**Second Place: Starry Night**

**Author: Claudine Paola Nava Urdaneta**

She beckoned me from the building’s roof. Red head band snapped on ginger hair, eyes intense and fluorescent, she directed a cold stare towards the pitch-black skies. The skirt of her dress flowed angelically in the direction of the wind that blew against her, waving out in rays, like sunlight. Ever so slightly, she turned her head towards me and planted me with her gaze.

*The stars have disappeared.*

A whisper. A memory. Her voice called out and trailed off.

I was too far gone.

They decided it is the doing of the upset gods. Astrologists and astronomers shook hands and absentmindedly pushed back the rencor they’d so long held against each other. Chaos ran through the streets. Nonbelievers collapsed on their knees and for the first time in their lives said their prayers. One by one, the people of Aster offed themselves like dominos tackling each other down the line. All because of a lack of twinkling in a sky we’d so carelessly polluted over the years. Desperation took charge. The city of Aster, the glistening erudite society which once took pride in being, was on a one way trip to its permanent, hysteric undoing.

They said it was punishment for our sin of isolation. Whether it was the astrologists or the astronomers that prophesied this, I no longer know. They said it was our own doing, that we damned ourselves the very day the titanium walls at the roots of our dome encircled our city and we separated ourselves from a crumbling world that needed us. They said it was because of our attempt to take nature into our own two hands, to select only the enlightened to carry on the name of humanity. The sun dial that once hefted itself with such pride at the center of the city was now covered in shameful scaffolding, as if any further attempt of Asterians to prove themselves larger than life would only worsen our condition. The large diamond script that once read *Aster* across the fifty-foot amethyst dial had been covered. Fires caused by the constant candlelight of lawless street gypsies had spread throughout the city the last couple of months since the Starless Night, as dubbed by the locals. They could take the moon next, the whispers called from alleys. This was the best they could come up with.

So much for enlightenment.

After my peculiar dream, I got through my day as I regularly would have, even throughout this madness. Days became gradually shorter, and school was cancelled so often it felt more like summer than early autumn. I followed Eliza’s orders and jostled through the manic crowd to my living quarters. *Head down, quick pace, shirt buttoned all the way to the top*. Mother was the head of the health administration of Aster ― she ran the hospitals and care homes. So, naturally, she was never home in the way mothers often were, or “should be.” It had always been that way. I never got necessarily lonely, however, because of Eliza.

Eliza was never my babysitter, (we didn’t pay her, and she was only two grade levels above me) but she surely went out of her way to act like one. She’d always somehow find a way to get home from school before I did and greet me at the entrance of our compound. We lived at the very edge of Aster, our building located on the Southern Aisle. We had the loveliest view of the Milky Way and Andromeda from our secret base at the rooftop. Being the son of an esteemed member of Aster’s government, I scored mom’s keys to the roofs. Our city had always been reluctant in allowing us to see what lay beyond the dome; they wanted our focus to be on only what lay above. Meaningless symbolism about reaching for the stars, I believed. But one night Eliza turned up out of the blue at my doorstep with tears streaming down her face.

Uneasy, I asked her why she was crying.

“You got home before me,” she sobbed, “I wasn’t there to make sure you arrived safely.”

Mind you, I was weirded out beyond words and didn’t particularly crave her company after an already tiresome school day; but there is something about seeing a pretty girl cry that tugs at the heartstrings of even the most heartless.

I let her know about the keys I found in mother’s room the other day, and lead her to the spot that had been my hideaway. The latch that opened to the rooftop was reached atop our attic. Living at the building’s highest apartment granted us this privilege. Ever since that night, Eliza and I built a routine of going there every evening to watch the sun dial slowly begin to shine and the stars to begin dotting along the sky and we stuck with it for the years to come.

Thus, Eliza acted upon the sharp increase in danger which had been nonexistent in Aster prior to the Starless Night, and gave me a set of rules to follow. I understood why she wanted me to walk quickly and keep my head down, but what intrigued me was the part about buttoning my shirt up. Eliza was the closest thing to a friend I’d ever had, but we were never close enough to reach a point of physical intimacy.

The Starless Night was different in several more ways than was obvious. For the first time in my entire life, mother came home early. She frantically checked the locks of all our windows and doors before taking me in her arms and holding me tight.

“Sweetheart, thank goodness.”

I had almost forgotten what she looked like; her life was a busy one, so it felt odd to have her hold me, more so with such vehemence. She checked below my collarbone, almost as if her memory had failed her and there truly was no birthmark there.

But she looked down and choked out frightful sobs, because as present as my breath was, so was the dotted line of brown that shaped itself into a star on my chest.

“God, they won’t let it go if they see.”

