

THE STARS

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Fiction

Lilith was only ten when she first heard about the beauty of the Old World. Her father had pages about it hidden under his chair. Apparently, the Old World was amazing and beautiful and everything you could imagine. Nothing like the place they live now.

Eight years passed, and Lilith still tugged out her father's pages every day. Dreaming of a place she so desperately wanted to be. The best part of the pages were the stars. They were brighter than anything she had ever seen. They emulated real light. Her pages spoke of a Milky Way, and constellations like Orion's Belt and The Big Dipper. But her favorite of all was Cassiopeia. All zig-zagged and unique.

But Lilith would never see those stars or stand on the lush green grass captured on her father's pages, because venturing to the Old World was forbidden. No one from Stonehollow had traveled there and no one ever would.

Besides Lilith, her father, and her boyfriend Will, no one else in Stonehollow knew of the wonders the Old World held.

Told at an early age of the Old World's inability to sustain life, the people of Stonehollow felt much safer in the steel box they and their ancestors had lived in for over five centuries.

Lilith's teachers all told her the same thing; the Old World was destroyed by The Great Fire. Apparently, it quickly engulfed millions in its orange flame, allowing only fifty people to survive. With burnt flesh and blackened hair, the first fifty found Stonehollow inside a mountain. She knew what a mountain was because of her father's pages. They were magnificent, yet sadly a foreign concept to the rest of Stonehollow's population.

She opened the grey stone door of her room, shutting it quietly behind her. She dragged her toes across the red velvety carpet of the hallway, not wanting to disturb her neighbors. With it being 3 a.m. and the hall lights already shut off for the night, she had to rely on her memory to make it to William's room. His family was located on the

other side of Stonehollow in a room much smaller than hers. William's father was a part of the Custodial Unit, while Lilith's father was head of the Engineer Department. The bigger the job, the bigger the room.

"William?" whispered Lilith as she tapped her pinky finger on the door.

The door opened to William's crooked smile. It was obvious he had been sleeping, his hair unruly and his eyes still adjusting to Lilith's.

"Lil, what're you doing here?" he replied.

She grabbed his hand and pulled him out the door, leading him to the lift down the hall.

"We're going to watch the stars."

William allowed Lilith to drag him along, hitting the Level 1 button while stepping into the lift. As they rode down, Lilith thought about how they hadn't traveled down there since the incident.

"Lil, what if someone sees us? You normally never want to go this late into the night."

The lift doors opened and Lilith peaked out her head, making sure the officers had gone to bed for the night. She gave William a thumbs up and led him to the place he was already anticipating to arrive. Lilith knew William was apprehensive to return to this spot, which is why she coerced him to go late into the night. If he wasn't aware of the trip, then he couldn't decline.

She excitedly jogged through the several rooms they normally ran through, opening the last door slowly. She let out a sigh of relief.

"The stars," Lilith breathed.

She sat down on the tattered, old blanket that William and she had found so many years ago. Looking up at William, she saw him smile. Lilith knew he wouldn't regret coming down here. This was the only place their steel box allowed them to actually live. Patting the spot next to her, William allowed himself to fall in place by Lilith's side.

"They look so bright tonight," William whispered.

Lilith laid down next to him, softly putting her head in his lap. The light of the Milky Way shined through the skylight, creating a makeshift spotlight that landed directly on the two. Lilith turned her head to see William already staring down at her. His face glistened from the night sky, his eyes reflecting a unique sparkle.

"One day we'll finally make it out," she said. "We'll be able to look everywhere, no skylight to block out the rest of the world."

When Lilith first told William about her father's pages, he dismissed

the idea completely. He couldn't fathom that the Old World could be a beautiful, wondrous place, but then she took him down to Level 1 and shoved him under the skylight. Even though it had to be miles above them, William stared in awe. She saw the realization hit him that there could be more to life than living in Stonehollow.

She had found the skylight one day as a kid while exploring Stonehollow. Before that day, her father's pages felt like fiction, like a story some amazing writer printed with great illustrations. Just like William, Lilith couldn't believe her eyes. Suddenly it was all real.

"Lilith, you know what happened last time we tried to leave..." William said.

Lilith did know, but she didn't like to think about it. About that day. About the thick red blood that rushed out of her father's chest. About the screams coming from William as he was beaten with an officer's bat. About how close the three of them were to leaving Stonehollow.

Lilith could still feel the officers dragging her away from that violent scene. If she was silent enough, she could still remember the last words her father spoke; You'll make it out there, Lil. I'm sure of it. You're the one.

Lilith sighed, closing her eyes tightly.

"William, I can't just give up. It was my dad's dream," she replied.

Lilith's father found his pages within the Stonehollow library. They were wedged between two seemingly unopened novels, folded neatly as if they were waiting to be discovered. Since that day, her father studied those pages with meticulous detail. As each year passed by, Lilith's father became more and more convinced that Stonehollow was keeping the wonders of the Old World a secret for a reason.

