

Elysium

“He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it.”

- Cormac McCarthy. *The Road*

The world has fallen into an eerie silence and only the Scavengers remain. Esmæ stares out onto the barren lands before her, stomach collapsing and bony rail back to hunch. She wears layers of grey and black sweatshirts, hidden by a dreary long trench coat with only one button remaining to lighten her load when it is time to move on. Dark jeans hide her toffee brown legs, her feet covered with red converse sneakers. The sole of the right shoe is falling off and slaps the ground with every step she takes. Black gloves cover her hands, hiding that she is wasting away underneath. When she dies, all that will remain is a pile of clothes.

Grayson waits a few steps ahead of her. A blue baseball cap covers his unruly red hair which falls upon his cornsilk skin, a knitted red handmade scarf covering his mouth and nose. His hands rest in the pockets of his brown aviator jacket. He shifts his weight from one foot to another, his knee poking through the hole in his jeans at any given moment. Esmæ rubs the bandana pressing her black curly hair closer to her head, covering the hole where her left eye used to sit as she carefully steps towards him. The wind makes the plastic shopping bags on her back rub against each other until their weight is shifted to one side. When she reaches Grayson, he removes his left hand from his pocket and pats her on the head; his blue eyes shut slightly, the only signal to Esmæ that he is smiling.

If someone were to ask her how much time has passed since the atomic bombs known as Daegons hit, she would have to assume a few years. Days are filled with finding food and shelter, not reflecting on things that have already happened. On this fateful day, a black cloud devoured those who were unable to outrun the terrible stench. Flames sowed patterns onto Esmæ's back and arms of the clothes she was wearing that day. Glass fell from the sky like raindrops, shattering when hitting the ground. One oblong shard caught her left eye, leaving it to dangle by her breast. She wandered in search of anyone who had survived the clouds of smoke. The streets were filled with hundreds of people, with contorted faces, crying out for loved ones or for mercy. A mother cradled her tiny baby, desperately trying to feed it but the child no longer received her breast willingly. Upon closer inspection, the baby's eyes were glazed over, lying still in its mothers arms.

Grayson becomes motionless at the top of a hill overlooking the remains of a town. Brick buildings with missing roofs and windows become shelters for human scavengers. Esmæ stands next to him, waiting for his next move. His body jolts as he struggles to hold in a cough. He puts his hand on his scarf and presses it closer to his mouth. When his body stops shaking, he begins to slowly walk towards the hollowed buildings.

Shadows of the dead are splattered on the walls, their ash outlines showing just how unaware they were of the attack. Esmæ approaches a shadow of someone sitting or lying on the steps. Her empty socket becomes irritated as she rubs the bandana again, her left eye weeping for the person that is gone forever.

There were many figures like this when they first started wandering the ruins of their world. Esmæ assumed early on that this was what happened to her family, the ones she would never hear from again. It seemed like the quickest and easiest way to avoid what was left once

everything grew silent. Now the memories of their bodies are scattered amongst different pieces of rubble, shadows of those forever holding a pose in time.

“Stop rubbing it.” Grayson hisses as he walks past her. He boosts his load higher on his shoulder before walking ahead. He peeks through the openings of the buildings in search of anything that might be useful.

“Do you think he’s there?” The footsteps stop as both consider this possibility.

“No, Elysium is a place for the living. Your friend there, he never had a chance.”

Elysium, the place Grayson whispers about under the cover of night. He says there, the trees would reach up to an endless sky of light blue with clouds that separate at a branches request. Birds fly dropping multicolored feathers, letting melodic tunes escape from their beaks. The water is clear enough to see the fish’s scales glisten as they are able to return to a world untouched by the Daegon bombs. A place where communities are built and everyone recognizes their neighbor as human and not some creature created when the fires finished destroying everything they touched, and the ashes ceased to fall.

Esmæ sits next to the shadow, her legs too weak to carry her any further. Her breathing has become labored and heavy as she lowers her shopping bags to the ground. The world around her begins to dance in waves as she sways in her seat to the movement of a soundless song. Something moves, pink ears peek from behind a wall across from her followed by a white face with red eyes. Esmæ tilts her head slowly in curiosity, the possum mimics her movements. She hears Grayson approaching, but her stomach yearns for the possum.

“Should we try it?” He lowers himself by her side, pulling a knife from his pocket. He watches the possum intently, his pupils narrow on the target. The possum shifts its gaze to him and sniffs the air.

