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THE ONE WAY BRIDGE

by

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A Creative Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
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ABSTRACT

The One Way Bridge is a post apocalyptic slice of life novel about seven survivors of a mysterious world ending event known as “The Silence.” The story primarily follows Lieu, a young transgirl and the only child among the seven, as she learns more about her found family and about herself in a world that has already ended. It explores the themes of loneliness, grief, self loathing and love, and the inevitable necessity of change.

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THE ONE WAY BRIDGE

Chapter 1

Lieu was the first to notice the trout returning. It was an accident really, the product of sneaking off during a lunch break while Casey was busy working a crowbar over the third abandoned crate they'd pulled out of the backrooms of a convenience store on 351st Street. Lieu had scarfed down the rations Lucy had packed, giggled at the stick figure of herself as a superhero Lucy had drawn for her on the wrappings, and scurried off. She crouched down to hide among the tall grass that clawed its way out of the broken asphalt of old Belphamore and was careful not to kick up the rubble and dust around her lest she be discovered and reprimanded. She swore Casey could hear a raindrop from four blocks away.

Lieu bit her lip as she turned down an alleyway that the sun had rarely touched and dodged the discarded trash that nature was slowly reclaiming. She was not one to disobey family; "Always brush your teeth! Never stay up past 9! Don't tell strangers your name!"

When Casey and August had gone on their first scavenging after the Silence, she was adamant about them finding her a toothbrush and toothpaste. When they brought her back one, she was almost as gleeful as Evan when he got that creaky old grandfather clock in the library working again, and even with no one else left but The Eight, Lieu hadn't given them a name. Well she gave a name, would have been awkward if she didn't, so "Lieu" it was. She thought of the Eight as family by now, but Lieu was still as good a name as any other. A better fit than the old one anyways.

Feeling she was far enough away that Casey was out of nigh-supernatural earshot, Lieu kicked a crumpled can down the next street and let loose a sigh of relief before looking up to the buildings, all tall enough to blot out the midday sun. Gashes of greenery like veins snaked up the valleys of cement bricks that made up the towers which hadn't known the footsteps of people in five years, give or take a week. As the can settled, no noise rose to replace it.

Like the city, the name she was told not to give was very much dead.

And the dead don't snitch to Casey.

Lieu scanned the buildings before her, squinting from the sunlight encircling their peaks like a halo, and parsed which one to climb before settling on her choice.

Wilco Offices. Standing at about fifteen stories, it held itself above the buildings of the lower blocks and blanketed them in shadows for the whole morning till the sun managed to climb above it. With some struggle Lieu opened its rusting doors. The reception hall was cold and covered in a thick layer of dust that had grown back in the year since she and Casey had looted the place. That excursion was a dud mostly, in Casey's eyes at least. Not much helpful for survival in an office building that's most notable features were a law firm once run by Lucy's cousins and a crumbling fountain in the lobby that was long since dry. Greco-Roman design, at least that's what she thinks Evan had called it. He was always so hard to understand when he was excited, talking faster than the wind of a hurricane. For a man that lived like Casey, mostly in solitude, you'd think they'd try and make what they had to say to people last a little bit longer.

Lieu made her way to the stairs at the back of the first floor, stepping around the remnants of boxes they'd left abandoned on the floor and gutted of their contents. Evan had been the only one particularly happy with the Wilco haul. While most of what they found had decayed to water and time, all cheaply made like most things in these buildings, they'd found a few boxes of printer paper well kept in the law offices up stairs. "Never know what records we'd need to write!" He had spoken cheerily, prompting the funniest of eyerolls from Casey. They'd also found a book on city and state laws, as well as a log book of case files both complete and ongoing at the time of the Silence. She'd seen Evan almost cry at the sight of those, "More to remember" he'd muttered. Casey probably heard him with that scary hearing of theirs, but if they did they hadn't responded with anything more personal than a quick nod before leaving to get their dinner ready.

Lieu reached the top of the stairs to a lone heavy set door. Digging in her heels and gritting her teeth, she pushed hard at the door, flinching at the low grinding of the door like it was a waking predator. One huff, two, and the press of her full yet unremarkable weight eventually managed to push the door open and into the blue sky and sunlight. She stumbled, nearly falling face first into a stagnant pool of rainwater on the roof before catching herself on the door frame.

“Suck my dick!” She exclaimed with childlike glee, giving the ajar door several rude gestures she’d seen Casey use on antagonistic locked doors in their outings. With a huff to catch her breath, Lieu decided she deserved a reward and reached into her pocket to rest on something cool, dry, and fleshy. A baby carrot. She held it aloft as she exited onto the building’s roof, the orange color so bizarrely out of place to the towers of gray and drapes of green that formed the patchwork of her world. No less out of place though, than the scrawny twelve year old covered in rags and searching for scrap. She plopped it into her mouth without a second thought and smiled at the crunch.

Satisfied, she ventured out onto the roof, onward to the building’s edge, and letting the youthful belief in one’s own invincibility pilot her for a moment, gazed over it. The streets looked alien from above. Down on the ground their turns felt second nature, walled in by stone and concrete like a cave system with mounds of trash and ruin piling like stalagmites, run off grooves in the pavement for streams to trickle and slowly carve canyons. The streets made sense. Back before they grew Silent and Lieu could count her age on her fingers, they screamed with cars that weren’t rusted out husks and crawled with vendors whose stands weren’t crumbled to the pavement and picked clean for what food hadn’t spoiled in the first expedition. Swimming amongst it all were the people, thousand, she was too young to count high enough then but Evan had said it was closer to a million or so, but all of them managed to get where they were going in the chaos, guided as if by invisible hands and strings along paths grooved out by others with a whole city plan in their minds. Lieu hadn’t been old enough to explore the streets on her own when they lived; she was always with mom or dad....

Lieu swallowed her carrot and sighed before letting herself slide down into a sitting position on the ledge of the roof. On the ground the streets felt natural, but looking down from above their symmetry betrayed them. Each city block, a square encircled on all sides by asphalt streets and sidewalks, meaningless distinction now, caging in sets of buildings once distinguished only by signs now mostly faded and fallen. Time and weather now left cracks that flowed across the streets in a criss-cross randomness that even Lieu couldn’t match on a more chaotic and imaginative day like today. The cracks broke across the withered yellow lines that once mirrored the streets, ignoring their boundaries that cars didn’t dare cross, and blazing trails for nature’s seeds to thrash and

claw towards the sun amid the gray and black rivers of the city. There was nothing about nature's move back into the city that was symmetrical. It was Daphne and Aidas that had joked that nature was trying to be petulant and spiteful about its conquest of the river bank which the city had taken from it.

Evan had scowled at that idea, "Nature doesn't do things intentionally It doesn't think; it just does. Stop trying to see things that aren't there," he'd said before losing his appetite and leaving the bar and the food Lucy made him behind. It was fine though, Lieu got to finish it off and it was delicious as always! Sure she could eat the dirt off the pavement and say it tasted like jam, but still.

She let her backpack slide off her back and onto the roof and rooted around in it while letting her legs swing lazily in air, and pulled out a bit of contraband that's disappearance would enrage Evan more than any of the other Seven's quips. He'd no doubt drown her in homework till winter set in. Lieu shivered at the thought of being locked in the library's back rooms while the days grew shorter without her to run around and soak in the sun like that photosynthesis Evan had forced her to read about a few weeks ago.

Her rummaging stopped as her hand found what she was looking for, something metal ,smooth, cylindrical, and cold to the touch. Lieu smiled, thoughts of punishment falling off the side of the building and leaving her thoughts swaying free. She pulled it out; it was a telescope, free of rust but tarnished to a grayish shade. Stretching it out she held it aloft and peered through its lense. It was miraculously uncracked despite Casey finding it in a gutter weeks back, but more importantly it allowed her to look at things from an entirely new perspective.

Evan said ever since the light pollution ended you could see planets as far as Saturn with this scope, and if they could find a better one and get it working, they could maybe see Neptune or Pluto. Those thoughts kept Lieu awake with wonder every night as she strained her eyes up at the sky every night, but for today she was exploring something closer to home. There was another reason she had picked the Wilco building as her perch, directly across from it was a block of high rise apartments, whose balconies were the perfect theaters for a curious girl with an ill gotten telescope. Holding tight to the minutes she had before Casey inevitably tracked her down from the sound of her quickened heart

beat like a bat hearing its echo, she spied through the windows of each apartment, imagination chewing on every detail.

From the outside, each unit looked as identical as the roads and blocks below, unnatural and imposed, but an aided glimpse inside showed an unmade bed here, a shattered mirror there, trash overflowing, closets and hampers spilled onto carpets, cases of beer and stacks of video games dotting each tiny boxed in scene. Not one unit was the same. Lieu didn't have TV anymore, and after five days, give or take a week, she was beginning to forget what it looked like, sounded like, *felt* like to just sit in front of a box with its own imagination for hours on end, drinking it in. She thought it felt something like this, staring down a couple dozen units to watch the stories Lieu could come up with about the people who once lived there.

“Unit 731 is a neat freak like Lucy and Evan.”

“Until 901 has its curtains closed, maybe they are grouchy like Cline, or quiet like Casey?”

“Unit 845 doesn't have their life together. Daphne.”

Lieu giggled at her own jokes. There was one apartment she kept finding herself going back to after scanning each floor. Unit 749. It was the only one that's door onto its balcony was open, and she believed it had been open during the Silence. It was hard not to be drawn to it, the breeze got strong high enough off the ground that the curtains were at a constant flutter. Always moving, but never enough that she could see beyond them. Across the towering cement face of the skyline of Belphamore, there was no movement. Everything stood frozen save tiny points of failure like the curtains of Unit 749. Lieu found herself enthralled with the curtains since the first time she caught sight of them from the ground months ago while on one of her first scavenges with Casey. Why was that door open? Did they forget? Was whoever lived there on the balcony when the Silence happened? Did they see the Silence from up there? Whatever the reason, the former residents of Unit 749 made a choice that led to that door being open, and five years later, give or take a week, it seemed to be the only choice of theirs that still left an impression.

Lieu extended the scope further and strained her eyes, leaned her body just an inch further, but to no avail. She couldn't see beyond the curtains. With a huff Lieu

pulled herself backwards from the ledge, and as she began to close the scope, a flash caught her eye. She turned to follow it, her sight trailing to the city edge where she could see a silver wall. The river.

Belphamore sat on an island, Evan had explained, in the middle of a wide river, named Eden by the first western settlers of the area, who wore their faith on their sleeves as openly as the guns in their hands and on their backs. Belphamore was connected back to the mainland by three bridges built for cars going both ways, two to the east bank and one to the west. The two to the east were in disrepair well before the Silence, and since then nature had eaten them; their rubble sticking up through the river's surface like a broken jetti. The one heading west, the one with something about it that had just caught Lieu's attention, was still mostly standing. The side of the road that cars would use to enter Belphamore had fallen into the river during a terrible storm a couple months after the Silence, leaving only the path out of the city and into the western states, a bridge going only one way.

What drew Lieu in wasn't the bridge itself. She'd stared at it a thousand times at sunrise and sunset. Instead it was at the waterline around the fallen concrete from the arrival side of the bridge. Flashes of light, glittering on the surface, movement, and....something leaping from the water in tiny hops down stream. She re extended the scope and zeroed in. They were small and oblong shaped, with scales that caught the rays of light from the sun. Excitement shot through Lieu like lightning. The trout were back. For the first time since the Silence, the trout were back. The river wasn't dead; they could fish. The trout were coming back.

Lieu couldn't contain herself and she shouted, "The trout are coming back!"

"There you are!"

The voice caught Lieu off guard and her foot slipped.

Falling head first engenders a particular feeling of helplessness.

The world rushes away, and the sky recedes farther away as the concrete sidewalk rushes closer to you, and all of the brief time the imperiled is falling, they fail to right themselves, flailing to land anywhere but where they are quickly going to. Lieu saw the one way bridge shoot skyward behind too short buildings and somewhere in the rushing wind Lieu could have sworn she heard a scream of panic that wasn't her own. Half way

down Lieu saw a hand of green on an ocean of gray and white and grabbed for it. Her arm erupted with pain, eliciting a yelp. Her scope slipped from her grasp and hit the ground below with a thunk and a shatter that would have made Lieu wince if she were not caught up in the fact that she was dangling from a vine that had grown around the Wilco building like a stairwell with an arm that was deeply strained and perhaps dislocated.

Less than a minute passed before Casey's face shot out through the nearest window. Their skin a dark tan and hair too gray for their age. Casey. "You gave me a heart attack kid!" They yelled, grabbing Lieu by the collar and yanking her back into the Wilco building where both of them collapsed onto the floor. The two panted for a few moments, catching their breath and letting the adrenaline fade, and in its place...laughter?

It was Lieu who started it, a belly laugh.

Casey scowled, an expression that never sat well on a face that made it so often, "That wasn't funny."

Lieu kept laughing, "It was kinda funny."

"It was not," Casey snorted. Lieu found that to be a riot.

Lieu clutched her stomach as she lost control of her laughter, tears bubbling to the surface and down her cheeks. Casey broke down and followed suit with their own laughter that sounded like a woodpecker at work. It only made Lieu laugh harder. She wasn't sure if she'd ever heard him laugh before.

"You are in so much goddamn trouble" Casey managed to wheeze out through cathartic laughs.

"I figured," Lieu remarked, a content resignation in her voice just happy to be alive.

"Let's go home."

Chapter 2

“It's not fair,” Lieu grumbled as she bit into a fresh carrot she plucked from the dirt.

“Hey” Adias snapped his fingers to get her attention like she was an easily distractible puppy, “Wash it before you eat it, you don't know where it's been.”

“But I literally do.”

Adias chuckled, “Don't sass me Lieu, you're already in hot water.”

Lieu sighed and stepped over to a large tub of fresh water drained down from the filters and rain catchers up on the roof and dunked the new carrot. “But really, Casey does dangerous stuff all the time. Why should I get punished?” Lieu pouted and devoured the rest of the carrot. She got hungry when she was angry.

Adias's chuckle turned to a full good natured laugh, “Punishment? I didn't realize you disliked our time together so much, I thought surely your classes at the library would have bored you more.” Adias grunted as he dragged a large pot out of a corner and along the ground. Growing within the pot was a vibrant tomato plant that's fruit was nearly ripened. Adias turned back to Lieu with a smile, “Now, help me with Fredricka here?” He patted one of the hanging tomatoes like it was the back of an old friend.

Lieu rolled her eyes but couldn't hide the roots of a smile, Adias may be twice her age but to Lieu he still thought like a kid in many ways, not least of all was his insistence on naming every plant he and Daphne grew in the green house.

“Alright” she said.

“Thata girl.”

Lieu let her smile grow as she bent down to grab “Fredrika” by the base, fingers intertwining with Adias', and on the count of three they lifted her off the floor. “Where to?” She grunted.

“Upstairs to the roof, ol girl needs a lot of sunlight right now and the windows down here won't cut it.”

