The Wonders of the Lost World

Marcus threw his broken glasses, and they splashed into a black puddle in one of the many potholes in the road. The run-down store had said they were glasses that could block out the sun, but all they did was blind him. The marketing back before the Clearing was outrageous to Marcus. It made him thankful to be born in a world after the Clearing. Two hundred and thirty-four years after the collapse of mankind, Marcus lived seventeen years of it. He wondered how people could fall so easily to the lies back in the day. Maybe it was because if you believed those marketing lies, all you lost was money, and a part of your dignity.

But now? If you believed the lies, you received nothing but your money and clothes stolen, lost all your dignity, left with broken bones, and in most cases, death.

Marcus dragged his feet, using the remaining energy he had to keep himself upright. The sun rained its mighty power upon Marcus. He sighed and wished those glasses had worked.

As he trudged along, he didn't look behind him for all that followed him was death. A few days had passed since the settlement had been overrun by the Reeks. Those same Reekers followed behind him, a few yards away. A horde of predators, waiting for the right time to pounce on its prey.

The Reekers were his brothers and sisters; his aunties and uncles; friends and enemies; strangers and more strangers. Marcus only took a moment to mourn his loss. The Reeks wore the faces of the people he once loved and knew, but nothing resided in them except an instinct for hunger.

Death trailed behind him, and all he could do was keep moving forward. Because if he stopped for one second—one second for anything—he too would join death, and become the curse that it held.

His broken canteen bounced against his leg. The last few drops of water seeped through the hole, fell to the ground, and replenished the dying Home.

Marcus winced in pain. He shot his hand up to his wounded abdomen. A bloody cloth—used from half of his left pants leg—was caked up in blood. Marcus had seen so much blood that he became accustomed to it, but it terrified him when he saw his own blood crawling from out of his skin, and he didn't know why.

A few days ago, he watched the blood clothe his stomach, and the top half of his pants. The blood became gloves after he ran his fingers through the slash caused by a metal beam. Marcus thought he was dead until his Savior appeared in front of him. He never saw her before, and he couldn't remember her face, but he remembered the final words she spoke to him several days ago. He remembered her wrapping his bloody abdomen, stood him up, and led him out to the road. He remembered her booming voice as she told him to walk. Walk forever. When his legs felt sore, he should continue walking. If he felt like dying, he should continue walking until he reached a place called "Paradise". It would be a journey that would end with his worries all gone.

When he began his journey down that road, he remembered the shrilling cries for mercy behind him. The growling of pure devouring filled the skies, shushing the cries.

Marcus slapped his face. He needed to stop thinking about those disturbing sounds because he feared he'd join them. But why was he fighting so hard to stay alive? A day before the destruction of the settlement, he wanted to die. He wanted to stop living, but now he was walking, trying to stay alive to arrive at a place he didn't know was real or not.

Was it because he'd feel guilty knowing that his Savior died to save him? Or was it because he knew deep down that he didn't want to die? He wanted to believe the former because if the latter was true, the last words he muttered to Irya was a waste...

The sweat dripping from his body became swarming bugs, but when he looked at his arm, all he saw was sweat. The sun was slowly dipping towards the horizon, replacing the blue's sky with a harsh glowing sky. There were no clouds in the sky. Were they called clouds? He should’ve paid more attention in science class. He didn't care about the scientific names, or the process of which things were made. All he wanted to learn was survival. He knew that if the big splotches of white in the sky were dark, rainfall would be arriving soon. Rain was water, and he could drink water.

Water was good. Water would be good to him if he could get his hands on it.

But it hadn’t rained in weeks. The settlement had to conserve their water until they could find a way to replenish it. The settlement became a scary place after the leaders placed a quota on the amount of water a household could receive. A household only received a certain amount of water that depended on the type of work the household provided for the community. Deadly fights became prevalent and dehydration ensued. Marcus was lucky his father was one of those

leaders. He didn’t have to fight for water as badly as the others he knew. How many days could he survive without water? A week?

