

The Inside World – Karunamuni, Year 8, TAS

Tuesday, 07/04/2278.

There Amber stood, fingers against the cool glass.

The outside world to her was nothing but a fog of mist and steam. It swirled and curled into soft cotton, and the only thing between Amber and the piercing winds outside was this pane of glass. A pane of glass, made of a nanotech-engineered force field. If she punched it with all her might and tasted salt down her cheek, it still wouldn't be enough. But when it came down to it, no matter how many layers of synthesised technology there were embedded in it, it was still glass.

And so Amber stood, watching the mist intertwine in pulsing braids of fog, entranced. There was no wind inside, ever, but the artificial atmosphere generator let out a waft of air. Her shirt floated in the breeze. From what they could tell, anyway. The only thing that satisfied Amber as much as the glass window irritated her was that everyone else couldn't go outside of it either. It seemed evil to think that, in hindsight, but it brought a lukewarm taste to the freezing snow swirling at the pit of her stomach.

All of which scientists knew came from what arrived right up at their doorstep- Animals collapsing in front of windows, closed eyes frosted over with snowflakes, decayed leaves, from plants miles away. It was all they could do. Before, humans had dreamed of crossing the boundaries of space, floating hesitantly out of their galaxy, and building colonies on faraway planets- now their glory was reduced to nothing but scavenging for what floated under their noses, touching only what was in reach. For all Amber knew, the planets were long gone, galaxies long dead and lightless. All she could see was the quiet snowfall and the howling mist.

“Amber!”

She turned, already aware of bounding feet on white linoleum. Frazzled hair pushed determinedly into two short, bulging braids. Mouth perpetually wide open, always screaming and talking loudly. This was Harriet.

She stumbled up to Amber, her too-long dress slipping beneath her pudgy feet. If she tried, she could barely touch Amber's gaunt shoulders. She was so, so, small. But Amber was sure if someone measured her strength-to-size ratio, she would probably get categorised into her own species. She tugged on Amber's bright shirt, and she thought she heard one of the seams rip. “Amber, Elion stole my gem! He won't give it back, even though I asked nicely, and I tried negotiating!”

“Negotiating.”

“Yeah, negotiatiting! He’s being so mean! Come on, come on! Help me take it back!” She sighed for the sake of principle. She knew she had no choice.

She let Harriet drag her to the dorms, her feet dragging uncomfortably on the floor. Everyone else wore socks, and some pretentious few even wore shoes, but Amber always trudged around barefoot. The coldness of the tile reminded her not to get too used to the warmth that marinated the rooms like poison ivy- because like everything else in this wretched place, it was all fake. Artificially generated wind, artificially generated sunlight, artificially generated season changes; it was all fake. But that, as most things were, was a problem for later.

First, she had to get Harriet her gem back.

They walked in through the hallway that even to Amber, after living here her whole life, sometimes seemed to echo on for too long. Everything in their habitat was very, very, big, built for about a thousand children. Everyone like it had been made frantically, in preparation for what was coming. Though the designs tended to vary based on where they were and who made them, they all served essentially the same purpose: to keep them all safe from the dangers that lurked outside- the withering sandstorms in Africa and the raging tsunamis in Japan. All that they had caused, and all that could have prevented, trapping them mercilessly between their claws. That was what happened when you put the responsibility of the world in the hands of beasts: they burn it to the ground for selfishness. These habitats, they were supposed to protect them- and for the past century, they have. But protection is nothing but a sliver when compared to living outside.

Harriet stopped resolutely. Amber blinked, her eyes refocusing. She saw metallic grey. The number 02 was engraved on the door.

Finally. They had reached Harriet’s dorms.

Amber stepped up to the door, swiping her finger against the screen. It hummed to life. She squinted, the sudden light catching her off-guard. “It’s 92475,” Harriet chirped. She warily typed in the passkey, her fingers deft in the practised action. The door slid open. And what was inside could only be described as pure pandemonium.

Tousled bedsheets covered the floor in a colourful array of patterns. An enormous glass of spilled orange juice had created a pond on the floor, and Amber had to cautiously edge away from it. Even though the children had another room specifically made for playing and storing toys, she could count at least ten strewn across the room, either messily tucked into beds or in the most peculiar positions. Amber grimaced at the untidiness but glanced around to spot someone in the empty room. It was devoid of all life, and the loud laughing and crying a few rooms down probably meant that all the children were in the playroom. Hardly anyone Harriet’s age ever stayed in their beds during the day, except for the older children in Amber’s dorms.

She turned to Harriet, confused at why they had come here specifically. She hadn't given it much thought- she had only been following her on autopilot.

"There's no one here."

Harriet frowned. "Yes, there is."

She walked further into the room, peering over the chaos. She scrunched her face in concentration, scanning every inch of the spilled orange juice and fallen pillows. "Aha! there he is!"

She leapt and hopped across the piles of clothes and bedsheets, clearly used to the disarray. Amber trailed behind, trying her very best not to touch anything. Harriet stepped over several abandoned pyjamas and teddy bears before finally coming to a sudden stop in front of a grey, furnished, cupboard. There was nothing different about the others that Amber could pinpoint, but Harriet confidently yanked on the door handle. "Elion! I brought Amber to help!"

A muffled voice resonated from within the cupboard. "Leave me alone!"

Amber blinked in surprise. How on Earth Harriet had found him, she had no idea. Maybe she should seriously consider the idea of getting her to complete a medical survey.

Amber crouched down on the floor, wincing as she stepped in something mushy. Maybe one of the disadvantages of walking around barefoot. "It's Amber. Why are you inside this cupboard?"

"Because Harriet won't stop bothering me."

"I'm only bothering you since you took my gem!" Harriet shrieked into the door.

Amber sighed again. "Is that right, Elion?"

Silence. Then, the ruffle of someone wiping their nose. "I only wanted it because I don't have anything else."

"You have plenty of stuff! Your stuffed horse toy and your space lamp and everything else!"

"It's a giraffe toy!" He yelled right back.

"Same difference!" Harriet yelled back, double the volume.

Then, the sound of a lock being fiddled with, sounds of clicks and turns and pokes. Then the door swung open.

Elion's eyes were rimmed with red, and his cheeks were flushed pink. It was obvious he had been crying for a while, and his lips pouted as he sniffed back tears. "But- you're the only one who has something from before." He wiped his eyes. "I don't have anything from my parents or before I've been here."

Harriet stopped yelling, clearly lost at what to do. How she had known that Elion was in this cupboard but hadn't realised the boy was obviously upset, Amber didn't know, but then again, she didn't know a lot of things. Like how she didn't know what colour the sky was when it wasn't cloudy, or how she had never seen a naturally grown plant. It saddened her so much, everything that she had lost that she had never gotten to have. Her parents had paid the price for it. Every single child in this place had paid the price for it.

"Here," Elion held up a little stone, glimmering gently in the light. "Take it."

Harriet stared. Amber could almost see the gears turning in her head, working furiously. She held up her hands, and Amber almost thought she was going to take it, but then she pushed it towards him. "Keep it."

Elion blinked in shock at her. She smiled, unsure, but it was something. "I think you need it more than I do. It may not be something from before to you, but it's something from me now."

Amber stared. And stared and stared.

Something from now. Not before.

She smiled, too. It wasn't much, but it was something.