Lieu nodded and began backing up towards the stairs, careful to avoid bumping into any tables or chairs with plants or into Fredricka's neighbors scattered across the floor. The greenhouse had been expanding every year since Adias started it about a year after the Silence, but in that time he and Daphne never found it in themselves to properly

organize its growing chaos. Evan would throw a fit at the sight of it if he ever went more than a block from the library, yet Lieu liked it, there wasn't anywhere else in Belpaore where you could look in every direction and see life. That was until....

The Trout.

The thought sent a jolt up Lieu's spine. Mentioning that she'd seen trout in the river for the first time since the Silence was more than half the reason Lieu had only gotten chewed out for how careless she had been as lightly as she had. Casey had said they and Lucy would call a meeting over dinner to talk about it with everyone, and to until then stay well within the bounds of Echo Town and help Adais and Daphne with the green house. All in all there were worse punishments, she could have to sort books with Evan at the library, but her excitement was killing her, she couldn't focus on anything else. This was a problem as she was halfway up a set of stairs carrying half the weight of Fredrika, "Lieu!" Adias grunted.

Lieu snapped out back to reality, "Sorry, sorry," and resumed pulling her half of the weight. She could think about what the fish coming back meant later.

With a swift kick behind her she opened the door to the roof behind her. It gave way far more easily than the one at the top of Willco. She'd like to think that was because she was just getting that much stronger, but it was much more likely due to its common use.

"Alright, set her down right here." With a little more maneuvering, Lieu and Adias settled Fredrika into her new home next to their other tomato plant, Grima.

The roof of the green house was dotted with various other plants bearing fruits and vegetables. Lieu's favorite was Caleb the blueberry bush off in the far left corner. Adias said it was going to have a good yield in the coming summer. Lieu had jumped for joy and salivated at the thought of Lucy's blueberry bread. Upon hearing Adias's prediction Daphne squinted and frowned in the way she always did when she was overthinking things and asked him how the hell he could tell. Adias simply shrugged and said, "It just looks like it wants to." Daphne had scoffed but left it at that. She may have had the greenest shade of thumb among the rest of the Eight, but Adias' hands might as well have been made from moss his whole life.

Some of the Seven were like that; You didn't challenge Adias when it came to plants, Casey to scavenging, Evan to knowledge, Lucy to cooking, and Lieu and Daphne to being Lieu and Daphne.

Adias righted Fredrika's alignment with Grima's slightly then gave himself a satisfied nod, "She looks comfy, good work."

Lieu looked skyward. The apartment building Adias built the greenhouse out of was a low-rise building of only about three floors and near the edge of the city, only a block or two from the water. The buildings in this part of the city were low enough that the late evening sun wasn't completely consumed by them so Lieu could see it getting ready to sink below the horizon.

Lieu stretched and sighed, "Alright, I've worked all day, is my punishment over?"

Adias shook his head in dismay, "For the last time Lieu this isn't a punishment."

"But I've been taken off scavenging duty with Casey!"

"Not permanently, your rotation just got cut short."

"But I had just gotten *back* to it!" Lieu burst out, louder than was probably appropriate, but she knew it had to be said. Ever since the Eight figured they were the only ones left they knew Lieu needed new parents, and ever since the Eight very suddenly became the Seven they decided they'd all try to be that together.

So they set up a schedule. For one week she'd work with Adias in the greenhouse and learn a bit of first aid from Daphne. The next week she'd tail Lucy on her deliveries to the rest of the Seven and help her in the kitchen trying to feed them all. On the third week she'd study under Evan in the library, learning math and science as best he and the books he found could teach to try and make it feel like school didn't need to stop when the world itself did. Then lastly she'd get to what she *really* wanted- scavenging with Casey.

Before the greenhouse, in the early days when the city's natural quiet was alien and unnerving enough to scare the Eight into each other's arms for days, it was the scavenging that kept them alive, something that only two of them had the courage to do at first, two carrying the weight of Eight.

Grocery stores, convenience stores, office buildings, apartments, rows upon rows, stacks on stacks of concrete and wood yet to crumble and rot from lack of care; the city, when awake, was meant to feed, house, and animate hundreds of thousands, and with a little bravery and elbow grease it could support Eight in its sleep easily.

And that's what it did. While the Eight staggered bewildered and terrified from the dust of everyone else and learned to steady their stance and wipe their tears, while the first seeds grew slowly in the windows of the first floor, the abandoned streets turned into silent wilds and became their life blood.

Lieu clenched her fists and looked away from Adias.

She was too young to help then, but she wasn't now. *"Apparently that doesn't mean anything,"* she thought. *"Apparently all it takes is one mistake and it's back to the gardens for who knows how long."*

Adias slapped Lieu on the back and pulled her into a sideways hug, "But you're right on one thing Lieu, we have been working all day. Let's head downstairs and grab something to eat."

Lieu sighed and unclenched her fists. Getting pissy wouldn't make anything go her way. Casey taught her that one day after they nearly broke their hand punching a hole in a wall after failing to open a particularly stubborn crate for twenty minutes. And if she wasn't going to actually use the lessons scavenging taught her, then maybe she shouldn't be out there after all.

"Yeah, I think I'd like that," she forced herself to smile.

Adias could probably tell it was fake, but he replied with a real one all the same. They left the roof down the stairs, Lieu leaning into the sideways hug the whole way down.

As they descended, the bottom floor began to resemble a home fit for people. Two of the floor's units still held a plant or two and the entranceway was still lined with twin walls of vegetation up to the desk where a large raspberry bush sat with a name tag reading "Hi I'm Davy " stuck to one of its exposed branches. However despite this Adias and Daphne had cleared out two units of their own and filled them with the possessions they still cared for.

Adias's unit still kept yet more plants, these of the decorative variety, and he filled half the cupboards of the commandeered kitchen with a seemingly endless array of gardening equipment that was a mixture of both his from before the Silence, supplies he said he "inherited" from his classmates and professors at his university when they vanished, and stuff he'd badgered Casey and by extension Lieu into getting for him at a hardware store on the other side of Belphamore.

On the other hand, Daphne's apartment gave little indication of her life working in the greenhouse. Instead it appeared much like a mini library, filled with tomes that ranged across every genre Lieu cared to know and the many she didn't. Daphne happily took any old book, and would always let the giddiness she'd keep under wraps bubble over whenever Casey brought one in from a recent scavenging. Lieu wasn't the biggest fan of reading, but she loved to see Daphne smile, and more than that see Casey slowly but surely lose an internal fight it seemed only she noticed as he allowed himself the tiniest of grins as Daphne would awkwardly go for a hug in gratitude.

Lieu poked her head into the apartment to see Daphne flipping through the pages of a comic book that by the whilt of its edges and the stark white line of its spine, was on its last days before joining the dusts in Belphamores twisting streets.

Lieu kept her gremlin smirk to herself and made a mental note not to tell Evan about that. While the man would no doubt be overjoyed to know another of the seven had half as much love for books, he'd be horrified to see how she treated them. Her collection lay scattered around the room with no rhyme or reason, ready to be kicked into a corner accidentally by an oblivious Lieu, their pages swelled and curled at the moisture hanging in the air about the building from the ever expanding plant life.

Lieu made no noise as she looked in but Daphne noticed her outright all the same. She had a knack for noticing the people around her, much like Casey.

“Now what is a cute little troublemaker doing spying in my room?” the older girl drawled with a dry smirk and with her bright almost golden hazel eyes alight with a playfulness allowing Lieu to feel a kinship with her.

“I'm not cute,” huffed Lieu, not particularly minding the compliment but feeling a little pushback was obligatory.

“Right, right, of course, you're all rough and tumble just like Casey.” she chuckled, flipping the comic book shut and depositing it unceremoniously on the floor. She rose from her spot on her bed and walked towards Lieu and the door. “Would you prefer handsome?”

Lieu grimaced and neared a full body shiver, “Is mainstreet loud these days?” She replied.

“Well then I guess you'll have to settle for cute!” She leapt the rest of the way to Lieu and put the far shorter, by at least a full foot or more, girl in a head lock and ruffled her already apocalyptically messy hair like one might do to a younger sibling in need of teasing.

Lieu flailed about with no real conviction and joined in a duet of giggles, settling into a sideways hug with the tall woman. Daphne's hugs always came from the right, opposite Adias', allowing for the occasional hug sandwich. That's what Lieu liked most about her time staying with the greenhouse duo, while tending to the plants never quite called to her, they more than any of the Seven made her feel like she was staying with family, and despite her time with Casey out scavenging being cut short, she couldn't help but crack a smile.

“So you finished helping Adias for the day?” She asked.

“Yep,” Lieu replied, jovially popping the “p.”

“Did you enjoy your afternoon off?” Lieu chided.

Daphne huffed in mock offense “Why yes I did. Not every day you get a spare set of hands to order around; it's only natural I'd seize the opportunity for a break.”

“How lazy! Isn't Casey supposed to be my *“bad role model”*?”

“Hey, Adias can take a break whenever he wants and I’ll pick up the slack no questions asked, not my fault he’d marry the bushes upstairs if we had a pastor left to confirm it.”

Lieu snorted, Daphne smirked, “But you didn’t hear me say that you hear?”

“Hear what?”

“Smartass.”

“Language, Daphne.” Adias stepped into view, his tool belt and gloves left behind in his room and the dirt caking his face mostly washed away. “You should mind your tongue around Lieu.”

Daphne and Lieu rolled their eyes in near unison, “And who is she going to offend? Cline? If he ever comes around? Hanging around Casey, well you’re lucky she doesn’t talk like a sailor.”

Lieu smiles innocently, “It’s true!” She wasn’t entirely sure what “*Talking like a sailor*” meant but given the resigned sigh and shrug that followed from Adias it probably won her the argument, so she didn’t really care.

“Fine, fine, I know when I’m outnumbered. Now come on before dinner gets cold.”

With that the conversation went to rest and the three departed from the greenhouse, Lieu inviting Adias into the loose hug on their way out, as if to let him know there were no hard feelings. He gladly accepted it with a smile that told her he already knew.

The streets in this part of the city were a different beast to the ones Lieu explored hours earlier; these had been lived in post Silence. Echo Town was what Evan had taken to calling it, and the name stuck. Echo Town was about two city blocks at the river’s edge clustered around one end of the One Way Bridge where each member of the Seven carved out something of a home from the vacant necropolis. Except for Lieu though, being a kid in all, the only kid, she bounced around and shacked with whatever member of the Seven she was the responsibility of for that week.

As they walked down the street long since freed of debris by its few inhabitants, the quiet of the barely populated block allowed the sounds of the nearby river to wash over the trio.

It was August’s suggestion that the Eight settle down near the river, it was fresh water and at the time they thought they could do well catching fish for food. They gave up on that plan after three weeks and not a sight of a fin breaking the quiet waters. Still once people dig their heels in some place it’ll take a lot to move them, like rocks that have let the dirt below cake up around them, and roots of nearby trees to twist overtop and make them an anchor for years to come. Roots are roots, no matter how they are laid, and who they’re with. So even after there was little need to stick to the river, after Casey and August braved their first scavenge runs in the deeper city and confirmed that there were no giant mutants or whatever sci-fi horrors the mind could dream up emerging after

the end of the world, the Eight didn't feel the need to press outward. Cline stayed away but he was never with them to begin with, not really, but that was neither here nor there.

The three chatted amicably as they went; Adias ranting happily about new plans for the next harvest that might require clearing out another unit on the third floor, and after more than a little prodding Daphne let herself go on a small info dump about the comic she'd read, and lamenting about not having the next issue.

"I continue to kick myself every day for not reading these types of things when money still mattered" she said with a wistful sigh.

Adias chuckled at her distress, "You could always ask Casey to go look for it on their next outing."

Daphne considered a moment before shaking her head, "I don't want to bother him."

Lieu elbowed her in the side, "You won't if they can stomach me they can stomach you."

"Thanks, I think?" She replied, rubbing her side.

Lieu grinned, taking a moment to jump over a particularly wide gouge in the pavement that the other two simply walked around. "If you asked, you could probably even go with him."

Daphne stumbled, "And just what are you implying?"

Lieu shrugged, "Casey was probably happy to have company on their trips, but since I'm here now." Lieu gestured sullenly at Adias who returned an offended glare, "He doesn't have that."

Daphne fell silent, a silence Adias quickly moved to fill, "Casey? Wanting company? I can't remember the last time I had a full conversation with them that wasn't about what they found or I needed them to find."

Daphne shook her head, "They're just quiet. And just because someone doesn't want too much company doesn't mean they don't want any. They wouldn't have taken Lieu under their wing otherwise."

Lieu leapt over another gap in the pavement and caught Daphne before she stepped straight into it, already losing herself to her thoughts. Lieu's grin widened to an evil angle, "So is that a yes?"

"What?"

"A yes that you'll tag along?"

"I-" Daphne stuttered, a blush sneaking its way onto the edges of her cheeks, "If I went you realize that'll just mean more work for you right? Adias can't do it all by himself."

Lieu shrugs, "Of course the old man can."

"Lieu I'm twenty-six."

"Old. Man."

Daphne burst into laughter, relieved the conversation had turned from her to another topic. Lieu and Adias couldn't help but join in the laughter as they traveled down the broken streets of Belphamore, now Echo Town, towards a gathering of life and drink.

Chapter 3

The Object Permanence, as the Seven had taken to naming it, wasn't actually a bar. Instead it was set up in a particularly cozy lobby of a three and a half star hotel called the *Belphamore Springs*, but you wouldn't know that from the decaying sign that now seemed to read "*Belpha.....ing.*"

Casey had counted a total of three actual bars within the limits of what became Echo Town in addition to a club, yet Lucy had adamantly refused to set up shop in any of them on account of the "*vibes.*"

"Too few people to serve, I'd be empty for too long, and an empty bar just feels wrong, I won't have it." Lucy had said.

Wanting a place to unwind quickly beat out any annoyance of the Seven at this and they'd gotten to work getting the place together, it was the whole group's first real collaboration really, before even the green house had gotten started. Evan and Adais had musingly questioned the collective's priorities, but the others hadn't paid them mind, it was a grimmer time then. The Silence was buried in less than a year of memory, the city still looking ready to be lived in at the drop of a hat, and a certain rainy day had left them all hollowed out.

They hadn't let Lieu drink that day, the Seven probably weren't the most qualified parents, but they still had standards.

Lieu, Daphne, and Adias stepped through the entryway of the *Object Permanence*, sliding open the derelict automatic doors with the makeshift handles they'd whipped together some time ago to far greater difficulty than any of them had expected.

Inside were two isolated pods of comfy black chairs and tables flanking either side of the entrance. Various random games, left behind in the rooms of the hotel they long since picked clean, sat aside and atop them, waiting to be cracked open.

A fireplace was wedged in the far right corner of the lobby, closed and abandoned. Firewood was hard to come by. The main desk had been gutted and fitted to become a makeshift bar with its always cheery bartender behind it.

"Lucy, pronouns for the day!" Adias called to it as the trio entered.

Lucy popped its head out from behind the bar, several strands of hair having fallen in front of its face that needed to be blown upwards before responding.