The tall, overgrown trees watched as he walked down the road. Marcus opened his map and pinpointed where he was by the crooked signs. With the help of the map, it showed that he would be coming up to an orange bridge. He had to strain his eyes, but he could see the huge bridge in the distance, hovering over a body of sand. Marcus shook his head. The map showed that the Golden Gate Bridge was over a body of water, but the reality didn’t meet the drawings.

Another lie from the world before the Clearing.

Marcus came up to the bridge. The bridge lost its color and many cars sat on its cracked road. As Marcus maneuvered through the slits between the cars, he thought about hiding in one of them, but they would smell his blood. He could kill one of them and cover himself in their acid, but he couldn't keep himself up. Killing one of them was a feat to worship. Losing to one was normal.

Marcus’ only choice was to keep continuing forward. In some of the cars, the Reekers banged on the windows, trying to claw their way out. How hungry they might be.

He almost skirted to a stop for a second as he heard a bellowing scream break through the snarling. His body started to turn, but he fought the temptation. The words of his Savior echoed through his mind.

"Never look behind you," his Savior said. "Not even a glance."

Hallucinations were one of the many effects of dehydration. He needed water. Dying by the Reeks was common; dying by thirst was even more common.

The yelling became constant. One after the other. It was a woman followed by a man. Then, the yells of terror transformed into words. A child crying out for their mother. Marcus's mother, calling his name as if he was lost. He wanted to turn, but he didn't. He continued forward on the bridge. At the end of the bridge, he could see a metal barricade made from cars about twenty feet high.

His feet shuffled quicker. That was his goal. If he could make it past the barricade, he would have plenty of time to rest. The Reeks were smart, so he would only have a few minutes—maybe even less—to collect himself.

The next set of screams came from his siblings, screaming for his help. Screaming for him to end their pain and suffrage from the Reekers. Marcus knew they were dead.

Some people believed there was still human life inside the brain where the fungus hadn't taken over. Marcus wanted to believe. He truly wanted to believe.

He remembered the good times he had with his family. The laughter, the smiles, and the joy they sometimes had. He also remembered the bad. The screaming matches, the threats, and the hate. They weren't a picture-perfect family, but they were a group of people Marcus could rely on. But they couldn't rely on him when they needed him most. He ran to save himself.

Marcus continued forward, trying to block out the screams that filled every part of his body, which made him shiver—

He stopped.

It was the one of the few things his Savior had told him not to do. His Savior's voice echoed through his ears. "Never stop."

He stopped.

The monsters gained ground on him, but Marcus didn't care. The cries for help, and the screaming stopped. It seemed like the world went still and silent. Except for that one faint voice that called out his name in that soft tone.

"Turn around, Marcus…" Her voice sounded different, but he could still make out the way the end of her words slithered like a snake, making you quiver for more. And Marcus always wanted more of Irya.

Marcus shook his head. He imagined tears falling down his face, but he didn't have any tears left to cry. He whispered, "I can't."

"Yes, you can." Irya's voice seemed to be getting closer with every word she said. "It's the least you can do after you abandoned me—"

The gargles of the Reeks drowned her words. Markus took a step forward, and then another until he continued moving again. "I was coming back for you," he cried. "We planned to meet by the tree if something happened. I went by the tree and you weren't there."

"Because I never made it to the tree. I sat on top of my roof and watched as every inch of the settlement became covered by Reeks. I watched as you walked out through the doors. I called

your name, but you continued walking. I died thinking about you, but you survived thinking about yourself."

Marcus coughed, feeling the guilt setting in. He was getting closer towards the barricade. Only a few hundred more steps.

Safety.

He thought about that night, and he did hear his name get called from a distance, but he moved forward, terrified. "I'm so sorry, Irya. I would do anything to see you one last time."

"You can, Marcus," Irya's voice sounded as if she a few feet behind him. And then, her words sounded as if she was right next to his ears as she whispered, "Just turn around."

Marcus yelped and turned around, expecting to see his dead relatives; his dead community; his dead lover. But all he faced was the face of the dead. A huge horde was creeping its way towards him. Skin was peeling off the bone, eyes were bulging out of their soggy sockets. Their mouths stayed gaped open because of its weak jaw muscle. Inside was black, and their teeth were loose and shattered.