It was all I remember her saying. Mother cried throughout the rest of the night and made some phone calls behind her locked bedroom door. I pressed my ear against the door, but she kept her voice hushed, so I headed off to bed. Looking up at the pitch black sky from the window of my room, I felt a nightmare as did the rest of the city.

If they knew, they’d condemn us both, regardless of how ludicrous the basis of their argument would be. She’d be the traitor who refused to give up what could be the cure to Aster, and I’d be the sacrifice first offered to the gods. They’d quite literally thirst for my blood. So yes, it was best to button my shirt all the way to the top. But how could Eliza have known? Before I knew it, my memories were snapped in half, and the school bell rang signaling the end of the day.

*Head down, quick pace, shirt buttoned all the way to the top*.

There had been a riot near the Southern Aisle, but I did not know of a way that could get me back to my living quarters that didn’t involve cutting through the main street, so I simply made a point of lying even lower. I stuck to the edges of buildings down the sidewalk; head more down, pace quicker, shirt buttoned tighter. I could almost see Eliza’s face, could almost see her eyes light up as she saw me walk by, before a strong arm took hold of my shirt and pulled me sharply to my left, making me land hard on my knees.

“You there. Do you not agree we must put an end to this insanity?” he yelled. I looked up at him. His shirt was torn, his pants tainted with paint, his edges tattered, his eyes brimming with levels of dementia the Mad Hatter himself would envy. Inside my head, I replied to him that maybe the first step to end the insanity would be for people like him to get their act together. I sat cross legged and stared him down.

“Can you not speak?”

*No, genius*, I signed and and sighed. An advantage to Aster was that sign language was a mandatory subject in schools. As was braille. Instantly, his eyes took a pitiful shift, which I was used to, and he let go of his death grip on my arm. Pity certainly looked more sane on him than desperation, and he offered me his hand, which I took to steady myself and stand up. I nodded at him and began to make my way back to the sidewalk. If I did not get home soon, Eliza would seriously panic.

*“Wait!”*

I stopped and allowed my eyes to roll before turning back to face him. This must be why Eliza was always so hesitant when I showed any signs of interest in going to places besides school and our living quarters. People, to put it simply, were mad. But if one is the single sane person in a world of madness, where does that put them? Mad in their own way, too?

Before I could sign at him to leave me alone, a bright flash blinded me temporarily. I rubbed my eyes on instinct and opened them. Instantly, I wished I hadn’t. Above me, on each screen where advertisements once laid themselves out, was a picture of me. Shirt. Unbuttoned.

Like a pack of lionesses spotting an injured impala, every pair of eyes up and down Southern Aisle drilled into me. Months of confusion and remorse now honed in on me from all backgrounds, heights. Terror settled itself behind my chest, under my throat, inside my arteries and across my stomach. Like someone was taking my entire chest cavity and squeezing it inside a huge metal clamp. I couldn’t breathe nor think. The star below my collarbone was not only present, it was glowing. And it reeked of guilt. My eyes snapped back into focus; the signs of shops and hotels no longer read their names to me. They instead read “Run.” So I did.

I ran through the narrow streets in between buildings that Eliza had so often warned me of. T]I ran through every alleyway and dead end the city could present to me. I ran. My knees gave out behind the store two blocks away from our living quarters. Darkness began to creep its way into my line of sight when I was again yanked by my arm to my feet by a hold that although firm, didn’t hold the amount of accusation the previous one had. I looked up into a pair of light brown eyes. Eliza. She fastened a blue scarf tightly around my neck and straightened my shirt.

“They found out, didn’t they?” I stared at her.

“We have to go.”

I made no move to do so. Instead, I signed: *how did you know?* She heaved an exasperated sigh and pleaded for me to follow her. She said she and mother had already made plans to escape. *No, tell me. Is it* my *fault they’re gone?*

Eliza simply looked mortified and shot me a pained look.

“Save the questions for later.”

I was going to continue to try to elicit answers from her when her eyes shifted to something behind me with horror. I tried to turn around, but narrowly missed that chance when a heavy blow struck me on the side of the head, knocking me back down and sending me into unconsciousness.

...Ever so slightly, she turned her head towards me and planted me with her gaze.

*The stars have disappeared.*

I made my way over to her, and stood at her side. Scanning her face for any hint of poignant feelings towards the situation, though, I found nothing. She caught me staring and, hiding behind a Mona Lisa smile, traced her hand and eyes along my collarbone before nudging back towards the sky. She was right, I noted. No matter how hard I tried to squint, no heavenly body materialized above us.