"I think it's an it/its day my friend."

"Good to know," Adias replied.

Lucy leaned forward, hands on the counter and forest green nail polish on full display, "Well how-de-doo and good evening to the breadwinners" it tilted its head down slightly to make eye contact with Lieu, "And what can I get the short stuff after a harrowing day's work?"

Lieu skipped across the frayed and faded rug up to the bar, "Don't call me short" she pouted, scrambling up onto one of the stools they'd stolen from an actual bar and taken here. "I'm still growing!" She declared.

Lucy smiled, “That you are. However, the question still stands, what’ll it be?”

Lieu put her index finger to her chin as if deep in thought. She heard Daphne snicker as she and Adias caught up and sat down on either side of her. “Milk.” she said.

Lucy rolled its eyes, “Haven’t seen a carton that wasn’t a biohazard in years.”

“HmMMMM, Gatorade?”

“Nope, last of it went bad in august, don’t ya remember?”

Lieu giggled, “Dammit.”

Lucy looked like someone shot one of its chickens then looked between Adias and Daphne with an accusatory glare.

Adias held up his hands defensively, “Not me, Daphne’s fault.”

“Throwing me under the bus are we?” Daphne replied.

Adias shrugged, Lieu giggled even more, “Then how about orange juice?” She asked, knowing full well the answer.

Lucy shook its head, “No again, how about you Adi?”

Adias sighed, “Working on it, I promise you Lieu I’ll have that figured out by your birthday.”

Lieu nodded, “Alright, does that mean I can have some beer?”

“No,” the other three shouted in unison.

Lieu had to grip the counter to not fall off her stool laughing. Getting rises out of these three would never not make her nights. She always made a point of messing with them like this in some way whenever their work gave them enough free time to all have a proper night together, something that thankfully was happening more and more often.

“Soda?”

Lucy sighed, “Flat, every last drop we’ve got, least till someone can find us all a home carbonator.”

A gruff voice rose from behind the three, “I’m working on it, get off my back.”

It startled Adias and Daphne. Mostly Daphne. Lieu’s smile only widened further. It seemed the family was almost all there. “Hiya, Casey! What’re you doing lurking back there?”

Casey sat up, pushing their unruly bed head from their eyes. They’d been lying blanketless across one of the bar’s couches that’s back was facing the door so the three of them couldn’t see them when they had entered.

“Taking a nap until a loud little gremlin decided to wake me up” they yawned, standing up and giving their back a satisfying crack followed by a sigh of relief.

Adias shook his head, “Public place Casey, the whole city’s empty and you sleep in the one place you can be woken up.” He looks back towards Lucy who was smiling at the banter before it, “Keep it simple, three waters.”

“”Make that four” said Casey as they walked towards the counter and pulled up a stool beside Daphne.

“Boring,” Lieu said, pretending to pout, crossing her arms and puffing out her bottom lip and everything.

“Nothing better for you, before or after the Silence” Casey said matter of factly and reached back around Daphne to give Lieu a familial slap on the back, causing Daphne to jump slightly in her seat at the near contact.

Lucy returned with four glasses of varying makes and size filled with the only drink the Seven had that hadn’t decayed with the rest of the city. Water. It had taken a while to get it right, but Casey, Adias, and Evan eventually managed to get rain catchers and tanks to hold them set up on about a dozen buildings across Echo Town, and later even managed to affix each of them with a proper filtration system. Not that that mattered a whole lot, rain had gotten less common since the Silence so they still found themselves relying largely on the expansive, yet as Adias would always be quick to point out, finite, stocks of packaged water in abandoned supermarkets across the city. As for the filters, without the rest of humanity pumping the skies full of carbon and toxins for the last half decade, the rainwater had been getting cleaner and cleaner, making them a bit of a mute point.

But whether or not they ultimately gave them much use was of little importance to Lieu. What she cared about was what it took to get those funnels, tanks, and pipes working. She was too young to help, still too scared to venture far from her hiding hole underneath Lucy’s bed in it’s apartment, memories of the hurricane that broke the one way bridge still far too fresh and haunting her far too deep into the night. It took Casey’s scavenging to get the parts, Evan’s booksmarts to draw the plans, and Adias’ ingenuity to put the whole thing together. Despite their differences, they were able to work together and build something, so even if the three didn’t exactly see eye to eye on just about anything, they always had that. Lieu always had that. They always had water in common.

Lieu grabbed her glass with two hands and gave Lucy it's well due thank you. She cupped it with both hands and took a long deep drink of half the glass, feeling its chill drain away fatigue. She looked to her left and right to see the others doing similar. She put the glass down on the counter with a satisfied sigh. She didn’t mind not having anything else to drink, she didn’t even mind not having any apple juice left to drink, she barely remembered how it tasted anyways; after all this time, and maybe she didn’t need to, remembering got hard after awhile, painful too. No, the water was enough for everyone so it was enough for Lieu.

“Like I said Lieu,” said Adias, “I’ll get you your apple juice some day. I promise.”

Lieu gave him the widest grin her face could hold, “I’ll hold you to that.” She wouldn’t. She didn’t care. But she decided she’d let Adias have this. He loved making her smile, and she loved smiling. It was good to have reasons to smile again.

“Well someone was thirsty” remarked Lucy.

Lieu shrugged and stretched in the same fashion Casey had moments before, “What can I say? Busy day; growing girl.”

The people at the counter gave mixed reactions of chuckles and eye rolls. Well, chuckles from everyone except Casey, who gave the eye roll. Lieu laughed at their reaction. Casey never laughed, their ways of speaking were a lot more subtle than that. She was learning to read them, bit by bit. She was starting to think she’s the only one who “spoke Casey” much at all. It wasn’t like they made it easy, they’d keep to themselves just as much as Evan and talk half that.

Lucy had called Casey something once, with all its signature playfulness, a “*Cryptid*.”

Adias had found it funny, Daphne failed to hold in a snicker, and even Evan let himself chuckle heartily. Lieu didn’t know that word and pulled on Daphne’s sleeve to ask her. She awkwardly described it as “*A strange and wonderful thing no one will ever understand*.” She’d been trying not to look to Casey for their reaction. Lieu’d only taken a moment to digest the meaning before perking up and boldly proclaiming, index finger pointed like a javelin, “That means Evan’s a cryptid too!” And that had gotten Casey’s laugh, one of the only laughs anyone other than August had ever gotten from them.

She’d meant it as a compliment, it fit him and she’d realized she hadn’t said something nice about him that day, something her parents had always taught her to do to the people important to her. Evan hadn’t taken it well and quickly stopped smiling, sinking back into whatever book he’d brought with him to dinner swaddled reverently in his gloved hands.

“Now where is the bookworm? I thought we’d be the last ones here” remarked Adias at the evident lack of Evan amongst them.

Lucy shrugged, “Couldn’t tell you, know his schedule less than any of you, even the freeloader on my couch.”

“I resent that,” Casey said flatly.

“Love you too buddy” it cheered. “But anyways, Lieu; you see him more than any of us, have any idea what’s holding him up?”

Lieu shrugged, “Not in the slightest.”

Casey sighed, “Last I saw him I was telling him what Lieu and I saw and he went all stone faced and ran back into his library. Didn’t tell me why, and he left me hanging there for what felt like forever before I gave up and left.”

A thoughtful quiet enveloped the room. Lieu felt a tingle of excitement stir in her stomach and began to set the water she’d drank to a boil. The trout, the trout she’d seen leaping through the river that very morning. That was what they were gathering to discuss.

The Object Permanence was more than just a place to unwind and chat, it was a middle ground, almost like Echo Town’s town hall. That might make Lucy technically its mayor, but that was an idea half the people there would have hated, most of all probably

Lucy. Whenever there was something of importance for most or all the Seven to talk about they'd spread the word and gather at the bar to discuss. Lucy'd always cooked the best meal it could for them, no matter how short the notice, and this notice was pretty tiny.

It was called the moment Casey and her returned from scavenging early after she'd fallen and had to be saved. That wasn't the topic, or at least Lieu hoped it wouldn't be, she really didn't want to get another ear full from Adias and Lucy about safety. The two had seemed to cool off since then so hopeful she'd avoid that. No, this meeting was about what she'd seen *before* she fell, what she had to move mountains to convince Casey it wasn't a "trick of the light" or her "imagination acting up" and for them to go back up and check for himself that "*Oh yeah, the trout were coming back!*"

Casey downed the last of their water and cracked their neck, "I can go back and grab him, at this rate who knows how long he'll be on his own." They got up from the stool and pushed it back in, "Save my spot." They joked to Daphne who chuckled and nodded.

"Wait, wait," Lieu protested. "You should stay, you need to tell me about what you got in the haul today!"

Everyone in attendance sighed, "Lieu..." Lucy began to say.

"But I wanna know, you always tell me, and we'll probably forget to talk about it after the meeting. Please!"

"Lieu you were there for the scavenging today. You saw what we got, packaged food; some expired, some not, a spare hammock, a new pot undented for Lucy."

"Thanks for that by the way!"

"Don't mention it."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but what did you find after you went back in?" Lieu had to admit, the haul had been pretty disappointing, it was part of the reason she decided to sneak off to begin with, but the first lesson about scavenging Casey taught her was persistence, a dozen duds were worth it for a gold mine.

"I didn't go back."

Lieu sat back, stunned, "What? But, but why?"

Casey sighed and, realizing they weren't going to be leaving any time soon, leaned back against the counter and exchanged what looked to be guilty looks with an increasingly awkward audience around Lieu. "I couldn't focus, felt wrong to head back out after almost..." Casey stopped talking for a moment, a near imperceptible frown graced their lips as they struggled to find the words. Daphne's hands left her water glass a moment to hover halfway between her and the hand Casey placed on the counter, but took too long and shrank away when Casey abruptly continued.

"Lost you. No haul is worth losing someone, losing you." They awkwardly scratched the back of their head. Daphne reached out again but this time pulled back with no one to blame but herself.

“Besides, I’ve been tired recently, needed a break, and a nap.”

“You can credit me for that, Lieu, keeping your favorite hobo from collapsing in the street” Lucy chimed in.

“Yes and we all appreciate you” Casey replied with just a drop of insincerity.

Lucy rolled it’s eyes, “Don’t let anyone call Lieu the problem child while you’re still breathing.”

Adias raised an eyebrow, “Lucy you’re not a day over twenty-four.”

“I’ve got an old soul, Adias, and don’t you forget that.”

That managed a laugh from the two planters and a slight chuckle from Casey, going a long way to releasing the awkward tension that started building in the bar since Lieu’s accident in the morning was brought up. Lieu didn’t much like laughing.

She tapped her glass with a bashful look on her face. “If you’re so tired, then wouldn’t it be smart to have some extra hel-”

“Lieu no.” Lucy demanded, nearly slamming the glass she was drying off onto the counter.

“But you want Casey to be rested! They get to rest, I get to go back out there. Its the best of both world!”

“Lieu please,” Lucy sighed with all the exasperation of an overworked mom.

Adias put his hand on Lieu’s shoulder, “Our top priority is keeping you safe kid, we can tucker ourselves out happily if it means that.”

Lieu’s stomach boiled again, but this time not from excitement.

“I could go with you, if you need a hand.”

Lieu’s head snapped over towards the offending voice and felt betrayal. Daphne had her hand meekly raised and attempted to make eye contact with Casey, who’d straighten their back considerably in the last few seconds. They tried to muster a response, by the tightening of their shoulders and the deepening of their frown the answer rolling down the hill was clearly a no.

Daphne cut them off before they could say, “I’ve helped you before, a few times, and with Lieu helping Adias I can be free to help you.”

Lieu deflated like the balloons she only half remembered from her early childhood. Daphne was going to dump gardening on her and take off with Casey on the adventures that were supposed to be her’s. Evan had tried to teach her a story once, one about this thing called a monkey’s paw, and being careful what you wished for, and the bitter brat in Lieu wanted to scream and shout, and take back all the teasings she gave Daphne on the way there that pushed her to swiping her job.

“Sounds like a good idea.” Adias let go of Lieu’s shoulder and ruffled her hair, “the little one’s got enough energy to pick up the slack, don’t you.”

Lieu grouched, for real this time, “Fine, work is work.”

Casey paused to consider, no doubt trying to conjure up an excuse that just wouldn’t come fast enough. “Alright, you can come tomorrow.”

Daphne smiled, and Lucy bounced a knowing glance between the two of them.

Lieu sighed and asked for more water. Casey sat back down to mutter with Daphne about where they would scavenge the next day, they decided they'd let Evan get here on his own.

The evening passed on and the light of the setting sun grew thinner and thinner, and with it the temperature steadily dropped. Lucy pulled lanterns, ones Casey scavenged from a hardware store not too far from Echo town, out from underneath the counter and lit them to hold back the natural darkness and carried one out the door and hung it from the ruins of the hotel's old sign so Evan could see it when he'd finally decide to arrive. Lieu shivered in the cold as night set in. Casey seemed to notice and began removing his thick coat.

"I'm fine," Lieu protested.

Casey simply nodded then put their coat, thick fur and an earthy brown color, around her shoulders, "Doesn't stop me from worrying."

Lieu stared down at the offending clothing draped and bagged around her, sleeves going past her hands and its length trailing down past her legs and down to her ankles. Seeing her body disappear within the fabric brought her back to the first days after the Silence, when the chill of the twilight days of fall locked them in all too quiet buildings, huddling together with people she'd come to know as a second family, but at the time with names she'd hadn't yet memorized. Casey had given her their coat, hoping it could at least end one reason she was shaking enough to rattle her teeth.

Either Casey's height and build made them a true titan, a possibility given they were easily the most well built and athletic among the Seven, or Lieu had failed to grow much at all. Lucy feared it might have been the second, panicked survival in an empty world didn't leave much room to build a nutritional diet. Still she'd put on considerable muscle of her age even if it was swallowed up by the coat. The food they had eventually managed to scavenge and then grow kept her from ever seeing her own ribs. All in all she was healthy enough given the circumstances, even if a growth spurt eluded her. Truth be told she didn't mind her small stature too much, she only held any dislike for it because the rest of the seven tended to use it as a point of teasing, evidence for her childishness. It wasn't her fault she was surrounded by titans and toothpicks.

The door to the *Object Permanence* creaked open and another chill pierced Lieu, fishing her from her thoughts. A man walked in carrying a cardboard box stacked with thick tomes covered in a clean cloth, and on his own person, a coat of a similar shade to Casey's that lacked the fur lining and exchanged the fraying wear and tear of the outdoors with a seemingly permanent layer of dust. He had a stubbled chin, shaved clear no less than a week or two ago, chestnut hair disheveled but washed clean, black gloves worn and graying, and eyes behind square glasses frames that were alight with an almost frantic excitement.

“Well look who finally decided to show up” said Lucy looking up from a conversation it was having with Adias.

“Apologies, apologies,” Evan repeated as he scrambled as fast he could to the counter without endangering a trip that could cause him to drop his parcel.

Adias chuckled, “Finally he arrives, should we be expecting Cline in your footsteps?”