Marcus' heart began to beat faster as he stared into their eyes and broken limbs. There was no one living in these bodies except for the fungus. These were monsters and nothing more. Nothing was behind those eyes except for desperate hunger.

He stumbled backwards and slammed his back against the barricade. He couldn't do anything. Terror filled his body like alcohol, making his body weak and tender. The Reekers pounced on him, raising their arms as they couldn't wait for fresh meat.

A shadow casted over him. He looked up and saw five people standing on top of the barricade with guns raised. A guy with gray hair yelled, “Get down!”

Marcus dropped to his knees and covered his ears as the guards opened fire, shooting down the horde. Marcus thought they would never stop shooting, but the bridge grew silent after a few minutes. Marcus raised his head, his ears ringing. The horde of Reeks covered the bridge for at least twelve feet.

“Damn, you must’ve had the whole nation after your ass.” One of the women joked, which got the rest of her squad laughing.

“Get up here, Son.” A guy with one eye said as he laid flat on his stomach, reaching out his hand for Marcus. He grabbed his hand and they pulled him over the barricade.

“Where am I?” Marcus asked.

The woman looked at one of the guys and back at Marcus. “Welcome to Paradise!”

Marcus smiled, something he hadn’t done in days. All five of the guardsmen jumped off the barricade. Marcus jumped, and as he landed, his right knee popped out of socket. His hands touched the asphalt, and they immediately scorched his hands, turning them an awful shade of black.

He tried to remove his hands, but the skin had melted to the asphalt. He doubled over, spitting blood and guts. The guardsman with one eye tried to touch him, but his comrades pushed him back.

Marcus could feel his bones melting into jelly, and his jaw began to sting. He cried blood, and his teeth felt as if sharp pliers were pulling at his gums and his teeth.

In the distance, he could see a white light coming towards him. As the light closed the distance, Marcus could see the silhouette of a woman. She was dressed in bright white clothing. His mouth gaped open as he saw the woman's face became so recognizable. How could he have forgotten that beautiful face? That face that saved him from the Reeks.

His Savior.

But that didn't make any sense. She was dead. He watched her get swallowed in the horde... but he never saw her get eaten.

"I…I…don't understand." His tongue thickened with each word he spoke.

His Savior bent low, meeting eye level with him. He could see the young in her face, but being in her presence felt as if she was a thousand years old. As if she was ancient.

"You showed me hospitality when no one else did." His Savior whispered to him. "Your city had no water, and people were fighting, killing, stealing, forcing themselves on to people to get what they wanted. But you, Marcus, you treated me like I was a person and not a thing to be conquered. And for your admiration, I saved your life from the horrors of your home for one thing in return: Never stop and never turn around. Keep moving forward. But you turned around, yearning for a life that was no more. And I can't grant you passage to Paradise."

Marcus cried out, feeling his skin turn rotten. "I don't want to die. I don't want to turn into one of those *things*."

His Savior turned her back to him. “I’m so sorry, Marcus. I wish there was another way. You passed the border, and any evil that passes the barricade dies.”

“What happens to me after?” Marcus choked.

His Savior didn’t move. She kept her head low as if she was mourning. “I know almost everything, but that is one thing I don’t know.”

Marcus tried to scream out, but blood came out instead. He thought about his family. How excited would be to see them again. He thought about Irya. To finally be able to touch her hand again.

Marcus’ eyes rolled into the back of his eyes, and his mouth opened wider. He grew hungry for something he never thought he would be hungry for. He tried to speak, but instead, a gargle left his cracked lips. He felt his eye roll back again, but he couldn't see clearly. His vision had black spots dotted around, and the parts that weren't empty had a glossy look to it. All Marcus could think about was flesh. He was starving.

In the very back of his mind, he only had a slight picture of Irya. The man with one eye stood in front of him, cocked his gun, and held it up to Marcus' head. Marcus raised his bony hand up to the man, trying to get a feel of his flesh. He felt a searing pain in his forehead before he felt nothing at all.

The End