*You can bring them back, but...*

I woke to sharp gusts of wind levying my body and pitch-black skies crowding my vision. After twenty minutes of struggle, I managed to sit up. Roughly twenty minutes in my mind, of course. All notion of logic had vanished within me as it had within the rest of the city. The marble floor was cold, dusty, and a throbbing pain seared through my skull. Scanning the rest of the scene as the black spots slowly dissipated, I concluded I was alone. I tried to stand, but was knocked down forcefully by an agonizing sting across my collarbone. I dared myself to look down and saw a gash of red drying across my birthmark. Memories of being knocked out when Eliza found me returned, and for a brief moment, I panicked. I heard a falsely enthusiastic voice hover from behind me.

“Administrator’s son,” bellowed Aster’s mayor. I cringed. Him, too? He represented a beacon of intelligence to the city, and it was pathetic that him of all people would succumb to this madness as well. I signed a cordial greeting to him and tightened the scarf around my neck.

“Do not attempt to hide it. We know,” he shrugged, and his voice dripped with disdain. “Too bad about your mother. She was one of Aster’s backbones.”

*Does that figure of speech make sense?* I signed.

“Save the wit, lad. Don’t you want to know what happened to her? Or to that girl you always hang out with? And what awaits you?”

*Not really*.

“A disappointment. You’ve got exceptional IQ scores. Despite your speech disability, you were quite adept to provide greatness to this city. Onto more pressing matters: what was your method of usurping the stars, if you’d be so kind to share?”

I yawned, feigning boredom. If I was going to end my uneventful life tonight, I at least wanted to get a kick out of pulling his leg.

“Let’s get this over with,” he said, sighing deeply. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he guided me to the edge of the roof and told me to look down. Below us was the Sidus Pond, the large body of water surrounding the sun dial. Dozens of expensive decorative lights lined themselves along the edge, and all the scaffolding and covers had been removed from the dial, allowing the light to pass through and refract on the dial’s crystals, putting a pulchritudinous spectacle to (almost) make up for the lack of constellations above the dome. The lights had been lined around the pond to form the shape of a star.

*So I jump?* I signed. The mayor gawked at me.

“Are you not the slightest curious as to why―”

I shook my head and signed my question again. Glancing down, I realized the roofs were not as high up as I’d given them credit for. Either way, my mind was not the most trustworthy at the moment. I climbed up and sat on the ledge, my legs dangling. *Do I get any last words?*

He began to nod, but was knocked forward by what I would have first assumed to be a sharp gust of wind. Hearing the heavy thud he made when dropping to the ground followed by the pool of blood surrounding him, I realized it was a bullet but had little time to react. Whoever the murderer was held me by a tight grip on the shoulder. I turned around.

“Isaac,” she said, voice breaking halfway through my name. *Red head band snapped on ginger hair, eyes intense and fluorescent, she directed a cold stare towards the pitch-black skies*. *The skirt of her dress flowed angelically in the direction of the wind that blew against her, waving out in rays, like sunlight*.

“The stars have...we’ve been over this, have we not?”

I tilted my head and faked confusion.

“They fed you lies, Isaac. They knew all along this would happen.”

More confused by the minute, I frowned.

“The dreams, Isaac, the dreams...that’s all they wanted from you and your mother, a scapegoat, can’t you see? You can’t bring the stars back, any more than I or anyone in this insane town would. They needed a victim to pin the blame on so they could resume their cooped up little lives,” begrudgingly gripping the gun at her side, which I had just noticed, she glanced over the edge.

“Ridiculous,” she sighed, “they decorated it and everything. As if it was some event.”

*Where’s mother?*

I couldn’t let Eliza get more caught up in this any more than she already was. Grabbing the gun from her, I quickly stood up on the edge.

“Isaac― what are you―”

*Tell them it was me*. I signed, in a frenzy. *I shot him, then jumped. You were nothing but a witness. Go to mother and tell her the same story.*

“No, you don’t understand, we can escape, we can-”

*Never live normally. Listen. Let me do this*.

She reached for the cuffs of my pants in a desperate attempt to stop me and cried out, frantic. I decided a jump would be too much, so I just shifted my weight, slowly, until I felt myself not standing on solidity anymore, but in a state of freefall.

The lights whooshed past me, a beautiful sight akin to the stars so long desired.

I was not only holding her and mother’s best interest in mind, but the city’s and my own as well. They’d get their sweet relief for a couple of days before realizing it truly wasn’t the reason, and after that, would return to the realm of logic they were bred to engage in. As for Eliza, give or take half a year of grief, would integrate herself with a more normal group of friends, and by the time she reached grad school, I would be but a waning memory she held no particular affinity to. Mother, well, she’d suffer most, but distracted by her work, she’d move on, too.

As for me, I simply knew better.

*“You can bring them back, but...”*

And bring them back I would. Just not in the way expected.

Before I hit the ground, I swear to you I saw them, like little white dots of paint splattering across a black canvas, seeping slowly back into the sky.