Evan apparently found the humor enough to laugh, if in offense, “I’ll admit, I’m a bit of a recluse, but I am no hermit.” He placed the box down on the counter and pulled off the blanket, noticing Lieu and with a smile offering it to her, to which she pouted and adamantly refused.

Evan shrugged at the rejection and turned his attention back to the books he’d brought and began pulling them out, “Erm, do you all mind clearing the place of liquids, don’t want the books damaged after all, I only dared bring them from the library because it’s a dry cold tonight and because their knowledge is in need.”

Lucy nodded reluctantly and put away the pitcher of water she’d drawn from the back kitchen earlier in the evening and collected everyone’s glasses. Lieu stole one last sip before relinquishing her cup. Evan began placing the books down in front of them, each one placed with the calculated yet excited reverence Lieu recalls her mother having for her bible she’d attempted to get Lieu to listen to her read every Sunday morning noon and night. Lieu leaned forward in her seat to read the cover of the one placed closest to her, resisting the urge to paw it with hands still laced with soil, knowing it would only throw Evan into a fit.

“Ecology of the Trout and other North American River Fish” was its title.

“I sifted through as much of the library as I could, and found everything we have on our miraculous new neighbors!” Evan said, glee falling from his tongue like a waterfall. He hefted a triangularly shaped book, no not book, more like a fancy binder, and held it towards Lucy. It reached for it until Evan flinched and pulled it back just out of reach. Lucy rolled her eyes with a sigh and opened a draw to its right and slipped on a clean pair of gloves. “There” It said.

Evan smiled and nodded fervently, handing the binder to it, “Cook book, there are recipes with trout on pages twenty five, forty seven, ninety one, one hundred ten, and one hundred thirty four.”

“Couldn’t you just mark the pages for me?” Evan gave it a look of horror.

“Right, dumb question.” It flipped to the first page mentioned and began reading.

Evan repeated this ritual to each of the Seven, granting them with books tailored to their responsibilities and interests that had anything to do with trout. “It’s marvelous isn’t it?” Evan said, handing a book on the use of fish in fertilization methods to Adais.

“I didn’t think you’d be the one to get excited over fish, or any animal for that matter” he remarked.

Evan shook his head with gusto, “But of course I am! What do you take me for? This is incredible! It changes everything!” He shouted, his voice bouncing off the walls and out the door into the wind and to climb the concrete jungle gym of the city to its highest peaks. Lieu felt her excitement from earlier creeping back in.

“Five years,” Evan whispered in astonishment. He held a single book in his hands after distributing the rest, it was a book he seemed to always keep on his person. It was a tiny tome, small enough that anyone, even Lieu with all her issues with attention, could read in a single day. Its binding was weak and shifting with the tiniest touch. Its cover faded to an indistinguishable brown swirl with the barely legible title of “*The Library of Babel*.” Evan traced his fingers over the cover, ridges, and crumpled spine of the book as delicately as he did all other things. Like it, and anything else he touched, could disintegrate at the smallest of false moves.

“Five years, five years I’ve kept track. It’s been five years since the whole bloody world vanished and we were left over. Five years we haven’t heard a peep from anybody, person or animal.” He looked away from the group entirely, fixating on his book. His voice echoing a deeply familiar pain. “Just. Nothing.”

The budding excitement muted as thoughts of just how empty the city truly was, how small their little village was, woke among those in attendance. Lieu looked down at her feet, thin sticks dangling over a foot off the ground from her stool. Grasping for thoughts to crowd out the pregnant silence, Lieu took a particularly vivid interest in her shoes. A dark green faded to the shade of mulch with laces matted and frayed, holes big enough for her big toes to fit through engulfed the front of both shoes to give air to otherwise cramped feet dealing with the growing reality that they were a size too small and counting. The silence burrowed itself into a pit in her heart and laid frost along its eggs.

Evan perked up and made an effort to fix his eyes upon each of them, even waiting a few moments for Lieu to look back up. He was smiling, a weak smile, one anchored by anxiety and inflated with a thin yet pervasive optimism. “But you saw them Lieu, right? Trout, *Oncorhynchus mykiss*, fish.” His smile grew, “Life.”

“That’s what she said she saw.”

“All due respect Casey but please, I need to hear it from her. She saw them, not you, I-” Evan stops short, almost choking up. “I need the primary source.”

Lieu stole her eyes away from her shoes, eliciting a shiver down her whole body. She took a deep breath and looked up into Evan’s tired but eager eyes. “I did see them. I could get a real good look so I don’t know how many there were, but it had to be them, I’m sure.”

Adias hummed skeptically, “You said you saw it from atop the Wilco Building? Casey isn’t that pretty far from the river?”

Lieu shot a glare at Adias who quickly shot his hands up in surrender, “I’m not calling you a liar Lieu-”

“I know what I saw!” She snapped.

“And if you’d let me finish I was gonna say I believe you, I just think we should be careful about getting our hopes up.” Adias gestured to Lucy with his cup for a refill that it obliges. He took a sip then continued, “We’ve done well here, setting up the greenhouse, this bar,” he smiles at Lucy, it smiles with the faintest of blushes, “And Echo Town, God knows we did better than any of us thought we could. The trout,” he pauses, a little exasperated as he tries to find his words, “the trout sound great, amazing, I can already taste ‘em in my dreams, but I just don’t want us to all have those dreams and then have to deal with them, well, being just dreams y’know?”

Lieu dug her nails into the old wood of her stool.

Adias shakes his head, “I just...we’ve all had to deal with a lot of...disappointments out here. I don’t want us to dive head first and with all our hearts into another one.”

Silence again: Casey sighed and ran a calloused hand through their bed head. Daphne looked anxiously back and forth between Adias and Casey, failing again to reach out a hand to the latter. Lucy suddenly found great interest in whipping off a smudge on the counter. Adias continued with his simple drink and Evan’s careful grip on his book uncharacteristically tightened. Lieu bit her lip and squeezed her legs together as a tightness coiled around her. She hated that the Silence managed to make a city of seven feel more claustrophobic than the densest metropolis.

“I think, Adias, that we are all well aware of that,” Evan whispered with slightest contempt.

Disappointment. In the hard days after the world ended, disappointment was what she called the sounds that pierced the Silence. The panicked voices of people much older than her that she didn’t recognize; voices that didn’t belong to her parents, her teachers, her friends, voices that meant so much now but meant so little then. Disappointment was the sound of your own voice yelling “*Somebody, anybody?!* ” back at you, deeper by the day, as it echoed off a city’s shell with the only response being the whistle of winds that had always been there but you never noticed over the thousand different urban sounds you took for granted and never thought you wouldn’t hear again.

Disappointment; It sounded like a name she hadn’t yet and now never would summon the courage to tell her parents to call her. It sounded like a voice crack that made her want to cry. It sounded like the thundering of her own heart beat when she’d look in a reflection and saw hairs where they weren’t supposed to be, knowing there would only be more to come. Disappointment, yeah, Lieu knew that word. She wasn’t book smart, Evan didn’t like to put it that way but she knew it. She wasn’t book smart but she was pretty sure she knew every possible definition of the word *Disappointment*.

Lieu’s mouth started to dry so she began the difficult process of unclenching her now aching hand from her stool and raising it to her cup then hoping she wasn’t shaking enough to drop it before getting a sip.

She managed to be the first to speak, “Adias; what did Lucy tell you when you started the greenhouse, when your first plants died and Casey hadn’t found everything you needed yet?”

Adias chuckled, “Wasn’t expecting that, or you to remember that kid.”

“I was eight, not stupid.”

“Fair enough, but, well, it told me to uhhh” he blushed. “I don’t think the exact wording is appropriate for your-”

Lieu raised an eyebrow. Daphne and Casey did as well, their synchronicity would have been funny if the mood wasn’t still so soured.

Adias sighed, “I think it’s exact wording was,” he cleared his throat and threw his voice as high as it could go, “*Get off your sorry lazy ass and back to work. You’re not here to mope-*”

“-You’re here to live” Lucy finished for him, “Also that was a terrible impression of me and I’d like to sue for damages.”

Adias’ previous chuckle turned into a deep and happy laugh, “Not all of us were theater kids, and we should be thankful for that.”

Lucy seemed quite crossed at that, “And what is that supposed to mean? I’ll have you know that knowing how to put on a good show is half the reason I can handle you trainwrecks.” It put its elbows on the counter and head in its hands and leaned forward with a sugary sweet smile, “And where would y’all be without me?”

“An actual bar?” Daphne interjected. Everyone looked at her. A beat passed, another moment of silence, and then they erupted with laughter. Evan nearly dropped his book as he bent over and clasped his knees to steady himself. Casey choked on their water. Adias laughed so hard he hiccuped. Lieu smiled as the tension sprung free from her body and atlast she felt she could breathe again.

Casey regained their composure as quickly as they lost it and clasped a hand on Lieu’s shoulder. “Lieu’s right, no sense in sitting around and wondering about ifs. Let’s just find out for sure, good or bad.” Daphne smiled and affectionately ruffled Lieu’s hair. She only put up a playful opposition.

Adias nodded, “Never meant to imply we shouldn’t, but you’re right we can’t go in expecting to fail. I’m sorry.”

“You better be,” Casey replied, “I’m supposed to be the cynic here, I don’t think the group can stand two.”

“Trust me we can hardly stand one.”

“Oh shut up Lucy.”

Evan let out a contented sigh as he straightened himself, “Wonderful, but to your point Adias, yes I understand. I’ll...refrain from getting ahead of myself. There is still so much we don’t know, and if the trout are in fact back, that could mean, erm, well needless to say it was easy to get carried away.”

Lieu hummed thoughtfully as she ripped her water. Of course he'd be more excited about this than anyone. Why the Silence took everyone else and left just eight people in all of Belphamore haunted all of them but none as deeply as Evan.

Adais stood from his stool and stepped up to Evan and put a comforting hand on his shoulder, "It's ok, I thought that too. Let's just....make sure we don't count the trout before we catch them." Evan hesitated a moment, and then nodded in agreement.

As Evan joined them at the counter for water and meal, and the dark mood soon all but banished, Lieu looked down at her reflection in the water, shifting the mug so its contents wouldn't stay still and showed her a reflection. As she stuffed her watering mouth with Lucy's latest dish, she let herself wonder, and consider, where Evan's thoughts were heading.

If after five years the trout returned, what else could?

Chapter 4

Lieu wished she could say her day was off to a good start. The previous night ended perfectly, after a dinner filled with humor and hope everyone retired to their makeshift homes and while Lieu prepared herself to be sleeping among the soil and plants of the greenhouse, Casey made an offer.

“You know just because you’ve got to do greenhouse work during the day, doesn’t mean it’s not still my turn looking after you. Why don’t you camp with me?”

Adias and Daphne had agreed without much fuss after seeing how brightly Lieu’s face lit up at the thought. She didn’t want to insult Adias and Daphne, they were good at making a comfortable, if deeply unconventional, home, and sleeping there was more comfortable than at the library with Evan or the bar with Lucy. Evan didn’t seem to know what sleep was and Lucy had the uncanny ability to sleep anywhere and everywhere no matter how uncomfortable. Lieu wouldn’t be surprised if it could sleep sounds in a garbage compactor.

Nights with Casey though? She looked forward to those almost as much as the days spent salvaging. Despite claiming to have lived in the city for most of their life, Casey seemed almost deathly allergic to the prospect of staying indoors for any long length of time, even in bad weather. Daphne has had to practically drag them indoors for the winter months every year less they take their chances dying out in the snow. As such Casey’s living space was a campground in the middle of a city. They’d chosen a diner called *Hermes Delight* on an offshoot road in Echo Town just off the crumbling highway that before the Silence would have stretched across the now shattered south bridge into the endless sea of suburbia. The interior had long since been picked clean but it was the roof that still mattered. The diner was in the unique position of being close to Belphamore’s downtown area, yet due to a lucky break of civic planning, was far enough away from any skyscrapers or other towering buildings that, if you laid a blanket or tarp out along the roof and laid down on it and looked straight up you wouldn’t see a single trace of the city. No roof tops, no billboards, or the water tower painted a loud faded rainbow on 252nd street. Just the sky, the clouds, and most of all the stars.

Lieu had thought she knew what stars looked like before the Silence. She’d seen them in movies, and shows, and if her dad put her high on his shoulder and she squinted really had at the sky she could see a half dozen pinpricks of white light in the sky, like broken pixels muttered across an old laptop screen so they refused to be the proper color as the rest of the background.

Light pollution, Casey taught her. A term Evan never thought to do when he taught her the history of Belphamore. Apparently the thousands of lights from cars, shops, and buildings condensing around the city were so bright that it made it near impossible for the eye to see the stars, and Lieu who’d spent her entire life in the city, grew up thinking it was normal. It wasn’t till the first night, a few years ago, when Lieu had had the courage to camp outside with Casey that she realized how wrong she was.

Lieu at first struggled to find a word that fit them. Eventually she settled on one Evan taught her when teaching about art, a mosaic. The stars that once looked like scuffs and chips of paint on the night sky now looked like a river of pale yellow and silver dust that sent rays of dim light down to perch on the tops of Belphamore's highest skyscrapers, like birds coming to roost.

Casey set up a large and hardy tent fit for camping in the deep wilderness and a gas grill that was getting harder and harder to find viable fuel for. They also had with them a large tarp ready to set up to shield their little encampment from the rains, but on nights like last night where there wasn't a cloud to be seen the tarp made for an excellent spot to lay out and just watch the night pass by and the near full moon drift across the sky.

Adias and Daphne were great, they really were, but nights spent at Casey's camp were her favorite. Which made the feelings plaguing the next morning all the worse to handle.

Mornings were never really Lieu's thing. She'd always been known to be a well of seemingly boundless energy, a fact she took pride in, but something about mornings, more and more as the years went on, just hurt. There wasn't much of a better way to describe it, they just hurt. Like her body just wanted her to feel gross. The grime and sweat from the previous day's work was screaming its presence into her ears and made her hyper aware of every hair on her body and made her squirm in her own skin like a cocoon that was spun wrong. There was one downside to spending nights at Casey's campgrounds, they didn't have the means of taking a bath. They didn't think they needed it, after all they sometimes went days without talking to the others in Echo Town as they went on long scavenging expeditions all by themselves, and if they really needed to clean off they could just cannonball into one of the slower moving sections of the Belphamore river. Five years without the city churning out pollutants left the river cleaner than it had been in two centuries, they claimed.

Mornings were a gambit between feeling neutral and feeling like death to Lieu and as much as she loved staying with Casey she gambled with every night she spent there and it looked like she lost the pot this time.

Casey noticed Lieu's discomfort and awkwardly pulled her into a half hug, they weren't really known to give anything more, "You wanna go to Lucy's? It'll probably have a better breakfast than I can make."

Lieu rubbed the start of a tear from her eyes and nodded so the two packed up and made a brisk beeline back to the *Object Permanence*. Of all the homes of the Seven, Lucy made the most concerted effort to stay clean. Even Evan the neat freak let hygiene slip every once in a while, but not Lucy. It, actually she; She clarified her pronouns for the day shortly after Casey and Lieu's arrival, took one look at Lieu's state and entered what others of the seven had taken to calling "Mother Hen Mode" and quickly whisked Lieu off to the warmest bath she could draw without electricity.

