for sure. But I do hope that we won’t have to live in fear forever. I hope that we’ll always have enough food to live comfortably and that no sudden disaster will come destroy our homes. Anyways, we’ve got the scientists working with the government to develop plans to prevent such things from happening anyways.”

“Remember three years ago? Zone 13 was nearly wiped out because of the aerosols that had been released into the atmosphere! Weird wind patterns had concentrated those chemicals into Zone 13 and they were totally unprepared. Even now, those chemical aerosols are spread to other areas because of changing wind patterns.” Ellary’s look became more concerned as her nose wrinkled in frustration.

“Right,” Jimmy paused, before adding, “And the extinction of nearly all the species of fish due to ocean fertilization. Dumping iron into the ocean seemed like a pretty desperate action. But hey, we’re still alive. All that iron helped our oceans contain a lot more carbon dioxide than it could possibly have without the added chemicals. Without doing that, we might have drowned in carbon dioxide a long time ago. We can’t eat fish anymore, but we have air and we’re not suffocating.”

Ellary looked even more worried. “That’s ridiculous. How many more sacrifices can we keep making before we start harming ourselves? In fact, we’ve already harmed so much life. Soon we’ll all be living just to keep living. What kind of life is that? We’ll all be alone, desperately surviving in this mess that we’ve created.” She sighed, “We might not be suffocating from carbon dioxide, but without freedom, freedom from fear and apprehension, I feel like I’m suffocating anyways.”

Jimmy chuckled, surprised by Ellary’s sudden surge of emotion, “I’m sure it won’t be like this forever. What’s the worst that could happen? Could our Earth be any worse? If you think positively, I believe that we can only improve our planet from this point.” He shifted his feet and looked into Ellary’s eyes. “I think people do realize that they need to discuss the ethics of such methods for protecting the earth before using them to ‘save’ the planet. Otherwise, it’s a downwards spiral. One catastrophe leads to another.” Jimmy did a tiny spin, as if to physically illustrate the spiral he had just mentioned.

If the conversation’s topic hadn’t been so depressing, Ellary would have laughed at Jimmy’s dance. Instead, she looked at him sadly. “But that’s the problem we had around 200 BCE! Haven’t you heard the stories? People could never agree! The ethics around Solar Radiation Management were too complex and nothing ever got done until the last moment!” Ellary exclaimed. “And our last minute efforts were just barely enough to prevent human extinction, but not enough to avoid extinction of countless species on earth!”

Jimmy’s extended silence startled Ellary. Glancing up, she saw Jimmy staring blankly at the barren mountains in the distance. His look of concern caused Ellary to shudder slightly. “There’s a large dust storm of some sort headed towards us from the mountains. It doesn’t look like it’s moving too fast.” Jimmy motioned for Ellary to look in the same direction.

Standing up, Ellary could finally see what had attracted Jimmy’s attention. An immense expanse of land was obscured by dark particles that swirled in a turbulent manner. The mountain range that stretched across the eastern border of the zone was nearly completely obscured by the clouds of dust and chemicals. Brief flashes of lightning flickered across the dark mass accompanied by resonating booms of thunder. Gloomy shadows cast by the dark clouds hid the land beneath and seemed to swallow the entire ground into a dark endless void.

“Let’s clean up for the day then,” Ellary sighed. She tied her basket shut and gathered the tools she had brought. But before she could finish, Jimmy grabbed her hand tightly. Ellary could feel his warm hand slightly shuddering from the cold and from the fright.

“Wait, this isn’t something we’ve seen before. What if, in the end, it’s actually a massive disaster. We’ll need more food than this to sustain us for a while. I think if we harvest for a little longer, we can still make it back in time.” Jimmy continued his work with renewed energy, doubling his initial pace. Jimmy’s stern expression conveyed a mixture of fear and anxiety.

Ellary reluctantly followed Jimmy’s lead and continued her work. As they resumed their work in silence they could hear the fluctuating pitch of the howling wind that began to roar above them. The chilly air became even colder and Ellary felt her fingers gradually growing numb. Suddenly, the sky darkened as the sun beams that had shone upon the neighborhood vanished behind the scattered clouds. In the distance, a resounding siren began to wail, the warning echoing across the entire landscape. The clouds began to cluster together into larger clumps of darkness.