“No,” she whispers. “Possums aren’t supposed to be out in the day time.” Esmæ gathers her bags once more and forces herself to stand, putting her hand on the shadow. She wipes the ashy remains on her trench coat before stepping over Grayson.

A loud shriek fills the air. Esmæ’s eyes widen with surprise as a man jumps from above the possum, grabbing it in his dirt-covered hands. The possum squirms, agitated, whipping its naked pink tail around the man’s wrist. Grayson puts his arm in front of Esmæ watching the scene quietly. He keeps the knife hidden away in his pocket but never releases his grip. Any sudden movements would draw the man’s attention away from its prey. The man struggling with the possum has old and new scratch marks covering his face. Only a strand of dirty blonde hair remains on his head as he grasps the neck of the possum within his palm.

Finally, he makes eye contact with Esmæ and Grayson, the animal’s body squirming in an attempt to break free. Drool drips from the corner of his mouth as he lets out a low grunting sound. The possum’s body surrenders; the man standing in front of them licks his lips and mumbles something under his breath. He is one of the Rabid, someone who feeds off the omnivores that have managed to survive; not caring about the diseases they may carry.

Esmæ carefully makes her way towards the exit of the ruins, Grayson trailing behind. They can hear the man beating the possum against the building, trying to break its bones. Esmæ cannot help but look back once more at the man drooling in anticipation of his next meal. He sniffs the animal, now flat and hardly recognizable, before biting into it. She can see its fur stand before being separated from its body. He spits out the fur before biting again, this time struggling for a moment to sink his teeth beyond the fur of the possum, before ripping away at its flesh.

The barren land once again stretches ahead of them as Grayson holds his scarf to his lips. The bags under his eyes grow darker with each passing day and his refusal to sleep is beginning

to wear on his body. Sleep has become his only vice in this world, something he has problems adapting to. He tells her that, when he sleeps, his nightmares remind him of those he could not save. The ones he passed as they reached out for help. The person he is now cannot accept the person he once was, and he must forever stay awake in this world.

When she first met him, his face was fuller, his eyes were brighter, and he was not so dependent on that poorly made scarf. He was one of the few still able to walk, who did not seem affected by the explosion although he had been cut deeply on the back of his leg by a stray piece of glass. He used this shard to cut off her eye ball so that it would no longer dangle down her chest. It landed on the ground, the brown iris staring up at both of them. They did not share stories that night, talking about family members that had probably been swept away in the flames would only encourage them to accept death. Instead, they enjoyed each other's company until sleep took control of them.

Her body quaked, his hands on her shoulders. Corpses strewed the ground around them, some whose eyes stared up at a darkened sky. As they stumbled past them, heavy hands and limp legs tripping them, it was the first time they exchanged names. He muttered his under his breath. She shouted hers, listening to the echo. She wanted someone else to answer, to interrupt the silence. When no one returned her call, he offered her the opportunity to travel with him. When she asked where he was going, he smiled and uttered the word, Elysium.

Grayson stops and waits for Esmæ to catch up. In the distance on the side of the road, a large white cross lies on its side. Esmæ steps off the road, drawing closer to the symbol of God, waiting to hear a reply as to what has happened. A small figure lies beside it, a skeleton picked clean. An arm is missing, a hole through the side of the skull. Grayson appears next to her, kicking the skeleton's heel to the side, breaking the brittle bone.

“There is nothing here for us, Esmæ.” She feels his eyes on her but she wants to stay, to ask the man why he chose to die here. She looks up to the part of the cross that must have stood proudly on the top of a church, marvels at how far it has fallen in the eyes of God.

“You shouldn’t kick him. It’s disrespectful.” Esmæ leans down and puts the leg back in place as best she can. The sight of bare bones is something she has become accustomed to in this new world. Grayson laughs behind her, as small pebbles hit against her foot. As she stands, Grayson has already returned to the main road.

“If you wish to join him, do so. Killing yourself beside a cross does not mean,” he pauses before raising his finger to the sky. His hand is shaking as he looks at the tip of his finger but no higher. “That he will want you.” He continues walking, barely picking up his feet.

Esmæ puts her gloved hand on the skeleton’s hand. It almost moves, lifting its head and smiling towards her, thanking her for her kindness. She steps away, shaking her head before eyeing Grayson. He is dragging his feet, she knows he is waiting for her but would never admit it. They are partners; to suggest anything else would give false hope to a future that no longer exists.