“One of those days Lieu?” She cooed as she rubbed her back sitting aside the tub while it warmed.

Lieu nodded meekly, resisting the urge to scratch the hairs off her face.

“Do you have a clean razor?” Lucy asked.

“No, I wanted to try and find one in the city yesterday but after what happened it slipped my mind.”

“Sadly I ran out as well” Lucy gave Lieu a comforting pat on the cheek, “You enjoy your bath as long as you like, I’ll go ask Casey to find you one when they go out today. Ok?”

Lieu nodded and tested the water with the tips of her toes. Lucy stroked her hair soothingly before getting up and making her way towards the door. She was half way through it when she turned around, “Hey kid?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re pretty.”

Lieu’s heart fluttered and her shoulders tensed, “You don’t-”

“I don’t lie kid, I lied about being comfortable with only she/her for almost twenty years and got tired of that. Was enough lying for one life.” She smiled. “If we still had a real school and kids your age you’d have boys lining up to be your first partner.”

Lieu blushed, “Luuucy”

“Right right, girls too. Oh and us enbys as well.”

“Just leave” she said, unable to hide a small chuckle.

Lucy beamed at the reaction, “All right I’ll stop teasing. Just give yourself a break is all. Promise?”

Lieu paused then nodded.

Lucy returned it, “Good.” She passed through the door and began to close it.

“Lucy?”

The door creaked back open, “Yeah Lieu?”

Lieu hid her face between her knees, “Can you say it again?”

“Of course sweetie. You’re a pretty girl, Lieu.”

Lieu sniffled, “Thank you.”

“Take as long as you like, I’ll make breakfast.”

The door closed and Lieu uncoiled, wondering if she felt better not being perceived at the moment, or worse being alone with her thoughts and her skin. She slithered out of her clothing and briefly wondered if she’d be a bother asking Lucy to add it to the next wash she’d do. She looked around the room and took note of there being no mirror. She briefly wondered if Lucy removed it while drawing a bath. She’d have to thank her later.

Lieu sank beneath the surface of the water and using some soap Casey procured from a trip a week ago scrubbed herself clean; down to the bone, scrubbed until her skin was raw and she gasped out a few tears that thankfully vanished into the tub. As clean as

she could be and her nerves slowly pulling themselves together she sighed, somehow already exhausted from the day and wanting to go back to bed. It had been nearly a month since she'd had a morning this bad, and somehow last night was the first one in so long where she went to bed with dysphoria being the furthest thing from her mind, where new possibilities, excitement, and adventure felt like they were just a sunrise or two away, as if some stupid fish swimming down a river was going to change anything that mattered. If she wasn't so out of breath she'd break into bitter laughter. "Some things don't really change, do they?" she mourned.

Lieu slid herself down the slope of the tub till her whole body was submerged so she wouldn't have to look at it. It was when all but her nose and upwards disappeared into the bath's warm embrace that Lieu let herself fully relax and cry until the episode passed.

Chapter 5

Lieu emerged from her bath when the warmth couldn't persist any longer and the pangs of hunger began to make themselves known. Reluctantly she dried herself off with a towel Lucy left her and pulled open the dresser drawer in the corner of the room where she kept spare clothing from the nights she spent here under Lucy's watch. Despite the love she had for camping out with Casey, Lieu knew she should probably ask Lucy if she could stay here the next few nights. Mournings where the dysphoria reared its ugly head were rarely one off occurrences, and the chance of tomorrow being as bad were too high for even Lieu's tendency to push her luck.

Lieu pulled out the most feminine clothing she had that fit the weather of early autumn then made her way back down stairs, spirits properly lifted for the first time that day at the sweet scent of Lucy's cooking. Every member of the Seven knew how to cook to some degree, even Lieu, but they rarely ever did. Lucy's cooking simply put all of them to shame.

"Hash browns?" Lieu asked as she skipped the last step down and onto the floor of the *Object Permanence*.

Clad in a hot pink apron, Lucy stepped through the door leading to the kitchen carrying in mitts a skillet stacked high with hash browns, "Oh course, knew they were you favorite" she dumped the entire gluttonous portion size onto a plate on the counter and slid it a little closer to her and winked. "Now eat up."

Lieu smiled, genuinely, and climbed up into her seat and began eating, slow for a few moments, and then ravenously.

"Glad to see you've still got your appetite."

Lieu nearly choked on a large bite and chased it down with a large gulp of water from a mug Lucy handed her not a moment earlier.

Behind them, sitting in corner chairs and with a table between them in front of the empty fireplace was Casey and now Daphne with finished plates at their side, licked clean to her disappointment. Whatever amount of hash Lucy had made, Lieu could probably always find some place to cram it.

With a torn and faded map of Belphamore before them, Casey gave her a friendly wave and a look accompanying his shout that conveyed an unspoken question of "*You good? How can I help?*"

Lieu responded in kind with a smile where only a little of the mischief was forced, "What can I say? I'm a bottomless void."

Daphne gave her a smile and wave as well as a good morning that Lieu reciprocated without fuss. The two adults resumed their conversation. Lieu watched them while she chewed away at her breakfast, slowing her pace after a brief and angerless scolding from Lucy. Casey sat up straighter, their usual hunch gone along with them always unkempt hair. It wasn't anything even Lieu would call orderly but Daphne had a worse grasp on that concept than Lieu. Daphne also had an unusual stiffness to her

posture, as if she were worried an uncalculated move could ruin something, a precaution Leu had never known them to take. Something was up with those two, and it went beyond the simple awkwardness of Daphne helping Casey on a Scavenge for the first time in years. Lieu had a suspicion, or rather Lucy had her's and was a self proclaimed horrible gossip around other women. Lieu smiled. She was jealous that Daphne would end up being Casey's aid for the near future. She was a big enough girl to admit that, and big enough to get over it. So in spite of the sour feelings, she was happy to see them planning, happy to see the tiniest upturn of Casey' lips and the way Daphne awkwardly brushed strands of her auburn hair behind her ears every time she made fleeting eye contact directly with Casey.

Eventually Casey and Daphne left the bar with a goodbye and a healthy, and not at all awkward, distance between them. Once her breakfast was done, Lieu stood to thank Lucy for everything and began her walk to the Greenhouse to help Adias for the rest of the day, but was surprised when she heard her response:

“Oh no you don't kid, you're with me today” Lucy said with an innocent smirk yet a finality that left no room for debate or consideration.

“But why?”

She'd already jumped from one job to another in one day, now she was doing it again? What'd she do wrong this time?

Lucy, as alarmingly capable of reading her as ever, voiced her concerns before she even verbalized them, “You did nothing wrong kid, you were just shaken this morning and I thought you'd feel better sticking close to me today. Am I wrong?”

Lieu considered a moment then shook her head. It was true. She felt better after the bath and eating, but she still felt, for lack of a better word, fragile, and anything to reinforce herself would be hard to turn down. Especially when the one doing the reinforcing was a twenty something beanpole wearing an old biker jacket and enough tenacity to make the Belphamore river flow backwards.

Lucy smiled and pulled Lieu into a tight hug she gladly accepted.

“And besides I don't think being cooped up in the greenhouse is the best place for you today. We're gonna be out today. Which means...”

Lucy pulled an old shoebox out from underneath the counter and held it out to Lieu.

“For...me?” She asked.

Lucy nodded excitedly, “Was trying to figure out a good time to give it to you, and now feels right.”

Lieu opened the box and let out an excited gasp, “This is-”

“Made it myself,” Lucy said, beaming with pride.

Inside was a scarf colored with a soft blue hue on one side and a light radiant pink on the other. Lieu lifted the scarf from the box and rubbed the fabric between her fingers. It was so soft, a dream to the touch.

Lucy continued, just a tad bit more bashful, “Ma always said I was a terrible seamstress, but guess her opinion doesn't matter anymore. I think with this baby here, only yours does.” She smiled, “So whatcha think?”

Lieu gingerly wrapped the gift around her shoulders and neck. It was just slightly too big for her, something another person might take issue with and return, but something told her it was intentional, deliberate, just like every small kindness Lucy managed to show her. She finished wrapping it around her, its extra length causing a small pile up around her neck. With just a little shifting she could easily cover her face below her nose. With it she could hide the offending start of a beard, and the stubble that would make a wonderful substitute for steel if it wasn't buried in her skin like a parasite. With the scarf she could cover it with something beautiful, something warm and comfy, something her's and not her body.

“I love it” she croaked out. Another benefit of the scarf, it made it easy to wipe away tears.

Lucy tossed the box to the side and welcomed Lieu into a hug she accepted happily. “If you need a few minutes before we get to work, take them, I don't mind,” she told her.

Lieu wiped away the tears and swallowed her oncoming sniffles with a deep breath. “No, no I'm good. Where are we going? What do we need to do that we gotta leave the bar?”

When Lucy wasn't running the bar for the others of Echo Town, she was doing laundry for them and, if she had the time, put together a boxed lunch or two and give them out to the rest while they were doing their jobs. But Lieu didn't see any lunchboxes and Lucy had already changed out of her apron.

Lucy grinned sheepishly, “We're gonna have to go make sure a certain someone stays in the loop.”

Lieu froze, “Please don't tell me...”

...

Mornings don't get better; this was the moral of today's story if Lieu had any reading comprehension skills, something Evan had, for the longest time, concluded was a “*work in progress.*”

“Why are we going to see him of all people?” Lieu beamed. Despite her slow start, Lieu and Lucy were already well on their way before midday and were within spitting distance of their destination, a nine story tall apartment complex on Echo Town's main boulevard.

Lucy huffed at Lieu's protest, “I know Cline can be a bit crotchety-”

Lieu raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms.

“Ok, he’s crotchety *incarnate*, but he’s still one of us, and he deserves to know what’s been going on.”

“Then why doesn’t he come to the meetings? We have them every week!”

“He’s getting too old to climb up and down all these stairs Lieu, we’ll be like that too one day, sooner or later.”

Lieu looked up at the building before her. It was the tallest building in their little district and visible from nearly anywhere within its loosely defined borders and, at its topmost floor in unit 921, was the home of the Seven’s last member and the oldest resident of Echo Town, Cline. While the rest of the Seven, with the exception of Lieu, were at varying stages of their twenties, Cline found himself on the other side of the Silence at the ripe old age of sixty-seven, now over seventy.

“Then why doesn’t he live closer to us? Or at least not on the top floor?” She replied.

Lucy shrugged, “Some people are just set in their ways. I’ve tried to pull Casey indoors and Evan out of the library time after time and they won’t budge” she answered.

“Have you tried with Cline?”

“Not bothering, the old don’t need our arguments.”

The pair’s voices began to echo as they entered the building and began climbing the stairwell that twisted upwards in a cold spiral artery right up the building’s corpse. Lucy made each step with rehearsed purpose and a smile she wasn’t sure was strained because of the dust clogging the artery or some other annoyance.

Lieu shook her head. It wasn’t just the meetings, Cline never left his apartment, Lieu can’t even remember the last time she caught sight of him stepping out the door to look down on Echo Town from above. He never came down to see what Casey had found, what Adias and Daphne had grown, what Evan had to read, or what Lucy had cooked. He just sat up there, above it all, waiting for Lucy to run her lunch boxes to him three times as often as the rest of them as that was the only way he got his food and water up there.

“That’s just not fair. You do a lot for everyone, you shouldn’t have to go all the way out here constantly for someone who doesn’t seem to want to try.”

Lucy gave Lieu something she rarely saw from her, a glare. “I may as well have been a demon to my ma and pa growing up but if there is one thing they’ve taught me that I actually bothered to learn, it’s that you respect and take care of your elderly. It’s what they did for grandpa and it’s just what we’ve gotta do for Max.”

Lieu shyed back at the force in her tone and disappeared more into her new scarf.

Lucy’s gaze softened, “I’m sorry, that was too much and you’re probably still recovering from this morning. If you’d like to wait up here I can come get you when I’m done.”

“No, no, I want to help,” she protested.

Lucy smiled, “Alright then, let’s go.”

The top floor of the complex wasn't exactly a penthouse block, but those who lived there had been more than a little well off, with a communal balcony giving the residents an outlook over the river. Several lawn chairs sat rusting and tearing in the rising sun. Lucy walked up to the door to 921 and knocked three times, "Mr. Petterson? It's Lucy, I've come to see you."

She was met with a period of pregnant silence till the muted sounds of grumbling and creaking furniture could be heard from under the door. While Lieu waited for Cline to reach the door she stepped out onto the balcony and looked in every direction she could. You could really see all of Echo Town from up on this perch, the block of green amongst the hills of gray that marked the Greenhouse roof, the old curving architecture of the city library up on the enclave's back hill where Evan was no doubt hard at work organizing its contents for the thirtieth time since the silence or perhaps preparing Lieu's next lesson plan. Lieu was surprised how far into the city she could see from there, a lucky angle if there ever was one, she bet that if she sat there for a good long while she could eventually pick out the twin specks of Casey and Daphne milling about between abandoned buildings. The balcony was shaded well despite its height above the ground. Half of it was covered by the slope of the complex's roof, the other by a large radio antennae erupting from the center of the roof. One or more of the old residents must have had an old ham radio or something of the like.

Lieu pulled her scarf up a little tighter and pulled her eyes away from the looming shadow. Her father had had one of those, it had been a hobby of his, collecting old technology and fixing it up for use. They had wall phones, walkmans, record players, and his favorite, the ham radio. Lieu remembered cold snowy nights swaddled up in blankets with steaming hot chocolate, sitting next to him and having the time of her life leaping between frequencies in a hunt for other enthusiasts still keeping to chatting on the waves. Sometimes Lieu wondered if any of those channels were still open, filled with nothing but static and silence, wanting nothing more than to be occupied by people that weren't coming back.

Lieu turned her gaze towards the river. The One Way Bridge looked far less impressive up close. What was from a distance an endless stretch of concrete and wires across a rushing plane of water, the only of its kind still standing around Belphamore's island, was up close a clearer showing of the emptiness of the city than any of its hollowed out buildings.

Its road was not endless, coming to a stop about a half to two-thirds of a mile at the other bank of the river where more roads spiderwebbed off into sprawling suburbs upon suburbs. Saying it was the last bridge standing was as much a truth as it was a generous title. There used to be two other bridges; South bridge and West bridge, that connected Belphamore to the mainland around them just like East bridge, however they are now largely at the bottom of the river. According to the adults of the Seven, before the Silence the city government had gotten itself wrapped up in a massive scandal,

something about a budget being pocketed and maintenance being neglected; Lieu wasn't sure, her parents never talked to her about serious stuff like that. But because of that when the huge hurricane tore through the city about three months after the Silence hit, the South and West bridges collapsed with a horrific thunder and snap that Lieu had heard loud and clear from her hiding place beneath Lucy's bed. The East bridge barely fared better, the entire left side of it crumbling apart in a split straight down the middle that Evan said he would have called remarkable if disturbing wasn't a better fit. The right half still stood, the only connection between Belphamore and the wide empty world beyond the river. The right side, the side cars drove through the city, while the left to enter was long gone. The bridge's name stopped being East bridge since it was the only one left and started life with its new name; The One Way Bridge.

