

## Forget The World Out There

“They’re pulling this stunt *again?*” Namid groaned in frustration as he peddled us past the crowded city hall. Sign upon sign overlapped each other and lined the narrow sidewalk with messages in bold red or black ink. However, the words didn’t hold any significant interest to the others bustling along the sidewalks enjoying their evenings. They were far more interested in the market’s supply of fresh, local produce in the nearby park or sending out their letters before the post office closed for the night.

“They’re protesting the new *lighting system?*” I detested, “How can those protesters argue against something they haven’t tried? It hasn’t even *happened* yet!”

Namid quickly brushed it aside and accelerated the pace of his crimson bike; the gears turning and squeaking effortlessly in response. He was noticeably aloof with others, more focused on keeping himself and those close to him feeling content. “Don’t pay ‘em any mind, Tara. They’re just needlessly straining their voices anyway,” he mumbled, turning the corner onto a less populated street.

Burying my face into his shoulder, I tightened my hugging grip around his waist for extra precaution, “Will you just tell me where we’re going, *please?*” I begged impatiently, peeking through the strands of his blonde hair and at his sharp jawline. I

was never one for surprises - they got my heart racing too fast with emotion and my mind haunted with irrational thoughts that served me no purpose, simply a distraction.

Namid hummed in acknowledgment of my words, gripping the handlebars of his bike a little tighter while *something* occupied his thoughts. “Wouldn’t be much of a ‘*surprise date*’ if I told you what it was, Tara. So just stop asking. I already said I won’t tell you,” he mused with a mocking rhythm in his tone. Having this little secret remain over my head felt like a game; a game Namid was intent on *winning*.

I couldn’t help but feel a little giddy at the thought of some romantic outing with Namid, perhaps the movies or a candlelit dinner somewhere out of our usual price range. We couldn’t usually plan these things with how busy we both were in our own lives, the two of us dedicated to our high school and extracurricular activities.

Though, as he started guiding us to *The Living World District*, I could feel every ounce of rationality leave my brain. *The Living World District*, an uninhabited zone of abandoned buildings once used for everyday work life and the busy traffic jams that no one in their right mind wanted to be involved in. This zone, 20 years ago, had been specially designated as a protected wildlife site to try to alleviate the great amounts of population that strained the environment. We’d heard about it in our history classes, but being here was a completely different experience.

As we finally came to a complete stop, I was hesitant to get off his bike.

Towering over the two of us was a looming decrepit prism with long, draping vines hugging just about every nook and cranny in view. The dusted walls groaned and ached from the growing age, tall strands of grass spilled from the shattered ground-level windows acting as clear evidence of a lack of maintenance. If you looked close enough between the heavy layer of greenery, you could see the front doors held shut by iron locks that proved quite useless in the grand scheme of things. After all, reckless teenagers had created numerous homemade entrances over the years. In its previous life, it had been used as an oil factory, but ever since this part of the city was given back to nature, it had no purpose other than supporting the newfound life that now thrived here.

“I am *not* climbing up that building,” I affirmed quickly, crossing my arms over my puffed out chest. I took one quick look at this hallowed, hollowed building and quickly came to three solid conclusions:

1. This building supported more life now that it had been reclaimed by Nature than it did 20 years ago when it was used for the gruesome nine to five oil factory shift.
2. Part of me was curious to see the top.

3. I didn't want to admit conclusion #2. Namid *certainly* didn't need the satisfaction of winning over my curiosity.

“Oh, come on, Tara,” he pleaded in a whining tone, “I *swear* it’ll be worth it.”

While Namid seemed sincere in all matters, his words could also inherently be perceived as a challenge of bravery (Namid had a history of casted arms and crutches - trophies in his eyes - but a fact that I liked to playfully tease him about).

Puckishly annoyed by his lively attitude, I gestured my hands towards the decaying building, “Do you see how old these buildings look? When was the last time anyone even *came* here?” I snickered quickly in retaliation. We both knew that being here was *strictly* advised against as the structural integrity continued to worsen as the greenery took over.

Namid gently kicked a few stranded pebbles in the dirt, hands shoved deeply in the pockets of his wrinkled jeans. “Last week,” he murmured under his breath, an adventurous glint in his eyes.

I turned my head abruptly at his response, a look of grievance melting into acceptance. “I think *I’ll* be the one to plan our next dates,” I groaned, furrowing my brows in jest. I was feeling a mix of emotions: unsettled at the prospect of the climb ahead, but intrigued at what I might experience at the top.

“Just climb up the ladder with me, please? We’re running out of time, and I *swear* it’ll be worth it,” Namid pleaded impatiently, nodding his head to the rusted ladder hidden amongst the blooming vines. Whatever was up there could apparently be so *grand* and *amazing* that he thought it was worth our lives to see.