“There.” Grayson drops his bags and steadily walks towards an abandoned cart. On both sides of the road trying to discover what has happened to its owner as Grayson runs his fingers along the green plastic. He gives it a gentle push; the wheels turn making the cart move forward smoothly. He claps his hands together and pushes the cart towards Esmæ and their cargo. “It’s a sign,” he says between laughs as he picks up his share of bags throwing them into the cart. Esmæ removes her bags from her shoulder and places them on top of his. Her feet leave the ground as her arms flail, grasping around Grayson’s neck as he lowers her into the cart.

“What are you doing?” She grabs the sides, her weight squishing the bags beneath her. Grayson wraps his fingers around the handle and lowers his scarf from his mouth. Red hairs outline his chin and jaw, his lips curving up giving way to his excitement. He pushes off with his foot as the cart carries them forward.

The air feels enchanting as it moves along Esmæ’s cheeks. The tails of her trench coat billow and sway in the wind. She takes off her gloves and lifts her hands in the air, trying to capture the breeze. The red scarf becomes entangled within her fingertips, the strings tickling her palm. Grayson looks down at her with his soft blue eyes. One hand is keeping his cap from flying off his head, the other firmly gripping the bar. For the first time the world around them does not feel abandoned. They are moving faster than ever before, breathing in air again as it tickles their nose. After lowering Grayson’s scarf into the cart, Esmæ imagines trees once again covering the land on either side. It should be fall, the leaves orange and quickly flying out of their way. People peek from behind them, enjoying the sight of someone finally experiencing joy. They have arrived, or produced it by riding on this cart they found. The people extend their hands; birds fly overhead as insects hum from their hiding spots in the grass, all welcoming them to Elysium.

“You all look like you having some fun there.” The breeze stops, the trees disappear taking the leaves with them. The people cower behind the trees before fading away. The birds fall from the sky, diminishing before hitting the grass that turns back to pavement, the insects resuming their original forms of pebbles. An elderly man with a wrinkled forehead and strings of white hair bursting from his head lies amongst a heap of black trash bags. He wears a thin green jacket, his legs are bare and black boots cover his feet, the laces loose and dangling carelessly from the sides.

“Have anything to trade old man?” Grayson walks past him and starts opening the man’s bags behind him. Esmæ carefully lowers herself from the cart and touches Grayson’s scarf. A darker shade of red appears in spots where she assumes his mouth would be if he were wearing it. He searches each bag carefully, the old man lying there smiling.

“What’s mine be mine, boy.” He shifts, struggling to tuck the boots under his body but Grayson has already seen them. The same hunger appears in his eyes just like before, when he saw the possum earlier. The man nervously shifts amongst his bags, the coat moving with him revealing tattered cloth he has used to wrap himself in, forming a cocoon. “You all sweet on each other?”

“No, sir,” Esmæ answers quickly noticing Grayson beginning to blush. He avoids eye contact with her by splitting open the trash bags, letting their contents spill out onto the ground. He picks up a pair of sneakers, eyeing her feet before tying the laces together and swinging them over his shoulder. He kneels down behind the heap; the sound of him rummaging through the man’s things is broken up by the sound of his coughs.

“Bullshit.” For the first time, the old man leans forward and looks Esmæ in the eye. His gaze is serious, his mouth tight as he bites down on his teeth. The old man snorts, gurgles something deep within his throat before spitting up a green lump only inches away from Esmæ’s feet. He chuckles causing Esmæ to feel uneasy as Grayson emerges from the pile of bags. While the old man laughs, Grayson kneels by him, reaching out for one of the black boots. The old man squirms, attempting to put his weight on the boots. As Grayson tries to reach under him, the man nips at him, his only form of defense. His arms are bound close to his body, he no longer has the strength to kick out and do any real harm to the enemy in front of him. His breathes become harsher with every jolt until he rests his head on a trash bag behind him.

“You don’t move much, do you?” A smirk appears on Grayson’s face as the elder before him shrinks further into a heap of trash bags.

“Gray, don’t.” She steps forward, but Grayson has already removed the first boot and starts working on the other. She sees the old man squirming, struggling to hold on to what might be the only nice thing he has left. Grayson throws the new sneakers towards Esmae before sitting beside the collector, untying the boots that are two sizes too small for him. She stares at the new shoes, bends to pick them up and puts them in the cart. Something about putting the man’s shoes on in front of him does not sit right with her, let alone leaving her old tattered shoes in their place.