That hurricane, they'd name it too, like the weathermen did before the Silence. Casey had come up with it, *Artemis*, because it came in like a predator hunting its prey through the barren streets. Echo Town had been properly, or properly in her eyes, founded in *Artemis'* wake. It also marked the last time any of them attempted to cross the river and out to the rest of the world.

Lieu heard the old door to 921 creak open and she broke her gaze from the broken bridge, thankful for something to redirect her train of thought. Some things were too painful to think about; worse than parents she couldn't see and the sound of collapsing bridges.

The unit's door only opened enough for a head of matted white hair with a sheet of liver spots trailing down a long exposed neck to an abdomen covered by a simple stain covered white undershirt.

"Good morning Mr. Petterson, I hope you slept well." Lucy spoke with the cadence of smooth candy and the smile of a newlywed.

"I didn't," he replied shortly. Cline Petterson, elder of Echo Town, displayed no intent on stepping out from behind the door for either to glimpse a proper view of the recluse, instead he clutched into the wood and paint with yellowing nails and held it half closed like a protective shield to separate himself from the two women.

Lucy's expression softened, "Oh that's a shame, tell me is there anything I could bring you that could help? Any meal I could make you or-" She tentatively reached for the door, an action that seemed to deeply offend the cornered animal before her whose nostrils flared like a bull, and whose eyes narrowed on the hand that threatened to breach its containment.

He swung the door forward just an inch and retracted it just as quickly, effectively slapping her hand away with it.

Lieu scowled beneath her scarf but Lucy refused to miss a beat, simply shaking off the sting and pressing forward with her words, "Well if you need anything just ask-"

"Right" the man grunted and moved to slam the door.

“Wait!” Lucy lunged forward to halt the door and got her foot slammed between it and the frame in the process, eliciting a hiss of pain.

“What the hell are you doing, crazy bitch.” He snapped as he begrudgingly opened the door more to let her foot free.

Lieu leapt forward to pull Lucy back and, without thinking, interposed herself between the door and Lucy.

“What’s your problem?” She yelled.

Cline moved to pull the door closed again but paused as he got a proper look at Lieu, the first one he had in probably years. His eyes resembled those of washed ashore fish as he seemed to rack his brain for a person or name to attach to who he was looking at and couldn’t recognize. Lieu was too angry to notice the slightest flash of concern before his scowl managed to deepen further and his eyebrows crease downwards even more.

He pushed the door open nearly all the way, exposing the ancient slacks and dress shoes he wore and the immediate contents of his room that at a single glance made Lieu reconsider any designation of Adias or Daphne’s living arrangements as “*messy*.”

Cline strained his neck and looked past the two of them and off the balcony towards the One Way Bridge. He seemed as though he was searching for something, failed to find it, then looked back to Lieu, again searching for a recognition that finally seemed to come with an even *further* souring of his expression.

“Ah you brought the lad with you this time. Growing well enough at least” he said with something approaching approval from a cross country distance.

Lieu felt her stomach drop out from under her and roll off the balcony, every hair on her body alighting like blades fileting her skin.

Lucy, who'd spent the last few moments biting her lip and rubbing her sprained foot, regrew her spine and finally dropped the smile she'd been keeping and replaced it with a look of steel. She grabbed Lieu by the arm.

“Cline” she cut, “I believe *she*’s told you before-”

Cline groaned, “Save it, *he*’s the last kid on earth, *he* doesn’t need you getting all those ridiculous ideas in *his* head.”

Cline returned his gaze to Lieu. If he noticed her beginning to shake he didn’t seem to care, and spoke to her with unearned familiarity, “So *son*, what brings you all the way up here?”

Lieu's tongue crawled down her throat and all she could manage was a whine.

“What was that? Speak up *boy*, my hearing is not what it used to be.”

“CLINE!” Lucy yelled to cut him off. Lieu knew she only wanted to protect her, but the sudden spike in volume tipped her over the edge. She burst into tears and let out a sob that cracked so thoroughly that to Lieu’s ears she could never mistake for the cry of a girl but one of a pubescent boy.

She tore her arm from Lucy's grip and bolted for the stairs, broke past the light from the balcony, and plunged down into the dark gut of the building's stairwell. She ran, ran from the body that surrounded and hated her, ran from the voice that would only get worse, and ran from the voices that chased and passed her in the echoing stairwell.

"How dare you?" Spat Lucy, too late to help.

"Not my fault the *boy's* a little bitch. That your doing? You put dogshit in his brain and make *him* think *he's* a *girl*?"

Lieu tripped on the final step and slammed painfully into the dirt. She scrambled to her feet, flailing like a wild animal, and bolted unthinkingly out the door and down the nearest alleyway as fast as her feet could carry her. She could care less where they took her, she just wanted to escape.

But since she couldn't outrun her own body, going where that balcony couldn't see would have to do.

DISQUISITION

Discussion of Origin

The road to deciding on my thesis topic was not a straightforward one. Of my initial ideas I had devised during Intro to Honors Research, none of them ended up becoming my final plan, none of them were even a creative thesis. My first idea was an exploration of how internet born fandom culture and the use of social media has affected how we tell, consume, and remember stories. My second was an essay exploring the origins of the use of queer people as the basis of monsters in classic and modern fiction and how those portrayals developed over time. My third idea came about early in 498; an essay exploring the concept of first vs. second world fantasy and the differing themes between the two framing devices.

All three of these ideas excited me, and I hope to at some point in the future find ways to explore them in the detail they all deserve, however I came to the realization about halfway through the fall semester that I wasn't feeling fulfilled with the direction I was taking and decided to shift my thesis into a radically different direction and into a Creative Thesis.

Storytelling in all its forms has been a passion of mine since the beginnings of my education, and the one I chose to focus on is the classic format of a novel/novella. I've attempted to write in this format in the past to varying degrees of success and completion, and so I settled on this medium fairly quickly. I did briefly consider the use of podcasting or an audio drama format, as it is the creative format I am using for my New Media capstone I've developed within the same time frame as this thesis, but ultimately I

decided to stick with the more traditional format of the novel/novella for this project as to ensure a diversity of medium within my creative portfolio as I develop my body of work.

My format decided upon it was time to decide the story I would be developing. My genre of choice has always been fantasy, however that did not feel like the proper choice for this thesis on the account of the frequent bloat within the genre. Bloat is an issue I find with my writing on occasion, my inability to avoid “going too big too fast” and losing the emotional fundamentals of the story I’m writing, so when planning my thesis I made it a priority to avoid the large scale in favor of forcing myself out of my comfort zone to explore what I can do with a smaller narrative landscape. I looked through the lists of story ideas I’ve come up with in the past, ones for one off stories that didn’t fit my genre of choice, and I came upon one that I’d thought up a year prior on a whim and had not bother to pay it much mind since: The Story of *The One Way Bridge*.

I chose this story in particular because it fit my wish to focus on character study and relation to their environment, as well as the chance to explore the perspectives of LGBTQ+ characters that are so often passed over in favor of more mainstream varieties of protagonist.

Purpose and Intent

As alluded to in the introduction, one of the most important aspects of my work with *The One Way Bridge* was the unambiguous queerness of the story and characters. To take a step back to define *The One Way Bridge*'s genre, I would call it "post-apocalyptic slice of life." The story takes place on earth several years after an ambiguous calamity known as "The Silence" that left a small handful of strangers in the ruins of their home city of Belphamore with no trace of those taken from them. But *The One Way Bridge* is not the story of their struggle to survive or the mystery of how the world ended as I feel those dramatic hooks are narrative trappings of the post-apocalypse genre that I expressly wished to avoid.

This is not to imply that those types of stories don't have great merit both as a form of entertainment and societal introspection. Guerrilla Games' *Horizon: Zero Dawn* contains one of my favorite video game stories, and the lynch pin of its narrative comes from exploring how its old world ended at the hands of rogue war machines, its rebirth in techno-mysticism, and the lives of the people in its new age both freed of the binds of an old society, and still molded in subtle and profound ways. Its step by step unraveling the mystery of the "Faro Plague" and "Project Zero Dawn" is honestly a master class in its genre. Beyond and before *Horizon* we had the genre's arguably most renowned entry into the medium of gaming, *Fallout*. The first *Fallout* game, while a hidden gem by the standards of the rest of the franchise, embodies a lot of these "trappings" of the genre I mentioned. The fantastic opening narration done by Ron Pearlman spells out the causes of the end of the world, and every step of the game's journey reinforces the ghosts of the old world. I've even heard said before that the old world is the main character of the

game, though I can't find the internet comment that was its source. The first *Fallout* game, much like *Horizon*, lives in its duality with, and constant recollection of the world before the apocalypse, as if every character and struggles' purpose is to find where it/they stand in relation to what once was. It's never entirely about its main characters, Aloy and the Vault Dweller, but about their relationship to the broken old world. And do you want to know what I think about them? They are fantastic! But as such, I didn't really want to spend my creative thesis simply chasing their impressive shadows. In the early stages of world building for this project, I ran through a number of different ideas for what event, conspiracy, or conflict boiled over and caused "The Silence", but ultimately I thought back to the story of Ted Faro's arrogance in *Horizon* and the nuclear war of *Fallout* and I felt I couldn't think of something to truly stand out from them. I'm not putting down my abilities as a writer and world builder, but in planning my thesis I felt the need to acknowledge this fixture of the post apocalypse genre; "what caused the end of the world?" is a narrative bottleneck for the genre. A bottleneck mind you, that many of the best of the genre have turned into something quite fashionable, but a bottleneck nonetheless and one I ultimately felt did not need to be important to the identity of the story I wanted to tell in *The One Way Bridge*.

For all the genre's successes with exploring the specter of their world's great stage setting calamity I feel post apocalypse stories that dwell on the events that preceded and caused the end of the world as the characters know it, tend to miss the forest for the trees. They get bogged down in the nitty gritty world building details of how the tragic events that begin their story come to pass when the moments I find the genre to be at its

most emotionally satisfying and memorable to be the parts that explore the “new” world, the lives of those left in the wake of an ending, not the play by play of the ending itself.

This shifting of focus to the “post” world is the key to *The One Way Bridge* as a story. I made the decision from page one that I would not waste time elaborating on the mysterious “Silence” any more than I needed to to give the rest of the story its proper emotional context. I wanted to avoid the story obfuscation of obsessing over the mechanics of how the world of Belphamore’s ruins came to be as I, and hopefully the readers, are far more interested in the people who found the world on the other side of its ending and what they have become in its wake.

A story that focuses on this aspect that was important to my growing understanding of this genre was Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. *The Road* is never interested in exploring what caused the end of the world, and instead intimately focuses on the relationship between a father and a son as they move through its bleak setting. Remembering this novel helped me visualize what it meant for a story to be a post apocalypse story while keeping the focus away from the grand state and fall of the world and instead on the intimacy of personal connection in its characters.

However there was another aspect of post apocalypse fiction that I wanted to steer away from that *The Road*, admittedly to the benefit of the story it was trying to tell, fully embraced, and that was an oppressive and gloomy tone. From start to finish *The Road* is brutal, unforgiving, and at times downright horrifying to the point where I had to take extended breaks from reading it. Its cruelty was not without purpose and beauty; its darkness gave the moments of love and light between the two main characters all the more power, and were what truly stuck with me. Even so, when thinking about *The One*

Way Bridge, I couldn't see myself giving it such a tone. For all gloom's merits as emotional framing, I have had frankly enough of it in the simple facts of life in the 2020s so far. *The Road*'s intensity got me wondering about the opposite of its narrative equation. Could a post-apocalypse story keep its identity as post-apocalypse and hold the interpersonal relationships and struggles of its character as its emotional crux without the use of suffering and bleakness as a narrative emulsifier? My first instinct was no, of course not, the genre's got the world *apocalypse* in its title, bleak suffering is not something that can really be removed from it. But thinking about it more, was that true? *Horizon: Zero Dawn* firmly holds the genre title and its spot as one of my favorites in the genre, but it puts focus on the beauty of nature and joys of community within its setting. Looking further back into my roots, one of the most influential shows to me growing up, *Adventure Time*, was also set in a world long after an apocalypse, and while its shadow lurked around many corners, ultimately it was a story about a young boy growing up in a strange yet magical world. Both of these stories are framed by their apocalyptic past, but the aesthetic and tonal landmarks of the genre do not hold purchase on their identities. So why should I try to strike out in such a direction with mine?

I set the story five years after the "Silence" to give the characters time to have already sorted out the basics of their new life. Every one of the characters has found their niche at keeping their tiny settlement afloat and their new normalcy has sunken in. None of them are in dire need for their basic needs to be met and there are no zombies, viruses, or any other sci-fi or magical threat prowling the streets to hunt them. No, life in the post-apocalyptic Echo Town has settled into a mundane rhythm of life after the end of the world, and this is deeply intentional. I find the most interesting material that can be

extracted from genres like post-apocalypse is what we can see in the behaviors of people who have found a way to live their lives in an environment so alien to our own that it can only properly be known in fiction. I'm not particularly interested in seeing how many zombies Lieu can sneak past or how many miles of dangerous territory the characters have to trek through to find safe harbor for a night. I want to know what it is like to grow up as a young trans girl in a city that has been emptied of people. I want to explore and ask questions of the day to day lives of normal people in extraordinary circumstances.

On a more personal level, the representation of characters from the LGBTQ+ community within this story is of undeniable importance to me as someone who over the course of their college career came to terms with both their own bisexuality and gender fluidity. Queer characters are far too often passed over for straight counterparts when the core of a story's narrative is not directly tied to a queer person's identity and struggles. We have plenty of queer literature, and that's incredibly important, but in my experience so much of it is regulated to stories explicitly and in their near entirety about queerness itself.

There are stories that help light the way in terms of representation for me. There is the wide world of webcomics out there, made by independent creators, many of which themselves are queer and making stories to see themselves in where mass media at large tends to fail them. A titan of rep that made waves in the middling days of my college career was the Netflix series, *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*. A resurrection of a franchise from the 1980s that had woven its way into the culture of the gay community at the time, and used as a lesbian icon ever since, made good on its legacy and the needs of the queer community to champion representation with its queer main character and

largely queer main cast. Most recently, the Disney channel hit, *The Owl House*, starred a gay couple that became official only halfway through the show's run. A more common queer sotry is the all too common occurrence of a character's queerness being saved till the very end to be confirmed like in *The Legend of Korra*, or saved as a bit of easily discarded trivia years later like what happened with Dumbledore in *Harry Potter*. I wanted a story with unmistakable queerness at the forefront of a story that anyone could love, and integral enough to the character's identity that it can't just be edited around for the sake of international releases, like what happened to Disney's "First Gay Character" in their movie *Onward*.