He began questioning everything Stonehollow enforced. After inferring about the possibilities he believed the Old World held to the Stonehollow elders, he was placed in solitary confinement. His questions were deemed preposterous and his plans to try and leave were forbidden.

After being released a few days later, her father decided to keep his thoughts to himself. While his faith in Stonehollow had been squandered, his faith in the Old World had tripled.

Lilith had drawn up at least ten different plans to leave Stonehollow since the day her father lost his life to his dreams, but none of them were good enough. They needed to be great. This time, she couldn't fail. This time she had to make it, to prove her father was right.

"What if we" Lilith began.

“Do you want to go back to that isolation room, Lilith? Because I sure as hell don’t” William said, turning away from the stars.

The aftermath of their failed escape haunted them both. Lilith’s father wasn’t the only one punished for their crimes. William was immediately sentenced to solitary confinement and was forced to remove his pinky finger for insubordinate recognition. By the ninetieth day, William felt so hopeless that he knew he couldn’t go through that again.

Since Lilith was a woman, she only had thirty days in solitary confinement. Even though the isolation was supposed to be a punishment, she strangely didn’t want to leave. The plain white walls in her cell were a much better setting than the home her father would never return to. Lilith knew his glasses would still be on the kitchen table. His boots would still be by the front door. The sofa would still smell of his cologne.

When she was released, she found herself to be right.

Now, she shuffled mindlessly through a home that would never feel like home again.

“I have to get out of here, Will,” she said, beginning to cry. “I just have to.”

Lilith knew that a second offense in Stonehollow resulted in execution, but she would rather face death trying to make it to the Old World than never make it at all. She knew William was thinking about the same thing. She understood why he didn’t want to go, but she selfishly needed him by her side.

“We should probably head back before anyone notices that we’re gone,” William said, interrupting her thoughts.

Lilith followed him back to the lift, watching the metal doors slam together. They reminded her of a metal crash depicted in her father’s pages. These things called automobiles would collide while moving at high speeds, denting the metals in the process. She wondered why the lift’s doors didn’t dent when they slammed together.

“Hey, Lil?” William whispered.

She looked up, seeing his eyes brimmed with tears.

“I’m scared,” William said.

She intertwined her hand in his, pulling him flush against her.

“I know,” she replied. “So am I.”

Lilith watched William look up at the ceiling of the lift, avoiding eye contact with her own emerald green eyes.

“Look Lil, I’m more than willing to leave everything behind for you.

My family, my friends..." William said. "But I can't watch what happened to your dad happen to you."

She knew that William had promised her dad he would keep her safe, no matter what. She knew that William took that promise seriously. Lilith pressed the stop button on the lift, halting its movement. She closed the space between her and William, putting her arms around his neck. Lilith could feel their heart beats sink together, growing quicker with each passing second. She could feel William's hot breath on her neck. Her eyes fluttered at the small gush of air.

"William, you don't have to come with. I can do this on my own," she said as convincingly as she could.

William cupped Lilith's face with his large hands, touching his lips to her own. Lilith returned the gesture, opening her mouth to deepen the kiss. William pulled away, smiling at Lilith.

"Alright, baby. What do you have in mind?" William asked in a whisper.

Lilith pulled away, hitting the stop button again to allow the lift to continue its ascend. Glancing down at her watch, she realized it was already 5 a.m.

"So you're in?" Lilith asked eagerly.

William nodded his head, pulling Lilith in for another quick kiss.

"Go pack your stuff, and meet me in my room by 2 o'clock," Lilith said with a smile. "Tonight, we finally make it to the Old World."

When the lift opened to their floor, they each went their separate ways. When she reached her room, she took in a deep breath, taking in the only home she had ever known for the last time. She knew her father would be proud of her courage. He had always been the brave one of the two of them, and now it was Lilith's turn to take the lead.

Lilith walked over to their small table in the middle of the room, grabbing her backpack off it. She hadn't opened it since their last attempt to leave.

Unzipping it slowly, she smiled at the familiar contents. Her father's silver watch lay at the bottom, a token of love he had given to her for her fifteenth birthday. Even back then he had been planning their escape.

She reached in and pulled the watch out, attaching it to her small wrist. She shuffled around the bag, quickly taking inventory of their unperishable rations and water filter her father had stolen from the Stonehollow storage room. Reaching under the backpack, she made sure the rolled-up blanket was still fastened tight.

As she began to zip the back pack up again, she realized she was missing something. Running over to her bed, she lifted her mattress to pull out her father's pages. They were what started all of this. She couldn't leave them behind. Lilith folded them up and gently placed them in her backpack.

After waiting for what felt like forever, William walked in her room with an identical backpack.

"You ready?" William asked. "We only have an hour before dinner starts."

Lilith nodded and followed him through the door. She looked back at her home one last time. She silently said goodbye to it, knowing that if her home could reply, it was saying goodbye, too.