“Fuck you,” the old man hisses under his breath. “Fuck you and all like ya.”

Grayson lets out a low sigh before reaching into the pocket of his aviator jacket. Sometimes while traveling, they would play a game in which Grayson would pull out different objects from his pocket and have Esmae guess what they were. This time, the object is already sticking out. A black grip with a silver top extension emerges from his pocket. His pointer finger coils around the black lever located within the silver ring. His eyes become lazy, eyelids half open, the gun pointed at the man that has irritated him. This is the look of remembrance; the cursing from the old man must have triggered a past memory within Grayson.

She treads towards him cautiously; the sight of the old man shaking, lifting his hands in surrender irritates her eye. Grayson remains perfectly still as she leans towards him, cupping his face in her hands and pressing her forehead to his. The cap moves slightly back against his head, the only movement, while squeals emit from the old man.

“Come back,” she says, half humming to him. His hand shakes, head shifting in her palms. She tries to remain calm, refusing to let him know how afraid she is of him at this

moment. The knowledge of not knowing whether the weapon in his hand is loaded or not, ready to fire, keeps her on edge.

“We must survive.” He tries to turn a cold gaze towards his victim, but Esmæ makes sure his eyes remain on her.

“We will. We are going to Elysium, remember?” She smiles and removes her left hand from his cheek, touching his arm gently to lower the weapon. Pressing down, she meets resistance as Grayson’s breaths become harsher. Taking away the pressure causes his panic to fade. When he seems calm, she adds pressure to his arm. The gun lowers, finding its way back into the pocket of Grayson’s aviator jacket. Grayson changes his shoes, the old man remaining silent, settling back into his heap of things, disappearing underneath his jacket.

Esmæ takes the lead, unsure if Grayson would like her to walk with him or not. Coughs erupt from behind her, not dry heaves like the old man let out but hoarse sounds followed by the rattling of metal. Esmæ turns to see Grayson fall, the cart moving forward on its own. She stops the cart from the front before running around it. Dots of blood are on the ground as Grayson lowers his head further. She kneels beside him and touches his jacket, trying to reach his shoulder to comfort him. Yet, underneath all the layers she cannot reach him.

“My scarf.” He pants and Esmæ takes it from the cart and lowers it to him. He quickly seizes it, turns his head and spits before wrapping it around his mouth and nose. Eventually, he is able to stand with the support of the carts handle. Helplessly, she watches him struggle to continue and is reminded of her own hunger. Her gloves removed, she holds her hands up to the sky. Immediately, they start shaking, her bones outlined by a thin layer of skin. She is embarrassed, not by the dirt that is underneath her nails but by the thought of wanting to see if

any crumbs have made their way into their crevices. The moaning of the cart draws her attention away from her hands as Grayson pushes onward.

“Gray...”

He does not answer, he does not look back. He keeps moving and she has no choice but to follow. Even though she worries about his health, she realizes that her wellbeing is only guarded behind the layers she wears. When they cross into Elysium, stepping on grass that will cushion their feet, their bodies will be restored, no longer scavengers but healthy individuals who may not recognize each other with fatty skin outlining the bones they have grown so accustomed to.

They pass another set of ruins; these have managed to remain higher than the previous ones. Grayson turns the cart off the road, nodding to Esmæ to go ahead. She steps carefully, listening for any signs of movement. The sound of plastic bags rubbing against each other, the wheels grinding against the dirt and Grayson pulling the cart to try and steady its movement are very distracting. She wanders farther away from him in hopes of finding a place of quiet. She walks into a clearing, probably a main street when the ruin was actually a city and sees something glistening in the sunlight. A can, unopened is sitting among the abandoned buildings. Her stomach emits a growl causing her to hunch again as her dry tongue licks her lips.

She pushes her way towards the can, wondering what is inside. Preserved fruit, beans or mixed vegetables? The thought of which makes her more determined. Her thoughts are interrupted when the ground beneath her dissolves. Esmæ screams for Grayson as she grabs the edge, her body hits the sides of the pit trap. Beneath her are shards of broken glass and knives standing on end, the hunter making sure that his prey would meet their demise upon falling to the bottom. When she hears nothing, she screams for Grayson again. The metal wheels of the cart do

not press against the ground beneath them; the bags do not rustle together in a hurried breeze. Her fingers shake under the pressure of keeping her alive, her feet press against the wall but the loose rubber sole of her shoe bends under, the fabric wiping against the dirt. Esmæ looks down at the glass and knives below her as one arm falls limp by her side. Tears fall from her right eye as she feels her hand release the edge of the trap.