“Rain in ten minutes! That’s the alarm Jimmy!” Ellary scrambled to finish packing the remaining food she had grabbed. “We’ve got to go now!” She grabbed her knapsack and tugged at Jimmy’s sleeve.

“Alright.” Equally panicked, Jimmy jumped off the small ladder he had been standing on and covered his basket. He covered his basket, grabbed his ladder, and burst into a sprint.

Together, they dashed towards the supply shed and threw in the metal ladder which landed with a loud clatter. Jimmy clutched Ellary’s hand as they resumed their hurried pace. The darkness seemed to spread across the ground like flowing liquid, chasing them towards the neighborhood’s center. The looming clouds had extinguished almost all light from the sun and it was getting harder to see. In the distance, Ellary could spot the emergency lights in the neighborhood that were automatically turning on. A shrill ringing sound could be heard from the neighborhood center.

“We won’t make it Ellary! Let’s camp out in the acid-rain shelter! The rain’s going to hit in another minute!” Jimmy’s face had become incredibly frightful.

Ellary, mute from the initial shock, continued running. Just then, a massive gust of wind flew past them from the side. Losing her balance, Ellary tripped as her basket of food tumbled over a hill and rolled into the darkness. Jimmy, reacting from instinct, lifted Ellary upright and dove after the basket.

“Go on! I have a light with me, I’ll catch up in a minute!” Jimmy disappeared into the dark, his small flashlight flickering into the distance.

Ellary, incapable of responding, grabbed Jimmy’s basket and headed towards the glowing, neon shelter which was lit by bright LED lights. Her pace had become a sluggish limp due to her twisted ankle from the fall. Ignoring the pain, she stumbled forward, leaning against the strengthening wind. Just as she dived into the shelter, heavy rain began to splash the ground. Ellary, quickly shut the door to the shelter, and sank to the floor, breathless. Outside, hissing sounds could be heard as the heavily acidic rain began dissolving the rocks and plants within the ground.

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Ellary awoke in the dark with a beam of light flicking around the corners of the small room. Jimmy’s grinning face suddenly appeared in front of her. The right sleeve of his flannel shirt had been severely torn and his boots seemed to be darkened from acid burns.

“I made it.” He whispered. “I was so lucky that there was another shelter at the bottom of the hill. When the rain stopped, I dashed up here before the dust storm hit. It was a slow trek since there were so many puddles of acid rain. You can hear the storm going on outside right now.” He gently brushed the dust from Ellary’s cheek and clutched her hand tightly.

“Are you alright?” Ellary stared intently at Jimmy’s face. She slowly scanned him over, checking for injuries.

Jimmy shook his head, “I’m alright. Slightly bruised from rolling down that hill, but I avoided anything bad.” He gently held Ellary’s right ankle and noticed her wince from slight pain. “Seems like your ankle was hurt from the fall. But we’ll get it checked out once we get back in the neighborhood.

With tears pouring down her face from relief and exhaustion, Ellary pressed her head against Jimmy and listened to the thunderous pounding of wind and particles against the shelter. The apocalyptic-proof shelter seemed shake and lean in the direction of the wind.

“Thanks for grabbing my basket” Jimmy hugged Ellary. “I realized that I had left it when I dashed off the hill. Fortunately, we’ll have enough to last awhile if this storm continues. But it had better end soon. We need to get some supplies back to the others in the neighborhood.”

Jimmy reached over to pick up Ellary’s knapsack. With a single hand, he untied it and flipped it open. After digging around for a while, Jimmy pulled out a flare gun and two air filter masks. “I can’t believe you remembered these! I actually never imagined that we would ever use them. Now seems like a good time to give them a try.” He slipped one onto Ellary’s face before putting on another onto his own. Jimmy’s brown eyes seemed to glisten, reflecting the light from his flashlight and from the pale LEDs of the shed’s interior.

“Are you crying?” Ellary pulled closer to Jimmy, finally feeling the cold that permeated the inside of the shed. She pulled out the emergency blanket from the shed’s supply kit and wrapped around the both of them.

“Of course not. Aren’t you the one who looks like she’s about to cry?” Jimmy laughed and looked away, blinking intensively.

“Will we be alright?” Ellary whispered as tears finally began to leak down her face. “Will we survive? What’ll happen next?”

“I don’t know,” Jimmy propped himself up against the shelter wall looking back at Ellary. “I guess we’ll have to see when tomorrow comes.”