Gender identity is a thematic focal point in the narrative of *The One Way Bridge*, but it is also simply a character reality. Lieu is trans, Casey and Lucy are non-binary, these are important aspects of the characters and how they view the world, but *The One Way Bridge* is not designed to be entirely a queer story despite it being able to be classified as that. The core narrative of *The One Way Bridge* could survive with the character's queerness removed and in a way I feel that makes it stronger. It's a story meant to be emotionally resonant to everyone, and it is completely normal for a story to be queer simply because queer people exist in the same world as cishet people do, and as such the same stories largely written by, enjoyed by, and starring cishet people. Representation is important. I want a young queer teenager grappling with who they are to be able to find this book and see themselves in it, see that they aren't alone in the world and there are people just like them.

As for the value of this process, I wanted to stray into new ground for myself with this story, away from high concept world building and into the deeper character writing

that had drawn particular praise from readers of my previous works. As I was writing the prose I also wanted to test my abilities in three areas of fiction writing that I've always viewed to be my weaknesses: exposition, environmental description, and natural dialogue.

Victim to the follies of many primarily fantasy writers, a lot of my earliest work was bogged down with lengthy exposition that every writing class I've ever taken has led me to believe is an issue. As such I took a bit of an experimental risk in my writing: I decided to view the story's frame as a snapshot of importance within the life of Lieu and this community of seven and attempted to immerse the reader within that framing by limiting the amount of direct exposition as much as possible and let the reader piece together their understanding of the narrative in piecemeal. I wanted the readers to have to chew on the words and thoughts of the characters, and extrapolate the appropriate context from there. I am not sure how successful this narrative choice will be in the end, and perhaps when this work takes its final form before my eventual attempt to publish it I'll have gone back and beefed up the exposition, but for now I wanted to test this angle of writing.

In order to prevent myself from going overboard in exposition in any one area, I decided to try imposing a limitation strategy on myself: No bit of exposition is allowed to exceed a single paragraph/roughly four sentences. If I find myself going beyond that, try and split the exposition up throughout the scene, or cut the exposition short and see how the chapter flows without it. A strategy I want to try later in writing, either for this project or my next one, to avoid all exposition in my first draft and see how much of the story I can successfully convey without it.

Environments have always been a difficult thing for me to visualize both in reading and in writing, and many a writing project of mine have stalled for far too long as I struggled to put into words the landscapes of the narrative. Like with exposition, I tried to push myself in this regard, particularly in the first chapter where environmental description and grounding is the plot and emotional anchor of the entire section. The overgrown city of Belphamore is a setting I've spent a lot of time trying to envision for this project and attempting to do it justice. I got the inspiration for it by playing the game *Nier: Automata* which is a post-apocalypse game that is also set in a ruined city that nature is beginning to reclaim, and whose levels are more often than not defined by this contrast between collapsing technology and reemerging life. It was a treat to write and hopefully it has paid off.

In *Anatomy of a Story*, John Truby talked about environmental description by first exploring what thematic concepts and emotions are typically associated with a given setting: Desert are open but empty, harsh and draining, Mountains are isolated and cold, a perspective above the rest of the world and a place removed from other life. While advice like this felt obvious, hearing it put into words reminded me of the importance of thematic backbone in setting. Now to guide my environmental descriptions I tend to ask myself a few questions. What is the purpose of this location, and the state it is currently in, thematically? What does the thematic development of the story gain by focusing on describing this location? How will my descriptions feed into these themes? I put this thought process to use when describing the Green House, using the contrast of abandoned infrastructure and new life to show new growth, and detail Adias' curious personality.

Lastly is the issue of natural dialogue. In the opinions of my readers and my own self reflection, the strongest elements of my story have been the lengthy internal monologues of the characters I follow, and the ability to get the reader into the character's head space. I made sure to leave plenty of room in the narrative of *The One Way Bridge* for me to flex this strong point of mine, but I've in the past made use of this as a crutch to avoid having to write dialogue. There are few types of scenes in my writing that I've thrown out and restarted in frustration as scenes that needed to be carried by dialogue, and in some of my more amateur writing it felt painful seeing my competency visibly diminish when the narrative left the characters' heads and out their mouths. Oftentimes I would find my characters treading water in conversation, exchanging quippy one liners and snide remarks that helped characterization, but ultimately did little to move a given scene along. I'd be too worried about hitting readers with walls of exposition and stilted dialogue transparently pushing the plot forward in a lifeless manner, that I would find it incredibly difficult to move the plot forward at all in a conversational scene. A tip a writer friend of mine gave me while writing this did well in helping me along quite a bit was, "To make dialogue flow well, act the scene out yourself. If it sounds wrong spoken, it is wrong written." While this advice wasn't a life changing silver bullet, it certainly helped. I made sure to require of the story dialogue scenes that would challenge me to capture the characters authentically and believably in conversations when the isolated and contemplative nature of the genre would have been an excellent veil to hide from this weakness behind. The second and third chapters of the finished part of *The One Way Bridge* used dialogue as the core of its progression in an effort to show my growth in this area of writing.

Literature Review

The first piece of media that entered my mind when the idea of writing in the post-apocalypse genre for this thesis occurred to me, was an image of the crumbling city of the video game *Nier Automata*. In it you play as the characters 2B and 9S, androids in a war against rogue machines for the preservation of the last vestiges of humanity sequestered away out of the view of the characters and the player. Now of course the plot of *Nier Automata* is radically different from the plot of *The One Way Bridge*, one is a story about an endless battle against a looming villain, and the other is a laid back and contemplative ride through the lives of normal everyday people. That being said it was not the plot or high intensity action sequences that made this connection, but the mood, tone, and to put it a little more casually, the “vibes.” *Nier Automata*'s setting is an unnamed ruined city in what is assumed to have once been Japan, and while the game markets itself on its grand action sequences, to me the most defining and memorable element of the game was the city itself. The bulk of the game takes place in the city, with the story mission branching off into smaller zones around it before ultimately looping back into it once a mission is done, sometimes even letting the player explore more of the forgotten landscape. I and many players found ourselves spending many hours of the game simply wandering its ruined streets; taking in the sights of broken buildings, some standing, some not, exploring where nature had come to reclaim what humanity had taken, and where it had yet to touch, and within this city, hidden in a far corner of the map is a single encampment of the androids. From this camp much of the game's side content is generated, doing quests and gathering supplies for the small community as it grows and the androids contemplate what it means to be human, and to live in this destroyed world

they've been given. Few of the inhabitants leave its safety for these missions; as such the main duo, an older mentor in 2B and a younger protege in 9S, are set apart from the group as those that do brave the still abandoned landscape of the city. This dynamic is partially what inspired the role of the Scavenger that Casey occupies in *The One Way Bridge*: a quiet and capable figure that spends less time in the community than others in favor of venturing into the changed world for the greater community's sake, with the more eager tag along learning and growing as they go in the form of Lieu/9S. This dynamic was also inspired by others in the genre: The father and son from *The Road* and the brothers Finn and Jake from *Adventure Time*.

Another key aspect of *Nier Automata* and its influence on this work is its dynamic soundtrack that underpins the entire game, or at least one track in particular, *City Ruins/Rays of Light*. This track, aside from being the primary music track I listened to while writing this project, conveys a poignant tonal mixture of the beauty of nature slowly reclaiming the land and the simple joy of living. The moving violin and piano work with the distinct vocal style of the game's soundtrack to balance that bittersweet conflicting mood of *Nier's* world: The violin conveying the majesty of the natural world and the piano and vocals reminding the player of the distinct melancholy of the situation, how the world is empty and lonely despite its beauty. Humanity is gone from the world and its creations are slowly vanishing, but those that are still around are fully capable of living and enjoying the beauty of the world around them. I tried to capture this in one of the later scenes of what I've written so far, where Lieu is camping with Casey and looking up at all the stars in the night sky that she couldn't see before due to light pollution before the Silence.

Though they may be small in numbers and cling to a small corner of their world for community, they may still brave the empty world, experience it, and exist in it like “Rays of Light” breaking through the solemn stillness. *Nier Automata* is to me a prime example of post apocalypse fiction that helps define what I look for in the genre and engages on a tonal level with the type of story I wanted to craft for *One Way Bridge*.

A second work that shaped my perception of the genre is the book *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. In the story of *The Road* there exist four characters: The Father, the Son, the Ghost of the Mother, and the dead world. The world of *The Road* dies some ambiguous time in the past. The father and the son, names left unimportant, travel its corpse scavenging supplies to live another day, living with the memory of their wife and mother that killed herself in the interim between the apocalypse and the events of the novel. The tone and atmosphere of *The Road* is about as bleak as it gets, even for the genre in question. The world is shriveled up and devoid of natural beauty, leaving only starvation and cruelty in its wake, and while this pessimism of the physical state of an apocalyptic world stands in stark contrast to the natural beauty of *Nier*’s world, both use the state of their world as the core framing of the themes of the work.

Nier’s world is built and characterized as it is because it is a story of closed off characters finding beauty and joy in a world they’ve come to believe is damaged beyond repair. Meanwhile the hopelessness of *The Road*’s world is meant to push the bonds of the father and son to its limit. It’s an exploration of the endurance of human love and compassion that can buckle and bend but remains firmly intact no matter how awful the circumstances surrounding it. Its world is a gauntlet, while *Nier*’s is a painting.

There have been other works that have influenced my understanding of the post-apocalypse, and its cousin, the post-post apocalypse genre that have further shaped my understanding and expectations of the genre: Pendleton Ward and Adam Muto's *Adventure Time* taught me the surreal whimsy that can come with a world after its death and rebirth, and its irreverence further planted in my head the idea of ignoring the causes of a world ending in favor of the complexities of what can come after. The game *Horizon: Zero Dawn* did an incredible job of painting a thriving world in the ashes of an old one that examined how half remembered echoes from that old time can warp over time into new traditions, beliefs, and gods.

Fallout: A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game, Mad Max: Fury Road, Kipo and the Age of Wondersbeasts, Naussica and the Valley of the Wind; there are countless other pieces of media that have left their mark on me and the genre and an analysis of all or even a fraction of them would be a thesis or several onto themselves, but within the scope of my work preparing for and creating *The One Way Bridge*, they have all displayed one key element of narrative that defines the genre: The world is a character, its presence is felt in every breath.

In John Truby's *Anatomy of Story*, Truby talks about the importance of the story world and its many arenas, and how the choice of setting innately pushes and pulls a narrative in different directions much like a character would. This is because the setting is a character, and this is doubly important for a post apocalypse story. Truby explains that a character connects to others in the story in a criss-crossing character web. For example Character A has had a long and traumatic history with character B, and is trying to start over with a new friend in character C, however character C also has a history of trauma

with character B and worries connection to character A will draw character B closer. The setting of a story fits into this web as well, except it underpins every other connection. The setting may have forced characters B and C together initially and then offered a path out for C, maybe the conditions of the setting turned character B into who they are. The setting has its background, it has its kindnesses and malevolent episodes, it can foster growth in characters as well as prime them for falls. In a post apocalypse story, as the name implies, this interaction between setting and character is often the primary relationship at play and central to the story's narrative and thematic explorations. Stories in this genre are defined by the often violent and radical change within a setting, and the ensuing observation and exploration of the new setting its death throes created. Every post apocalypse story in some capacity grapples with how our environment, and the generational knowledge and traumas embedded in it, shapes us on both an individual and societal level.

Methodology

My creativity can often be a fickle thing; a visualization of it I've taken to liking it to a field of geysers scattered apart from each other, each one completely hidden, and no matter how deep I dig I don't find the water, let alone cause an eruption. But oh does it erupt. It takes an external push, a prompt that flips a switch in the back of my brain, and off I run, often dropping whatever I was working on for the next while as my mind races through drawing the scaffolding of whatever it is I've thought of. As an example, my time as a DM (Dungeon Master) in the D&D (Dungeons and Dragons) club here at UMaine. In games of D&D that I come up with outside of the club I often struggle to form something cohesive and gripping, all the ideas I've managed to "dig up" through brainstorming fail to come together right. In the club it's a different story. In the club we play in a pre-written setting, at time of writing it is the world of Eberron written by Keith Baker. While at first this might seem creatively stifling, for me it is a gift. I can take one look at a single blurb in the book, an interesting detail of a society, a plot hook left unbidden, or even something as small as an interestingly named location on the map lacking any prewritten lore, and start running with it. Some of my best work as a DM, and arguably some of my best writing period, has come from plots spiraled out of looking at these incredibly simple prompts. To put it in short, I need an external green light for my creative engine to kick into gear. For *The One Way Bridge* the "green light" came in two parts: one was lamenting that I couldn't include *The Road* in my reading list because I read it in high school. The other was Listening to *Rays of Light* from the *Nier Automata* soundtrack, I decided to let my brain take a break and think about what I would do to write a non fantasy/sci-fi story that evokes the same emotions of that song.

The next step after catching that runaway spark that helped me establish a setting and mood, was thinking up characters. My process of devising characters is roughly as follows: What emotions or themes do I want to invoke from my basic concept? For example: a concept is a “trapped in another world” portal fantasy story and from that concept I think of themes to explore like belonging, homesickness, or escapism. Maybe after that I think: “Escapism is a healthy human experience but it can be a poison if indulged in too much” is the theme I feel resonates with the emotions I’ve tied with the concept. Once my theme has been articulated I begin to think, “What struggles interest me or relate to that are reasonable within the setting and are able to contribute to the theme.” Like in a story about escapism being a virtue and toxic vice I might construct a character that has thrown themselves entirely into playing video games over normal human interaction because a string of harsh realities put him into a tough stretch of his life. Maybe once he is pulled into a fantastical world he becomes a tragic villain and sees the world as a video game free of his responsibilities and wreaks havoc. Perhaps instead he finds he is the only person capable of saving the other world and as such is forced to rise from his sloth to help someone other than himself. Either way the character’s arc serves to build upon the chosen theme. That’s how I view character writing, more often than not I treat characters as the heads of a hydra that is a work’s theme, they are all off shoots meant to loop back and strengthen the themes by the end of a work, and as long as I make sure to employ this in some capacity with every character I write, I find it easy to avoid writing “bloat” characters that contribute nothing or very little to the narrative.

To pull from *The One Way Bridge*, I sat down and thought about what losing the whole world you’ve known in an apocalypse would do to people mentally. I figured some

people would adapt well to it. What people would? People who are already used to being alone, people who have survival training, or people who felt they weren't at home with the old world and as such, would see the end of the world as a chance to make a new one one that they could belong in. That's how I created much of the cast: Casey fit in well with the first two types, their yet to be explored backstory involved camping trips with their father, and a lack of meaningful connections to those around them, making it easier to slip into the role they had in the new world. Characters like Lucy, Adias, and Daphne fell into the later categories. Lucy, being non-binary and someone who uses neo-pronouns, always found the old world, with all its thriving preglorious, one that was hard to be itself in, a restriction the Silence lifted. Adias hated the noise of the populated Belphamore and always loved the company of plants. On the other side of the coin are people who would not adapt well to the loss. I started thinking what type of emotions would be most powerful in this scenario, and above all to me was the feeling of denial. I wanted a character that's central thematic purpose was to represent denial, denial that the old world was gone and wasn't coming back. From this I put together the character of Evan. Evan locks himself inside the city library, surrounding himself with reminders of the old world. He cries every time Casey retrieves intact records of the old world, no matter how useless they are to the group's needs. Evan represents that denial integral to the thematic exploration in the form of a character.