Something constricts around her wrist, keeping her suspended from death. It appears as if the arm is coming out of nowhere. Esmæ is hoisted out of the hole and laid out on the dirt. She no longer has the strength to move, the layers she wears hold her captive to the dirt underneath her. The hand returns, moving in front of her eyes. The thumb and the middle finger press together, imitating a quick ringing sound to try and draw her attention. She gives out a low moan to let the hand know she is alive. The figure watches something in the distance; gestures towards her while muttering words that seem to be carefully blended together. Something clicks, dirt flies from the ground as the figure squirms and flails about and screams something before silence falls. A shoulder bends her in half; heels trade places as she is carried off. There is nothing she can do; there is nothing she wants to do. She prefers to dangle as dead weight.

Esmæ awakens on a newspaper bed on the second story of an almost entirely collapsed house. Through the wrecked roof she sees the sun setting in the distance, a reminder of another day without a meal. Her trench coat and shoes are gone, her toes, accented by their black nails, wiggle enjoying their new freedom. She hears footsteps from below and tries to move, pressing her palms against the floor. Her legs shake violently as they collapse and lower her to the floor with a thud. The footsteps become faster as a man appears in the doorway. His black beard and mustache are speckled with touches of grey, matching the hair that flows past his ears. He is wearing a black suit jacket with a white button-up shirt, sweat stains leaving yellow outlines

under his arms. The pants match the jacket; his feet are bare as he steps towards Esmae. When she flinches away, he stops immediately.

“No need to be afraid.” Even though he says this reassuringly, his face remains cold and distant.

“Who are you?” Esmae moves away from him, avoiding the end of the ledge.

“Breeder’s my name.” He extends a dry hand towards Esmae who raises an eyebrow towards him. “I’m the man who saved you from that pit trap.” He scratches the back of his head and begins to pace within the room. “Of course, you wouldn’t have fallen in if I hadn’t set the trap. Then again, I didn’t think a human would try and go after a can of beets.” Breeder lets out a faint laugh while Esmae looks towards the edge of the house. If she were to roll and fall, it would still look like an accident.

Footsteps are followed by hushed whispering in the hallway. Breeder moves to the doorway and looks out, caresses his beard before stepping aside. Grayson stumbles in, holding Esmae’s trench coat under his arm. He has removed many of his layers with the exception of his hat and scarf, on his feet are the black boots, the laces tied in a bow. He walks towards her and kneels down on her makeshift bed.

“You alright?” His blue eyes search hers for an answer. When she nods, his arms fling around her and pull her to his chest. It is the first time her ear has been so close to his body.

“Why didn’t you come?” she asks after hearing Breeder leaving the room.

“I did, even shot at him.” He motions towards Breeder who rolls his eyes and shrugs. She feels his arms loosen around her, allowing space for the support of the wall. He moves so that he is sitting next to her, their legs pressed together.

“Nearly got my knee.” Breeder pats his knee and smiles nervously. “Had to keep screaming at him till he finally understood, I was there to help.” He has a nervous air about him, constantly observing every inch of the room before stepping out. Esmæ can hear him hesitate before acknowledging another presence within the house.

Grayson lowers his head, pressing his scarf closer to his face. He lets the right boot scratch the top of the left. “I should have snapped back sooner.” He takes her hand in his and squeezes gently. She squeezes back.

Breeder returns with two objects in his hand. He offers them to Grayson and Esmæ, flashing a friendly smile. Grayson cautiously accepts the gift, a browned piece of food that is still warm. As he bites into it, Esmæ waits for his reaction. He nudges her shoulder lightly and she accepts the food from Breeder, taking a small bite. The substance is chewy; giving off a rare flavor Esmæ cannot quite place. She struggles to swallow, the meat still too large therefore, she is forced to cough it up and chew it again.

“What is this?” Grayson asks holding up the brown piece of food. He fondles it in his hands and bends it occasionally.

“This is what we traded for, my friend. Worth all those bags and the cart.” Esmæ chokes on her food. Their clothes and cart are gone for a little piece of meat no bigger than the span of the base of her hand to the tip of her middle finger. “My wives made it themselves.”