“Fine, but I’m going first so if I fall and die, I’m taking you with me.” With that, I started my climb up, up, up. Slowly, meticulously, *and cautiously*, I guided each foot up to the aged bars. I could imagine the satisfied grin on Namid’s face despite him being out of my view. If I wasn’t already concerned enough about a bar giving out underneath me, there were other fears like the rusted screws that attached the ladder to the building coming loose, or an angry flock of birds defending a possible nest, or, even worse, plummeting to my unavoidable death. But the choice to climb had ultimately been mine - and here I was hanging off the side of this decrepit building.

When I peaked my head over the concrete slab, all of the frustration I felt with Namid earlier melted away and was replaced with shock, and most *shockingly*, confusion. “You brought me to see.. *what exactly?*” I drawled, running my gaze over to the blinding city lights in the horizon, only growing brighter as the sun dozed further.

“Just wait, it’ll start soon!” he called out excitedly as he continued to make his way up behind me. As I was about to question him further, the moon had fully replaced the sun’s last flickers of light and it was finally all clear to me: *the surprise*.

There were the same old stars I’ve always known, but today, they were lit up in a way I’d never seen before. They were fuller, carried more light between each glimmer and shine. It was as if everything was darker, yet more clear for the first time in my entire life.

The lights of the city’s major corporate buildings were turned off, only the necessary streetlights aglow lining the streets below. The new legislation put into motion was intended to decrease the million tons of carbon dioxide released into our atmosphere from excessive use of city nightlights and increase the health of living organisms in the surrounding areas. More specifically, these evening lights would interfere with the natural migration and circadian rhythm of birds, inevitably interfering with their reproductive system and overall quality of life.

Namid had *specifically* timed this so I would see it in person.

Crickets filled the air, their pitch singing harmoniously in this tranquil moment between two star-crossed lovers, “You planned this? For me?” I questioned softly, my voice trembling with emotion.

As Namid surfaced from the ladder, he bashfully smiled at my reaction. “Figured you could use a nice break from all those draining protesters you have to fight against,” he chimed softly, taking a seat on the grass-padded rooftop.

I happily laid down next to him.

There we lay, on a rooftop overrun by wild greenery and fireflies dancing in the cool air. Our pinkies linked our physical bodies together, the minuscule contact enough to make my face flush with a comforting hue that could rival the heat on a scorching summer’s day. This moment felt straight out of those agonizingly awkward romance movies abundant around the holidays. All that was missing were the hyper-cheesy romance tropes like the soft tune of *Can’t Help Falling in Love* by Elvis Presley, chocolate covered strawberries, and the long, loving gaze into each others’ eyes.

I could feel Namid’s eyes burning into the side of my face, somehow disregarding the breathtaking view of stars that painted the sky with stories each unique to their own tiny orbit. Catching the way he gawked at me, I broke the silence we so comfortably shared: “These stars have seen everything, you know? Do you think they hate humanity for treating the Earth like this?” I questioned, a hint of remorse in my voice.

“I don’t think they have the ability *to care*,” Namid replied quickly and rather flatly.

Nodding my head listlessly, I shot him an amused glare, “Just humor me for a second,” I whispered, as eager as ever to know what went on in his complicated mind. I’d found that over the last few years of my life knowing Namid, he was a lot more guarded and closed off to others. But with me, he was more open, more honest, more *himself*.

Namid was silent for a moment. “I suppose if the stars *could*, they *wouldn’t*,” he spoke slowly, sounding vaguely unsure of himself in a way I couldn’t unravel with just a mere look.

Propping myself up on the pad of my elbows, I turned my body to solely focus on him. It didn’t fall on me until then how softly the stars reflected those hardened eyes; those eyes that could speak with unbridled confidence and drown my soul with undying adoration. A spiral of symphonies erupted like fireworks in my chest and I quickly cleared my throat. “How come?” I prodded quietly, biting down on my bottom lip nervously.

“Like you said, they’ve seen everything. They know we weren’t always so self-destructive,” Namid elaborated, tilting his view back up towards the stars. “Are you wondering if I *also* feel guilty?” he added slowly, fearful of being *wrong*, of reading the conversation incorrectly.



I nodded, resting my head against his shoulder with a pout, “I know we’ve been working towards getting better the last few decades, but what if it isn’t enough? What if the damage we’ve already caused is irrevocable?” I murmured quietly, my eyes hung low to the delicate blades of grass dancing between my fingers.

Namid inhaled for a moment and gripped my hand a little tighter. “As long as we keep working to *be* better, we have no reason to carry the guilt of the past generations,” he began, briefly pausing before he went on. “All we can do is keep trying anything that might help. No matter what, some people will rebel against it,” he murmured softly. “But that’s just my opinion,” he added *even softer*.

“You’re recognizing others’ opinions? The world must *finally* be ending,” I beamed, throwing him an amused smile.

“Yeah, well, I think everyone can benefit from a little change.”