George RR Martin says there are two types of writers: the "Architects" and the "Gardeners" or as I prefer to call them, "Discovery" writers.

An Architect writer outlines their stories extensively, planning out character arcs down to the chapter and effectively pre-writing the entire book before they even begin the

prose in earnest. Meanwhile a Discovery writer considers several key emotional beats they intend to reach by the end of their story but does little planning of the route to get there, preferring to let their pen take them on a joy ride as they discover the story chapter by chapter as they write. When I was first starting out I believed I was firmly an Architect writer, and to an extent I still am: I always draft an outline and a chapter forecast to every work of fiction. I think out all the key beats of a character arc and define clear moments in my mind that are meant to be turning points. But when it's time to write the story I find myself relying on the Discovery writer. What made me realize this discrepancy was my attempts at using writing planning software like Campfire and World Anvil, but I found it had an almost chilling effect on my creativity. Concepts that would spring to life as I was writing the story proper, felt like pulling teeth to express in a metatextual landscape and ultimately hurt my creativity. So while I do take pride in my architectural narrative skills, I still ultimately rely on scene by scene and in the moment intuition in getting characters forward through the plot in an emotionally satisfactory and sensical way.

When it comes to my writing I find myself to often be a perfectionist that takes their time developing a rough draft in order to ensure that it is of a decent quality as to save myself time, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy when it comes time for a second draft. This ultimately extends early time tables, my smaller than initially wanted size of the work done for *The One Way Bridge* at this time was largely because of this.

Critical Analysis

As denoted earliest in the Literature Review section, the primary mechanism within the post-apocalypse genre to explore its themes and characters is through scarred setting. In writing *The One Way Bridge* I took care to keep the character of the ruined city of Belpheomore present and accounted for in every scene, the characteristic of its silent presence is a constant theme throughout the actions and interactions of the characters. The first chapter of *The One Way Bridge* is entirely an exploration of post-apocalyptic scenery and the protagonist Lieu's small but meaningful existence within it. I used this detail of scenery to take a page out of *Nier Automata*'s melancholic beauty dichotomy to invoke the conflicting nature of living in a world devoid of so much we know. Lieu loves her cobbled together family, and is young enough that the wounds of losing the old world have started to fade, if only a little. She's taken a shine to scavenging and following in Casey's footsteps, and is fulfilled in doing this. She cherishes the fruits of her little community's joint labor at Lucy's bar, and the night she spends at Casey's camp gives her a chance to be mesmerized by the stars of the night sky undisrupted by the light pollution of the now dead city. Through her young eyes she is able to see the beauty in the ruins of the old and thrive in it, but the negative space it provides, the silence, is a constantly deafening force. The librarian Evan clings to knowledge of the old world like talismans against the fear of an empty world, holding himself up in the city library like a bunker, and Lucy clings onto trying to build a good relationship with the horribly bitter old man of Cline Petterson because he, like her, is one of the last people left, and as such she can't bring herself to cut him off because then that is seven down to six, another step closer to being alone in a silent world.

The pull of an old world just out of the peripheral vision of the story is a seductive enough force to cage the people of Echo Town in spite of the relative happiness they've built. Much like how the androids of *Nier Automata* or the Vault Dwellers of *Fallout: A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game* hold themselves up in small isolated enclaves away from the entire world that's been left to them in the wake of an ending they made it to the other side of. The end of the world, "The Silence" as the characters have taken to calling it, is a memetic trauma shared by all of them and bestowed on them by the setting itself. Whatever the tone, post-apocalypse stories are made with a deep undercurrent of loss and the fear that is born from that loss. The inhabitants of Echo Town are scared of losing what they've gotten back, losing another member of their group as they lost the group's de facto leader, August, only a few months after The Silence in the incident that created the name of the story. The One Way Bridge, the last passage out from Belphemore and into the great wide world that is now foreign to the characters. The reason The One Way Bridge is the titular symbol of the story is because to the characters it is a monument to the anxiety instilled in them by The Silence. It's where they lost someone for the first time, where one could say the world ended for them a second time. The characters know that someone could cross the bridge and find themselves in a world entirely different to the ruins of Belphemore, and if that person were to keep going and never return then their world would have ended once again, a self-made apocalypse. Because in the end that is what an apocalypse is, a drastic change in one's environment that changes how they must live their life forever.

The One Way Bridge is not a story about a single apocalypse, it's about many apocalypses, many "One Way Bridges" that once crossed cannot be crossed back. The

Silence can't be undone, August's death can't be undone, the trout returning cannot be ignored, the eventually arrival of the merchant twins Alice and Stetson from across the bridge cannot be simply forgotten, the fact that there are other survivors cannot be acknowledge while preserving the idea of their world of Belpheore being all that was left. Lieu realizing she was trans before the Silence wasn't something she could pretend wasn't real, a closet that she could stay in forever, neither could she pretend her eventual decision at the end of the novel to cross the one way bridge and into the unknown wasn't inevitable.

As a quick aside before the summary, the queerness of *The One Way Bridge* is a side of it that I cannot ignore or forget in this analysis. A thematic element that I did not fully get to explore in the length of the novel I prepared for this thesis is how the nature of gender expression would warp and change in a post apocalypse setting, especially one in which a child is being raised with no need to socialize within a particularly gendered society. Gender is a construct, assembled by varying clashing cultures and preconceived notions, so the idea of exploring it in the context of a world in which all of those factors are breaking down entirely appealed to me. A post-apocalypse setting is a new beginning for a queer person that needs an out from a prejudiced society. This is expressed by Lucy who is later shown to have started using the neo pronouns "it/its" after the Silence, and of course the main protagonist Lieu, a trans girl well before transition, who took the chance of the world ending to change her name, jump to she/her pronouns, effectively socially transitioning overnight in the eyes of everyone except the decaying fossil of the old world, Cline.

While the post apocalypse genre can pose terrifying and grim scenarios to test the limits of humanity, it also offers the alluring prospect of a new beginning, one that calls to most queer readers, leaving in its wake a form of mini-genre I like to call “Queerpocalypse.”

Summary

A sad but important lesson I learned in this process is to be more honest with myself on what I am reasonably capable of doing and creating within a set time frame. While I'm proud of what I have written for this thesis, it is less robust than what I had initially set out to create when I made my proposal back in November of 2021. I feel if I had aimed for a smaller target, say the first 25,000 words of the novel, I would have spent far less time stuck lamenting over not being within shooting distance of my goal, and would have procrastinated less. No doubt this more modest goal would have resulted in more work being produced for the final product, perhaps even more than the new goal would have been. That being said, I am glad I decided part way through writing to focus on taking my time to make what I would submit worth the time of my committee, and the time of myself instead of rushing to squeeze as much content as I could into my final product.

A more positive lesson I learned was to write what makes me passionate and happy, not what I feel is the safer option. I deeply regret wasting so much time in the first half of fall semester flailing around with thesis ideas that didn't click with me, that I'd chosen because I thought a creative thesis would have been "stupid" even if I knew all along I'd feel far more at ease and fulfilled doing one than a more conventional research paper. I guess in the end it was all part of the process of finding what worked for me, but I just wish that part had gone faster and I had doubted my initial instincts of wanting to do a creative thesis less.

From a more nitty gritty creative standpoint; I learned how to better handle scene description and dialogue within the novel format and ironically in the process of learning

to be hands off with exposition, stop fearing putting in exposition. This was because from the beta readers I'd gotten to read through my work on my thesis, the one prominent critique was to be more liberal with my explanations of events and characters, cutting back the natural flow of the scene in favor of small dumps of exposition. I realized that in my post-apocalypse novel, because the setting was so critical to the character's actions and decisions, I needed some exposition to show the terrain and thus to bring my characters to life. As I work through the setting and character interactions going forward, I will try to hit the sweet spot as I continue to write and hopefully one day publish *The One Way Bridge*.

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APPENDIX (CHARACTERS)

Casey Oaks: The Scavenger (They/Them, Age 26)

Casey was a minimum wage cashier at a convenience store in Belpemore. Grew up poor, with the most luxurious thing their family owned was a high quality camping tent that was the home of any vacation the family managed to take. Camping and the wilderness has always been an escape for Casey from the noise of the city, and where all their best memories with their mother and father came from. One night in their late teens while camping, their father just wandered off and never came back. They never went to college, couldn't afford it, and they lived in a crumbling apartment with their mother who was beginning to fall apart from early onset dementia.

Now post Silence, Casey spends their days scavenging food from grocery stores and other useful objects, bringing them to the other survivors then disappearing back into the still standing crappy apartment building they lived in before. They occasionally take Lieu with them on these trips. They harbor feelings for Daphne but have not acted on them.

Daphne Klaus: The First Botanist (She/They, Age 23)

Daphne is in her early 20s and the youngest child of four of the upper class Klaus family that had great influence in Belpemore before the Silence. They owned every convenience and grocery store in the city and had a gaudy billboard near the entrance of the city that is still partially standing. Her parents were both deeply paranoid individuals and kept the family sheltered from the outside world as much as they could, hiring expensive private tutors rather than sending them to any proper school. Her oldest sister was the darling child, constantly parroting her parents and striving to be the heir to the

family's business. Her two brothers that were the middle children hated the family dynamic and did everything they could to rebel and break away. Daphne spent her time growing up caught between these two attitudes, feeling utterly alone, until the Silence.

Daphne lives on the first floor of an abandoned apartment complex with Aidas, another of the seven, and the two run a greenhouse/indoor farm in the building to help provide food for the rest of the group to supplement what Casey finds when scavenging. She acts as an older sister figure to Lieu and has feelings for Casey which she tries to ignore.

Aidas Kairis: The Second Botanist (He/Him, Age 25)

Aidas is the aromantic and asexual roommate and closest friend to Daphne post Silence. Soft spoken and insightful, Aidas grew up in the country on a dying farm in middle american and came to the city to be the first in his family to get a college education with a major in agricultural sciences. The Silence hit halfway through his undergrad. He was the one that started up the indoor farm about a year into the post Silence world and eventually convinced Daphne to be a helping hand.

Aidas is probably the most emotionally stable of the seven, and has little in the way of insecurities, being entirely comfortable with who he is as a person after an adolescence of struggling to understand his own sexuality. The one ghost that still haunts him is thoughts of his family's farm out west and what barren ruin it must be now, as well as thoughts of the loving family he didn't get to say goodbye to.

Evan Berkley: The Archivist (He/Him, Age 31)

Evan was a library assistant at the Belpemore public library pre-silence with an intense love for learning, history, and literature. He dedicates himself to maintaining the

library to the best of his abilities and being responsible for pretty much all of Lieu's education beyond simple survival that Casey, Daphne, and Aidas teach her. Lieu thinks of him as a mentor and uncle-like figure.

Evan is a polarizing figure among the seven. He's a likable person, and makes sure everyone else has ample access to any reading they want, which is one of the few sources of entertainment they have left, and one of the few solid connections they have back to the old world. This however is the source of some contention. Some among the seven feel Even lives far too much in the past and not enough in reality. He sometimes acts like the old world of pre-Silence will one day magically return, as if it wasn't already 5 years dead. He seems almost obsessive about the state of his collected books, experiencing violent mood swings at even the idea of one being damaged.

Lucy Romano: The Mother (She/It, Age 22)

Lucy has always made it through life via one means and one means alone; being the most well liked person in the room. Lucy is about as extroverted a person as you could ever meet and thrives off of constant social interaction, something that has been in short supply since the Silence. Lucy's primary role among the seven has been what some in the group have jokingly referred to as "group mom," constantly checking in on each of the other seven to give them someone to talk to about any emotional problems they may be facing. She also takes the role of cook for the group at large. While every member tends to cook their own meals, her door is always open to anyone who wishes to dine with her, and she is responsible for cooking the monthly "family meal" the group all share.

In life she has largely ignored questions of her own gender identity and sexuality (which is ultimately non-binary and demi-sexual) in favor of presenting the most widely appealing persona to others around her, and is slowly learning to express herself in ways that are best for her in the wake of so few people being left to give her validation for being something she is not. She uses she/her pronouns but is slowly experimenting with It/Its, though right now Lieu and Casey are the only two she has told about that.

Lucy is absolutely terrified of being disliked and has a somewhat unhealthy determination to be liked by everyone left in Belpheore, including the old recluse Cline.

It lives out of a decaying hotel that's lobby has been turned into a bar called the *Object Permanence*.

Cline Petterson: The Recluse (He/Him, Age 74)

Cline is an elderly man who outwardly wishes to be left entirely alone. He lives in a ruined apartment on the 9th floor of a still standing apartment building in Belpheore (This results in him literally living above the rest of the seven, this is an important thematic detail). He stays there alone tending to his Ham Radio and searching for any signs of other life out there beyond the city. The only other member of the seven that he regularly converses with is Evan in order to take out books from the library. He also speaks with Lucy and Lieu fairly often though mostly due to necessity and Lucy's insistence. The only times he leaves his apartment is to go to the group's agreed-upon monthly dinners and a yearly visit to his wife's grave.

Lieu: The Child (She/Her, Age 12)

Lieu is a trans kid who was just starting to realize she was different and trying to find the words to express it to her parents when the Silence happened and was left alone.

Lieu was not her birth name, now dead name, and she came up with it on the spot upon meeting Casey and Daphne as she didn't want to give her name to strangers she just met. She is a smart child, hungry to learn more about the world around her and is constantly meddling in the lives of the others of the seven. She is jointly raised by all of them save for Cline and has come to view them all as family. One of her current projects is stockpiling hormone blockers and making her own HRT hormones as she is in the early stages of male puberty.

August Stetson: The Lost 8th (He/Him, Age 23 (Would be 28))

August Stetson was the 8th of the initial survivors and took the role of leader of the group in the first few months post Silence. He pushed for the group to venture out beyond Belphemore to find other survivors and eventually got his way. Him, Casey, and Daphne decided to head out on an expedition outside the city limits when tragedy struck and a powerful storm and flash flood blew through on their way out, killing August and nearly killing Daphne and Casey. This event scared the remaining seven into never trying to leave Belphemore again.

Casey felt a budding romantic attraction to August and was particularly crushed by his death.

August was fun loving and headstrong, always looking on the bright side of any situation and never letting fears or anxieties get in the way of what he thought was right.

BIOGRAPHY

Robert Hebert was born in 1999 and grew up in Scituate Massachusetts and is a graduating undergraduate at the University of Maine Honors College of the class of 2022. He's a double major in New Media and English and concurrent to *The One Way Bridge* Creative Thesis, he is creating a sci fi audio drama podcast called *Stardust Trails* for his New Media capstone. He has been the Loremaster for the Umaine Dungeons and Dragons Club for the last two years. He plans to continue writing fiction and become a published author.