“Your wives?” Esmæ takes another bite and smacks it loudly letting her spit fly. “Yes, they keep to themselves mostly except when it’s time to deliver.” Breeder walks to the other side of the small room and sits across from Esmæ. She begins to chew slower on the meat in her mouth, a queasiness upsetting her stomach. She can tell Grayson is getting the same feeling as he lowers his piece of meat onto the floor and stands.

“Well, we have really overstayed our welcome.” Grayson’s eyes widen towards Esmæ as she shrugs helplessly from the floor. He sighs, leans over and lifts her into his arms. “Thanks for the meal.”

As he makes his way towards the door, Breeder stands and walks over to the meat Esmæ and Grayson have left behind. “Wait.” Grayson stops in the doorway but does not turn to face him. “Your friend there, she’s been through a lot. Surely she could stay a little longer?”

“I already gave you my answer.” Grayson’s eyes narrow, focusing on Breeder. They are facing each other, both waiting for the other to move. Esmæ shifts in Grayson’s arms but he does not break the face-off.

Breeder rubs his neck and nods. “Yes, I remember. That knife will come in handy around here.” He extends the small amount of leftovers towards them. Esmæ puts her hand on her stomach and shakes her head, smiling politely. “Well, alright then. Hope you’ll come back soon, we’re expecting twins.”

The color leaves Grayson’s face as he hurries to carry Esmæ downstairs. Below, a pregnant woman carries a black sack past them, blood dripping from the bottom. Behind her is a room where many more women are looking out towards them. Esmæ sees one woman crawling towards them, her eyes red as she holds her stomach. The others approach her, holding her back from getting past the doorway. All of them appear to be phantoms, their sole purpose is to create and devour.

Her stomach lurches as they reach the outside. Grayson lowers her to the ground before taking a few steps away to retch the substance he so willingly traded for. Esmæ looks away, she cannot afford to be rid of the little food she was able to receive today. Unexpectedly, her trench coat flies to the ground from the second story. She looks up to see Breeder waving to her, one of

his wives waving as well. She kneels down to pick up her coat, wrapping it around her shoulders. As the sun disappears, she fears that she and Grayson will not be able to find a safe place for the night. She gingerly walks towards him, rubs his back for comfort as he stands. They walk into the barren lands again in search of shelter for the night.

Darkness begins to surround them as the eyes of animals begin to glow. More Scavengers will show themselves, trying to steal instead of trade. The animals become restless as more of them awaken with nightfall, preying on the dead bodies of the day. Grayson's steps are becoming clumsy, sidestepping and tripping over his own feet. Esmae can barely stand and stumbles off the road. She rolls down a dirt hill, the pebbles scratching her cheek. When she stops rolling she is face down, breathing in the dirt. Grayson flips her over and she sees his lips are moving yet, no words escape. She only sees his blood-stained teeth, his red tongue moving from behind.

Esmae feels the dirt move underneath her. She is being gripped under her arms, pulled to an unknown destination. When the world stops moving, she has entered a dark place, leaning against something metal. Grayson is struggling to breathe, lying next to her, arms extended. She sees his chest moving up and down in an irregular pattern. When his chest deflates his bones are visible through his shirt. The breathing stops and she becomes frightened of the silence. Like a ragdoll, she is pulled again, this time over something hard and unyielding pressing against bone and flesh. Grayson bends his knees, creating a wall on both sides for her to lean on. She lets her head fall back onto his shoulder, her body being pushed around by his breathing.

“I think tonight I'll be able to sleep,” he whispers in her ear, the smell of his breath reminds her of onions being left out in the sun. Her stomach growls at this thought.

“How long has it been?” She rests her head against his. She feels how rough his skin feels against hers, a sign that he has removed his cap and scarf. When he does not answer she thinks about how much time has passed since he started coughing up blood, since they were forced to steal from the dead and when humanity became split into categories such as the Rabid and Scavengers, since he first told her about Elysium. She wants to know when it will end, the time when society rebuilds itself and what they will call the present.

Staring out onto the barren lands, she has no idea where she is, what city she has traveled to or how many have survived. The darkness seems to spread around her, the warm breath down her neck slowing. She wonders how things would have been different. As Esmæ leans against Grayson, she hears a beating sound echo in her head. The sound is steady, soothing, calming her into sleep. The night settles on the barren lands as her body relaxes, the beating falls silent and the breathing ends.