Lilith and William walked through the hallway until they reached the central cafeteria. They both halted, realizing the seats that were supposed to be empty were filled with the people of Stonehollow. Turning around to abort the mission, they realized they were trapped. Two Stonehollow elders were walking down the hallway they had just come from, engrossed enough in conversation to not yet notice the two teenagers trying to escape. She looked from the cafeteria to the hallway trying to figure out their next move, but before she could come up with a plan, she felt William yank her into what she assumed was one of William's father's custodial closets.

"I thought you said dinner didn't start for another hour?" Lilith whispered in a panic.

She wondered if this was how it was supposed to end, them getting caught before their journey even started. How naive was she to think she could accomplish something even her father couldn't do? Lilith's breathing increased rapidly, looking over to William to search his brown eyes for guidance.

"Damn it, Lil, I'm sorry," William replied. "I forgot it was Thursday."

Every Thursday night in Stonehollow was special. To honor the First fifty, dinner was served an hour early to make time for the Great Fire ceremony.

This event included a reenactment of their journey, a sacred song to honor their bravery, and the passing around of the Fire Stone. Having been brought into Stonehollow by one of the First fifty all those centuries ago, it was meant to have special healing powers. Many believed it was the Fire Stone's powers that saved their ancestors from the Great Fire. She could hear the beginning of the sacred song, giving her an idea. She

dropped her backpack to the floor and grasped the door knob.

“When the song ends, head to the Floor 8.” Lilith said quickly.

Before William had time to ask questions, Lilith walked out of the small closet. She headed into the cafeteria, pretending to sing along with the rest of Stonehollow. Looking to her right, she noticed her neighbor Mrs. Shirley, an old woman who considered herself a true Stonehollow patriot. Her father and her never saw eye to eye.

Turning to the left, Lilith spotted the big blue button she had been looking for. Slowly shuffling toward its wall, Lilith searched to see if anyone was looking at her. Realizing Mrs. Shirley and the rest of Stonehollow were occupied by the sacred song, Lilith took the last few steps towards her destination, pressing the button with a light tap of her pointer finger.

Hearing the alarm blare from the intercoms above, she jumped away quickly and feigned shock. Everyone stopped singing and began to panic, running around the cafeteria to gather their belongings and head back to their rooms.

“Please, please, everyone, form an orderly line and calmly exit the cafeteria,” one of the Stonehollow elders yelled out.

Lilith ran towards the far lifts, knowing the panicked Stonehollow population could not use them, as all their rooms were located the opposite way. Looking back to the hallway, she spotted William running towards her. With all the commotion, no one seemed to notice the two backpacks William held in his hands. Lilith reached the doors to the lift, opening them just as William caught up to her.

“Great idea to hit the evacuation button,” he said with a laugh. “I’m sure their checking the oxygen levels now.”

Handing Lilith her backpack, they stepped inside. As he hit the Level 8 button, the doors quickly closed.

Lilith took a deep breath and felt the lift rise fast, taking up four stories in mere seconds. The doors opened and she looked forward into the pitch-black hallway. Even in the abyss she could feel her father’s presence. She knew if she walked a few feet forward, she would most likely find her father’s blood stained on the carpet.

William took Lilith’s hand and pulled her into the hallway, turning around to let her retrieve the flashlight inside of his backpack.

“Okay, Lil.” he began, handing her the flashlight. “Once I blind the camera, you go and break down the door.”

She nodded, giving him a reassuring smile.

This part of the plan had been Lilith's father's. He knew that if a bright enough light was aimed at the camera, it would hide their figures on the Stonehollow security screens. It wouldn't work long but, like last time, it was their only viable option for escape.

Lilith looked at William and nodded. She watched him grasp the flashlight tightly, moving to get into position.

"1...2...3...Go," he whispered, jumping in front of the camera and shinning the flashlight towards its lens.

Lilith ran to the door at the end of the hallway as fast as she could, knowing time was of the essence. Once she reached it, she pulled her father's hammer out of William's backpack and hit the door handle as hard as she could.

She pictured her father in the same position she was in now. Her father had barely dented the handle before the Stonehollow elders caught the three of them. They fired the gun before he even had time to turn around. Granted, he had only about a minute before he was shot.

She continued to pull the hammer back and hit the handle with all her might. Her hands had begun to perspire, making it harder to grip the base of the tool. Squinting, she could see that she was beginning to warp the handle.

"It's getting there," Lilith whispered as loud as she could to William.

After hitting the handle a couple more times, Lilith heard the lift.

"Is that what I think it was?" Lilith asked.

She and William glanced down the hall, watching the light above the lift flicker on. The Stonehollow elders must have noticed the skewed vision of the Level 8 camera.

"I think so. Hurry!" he replied.

She knew this was it. Either she broke down this door, or she would die just like her father. Pulling the hammer behind her head, She gripped it with both hands and threw it down with all her might, meeting the handle with a crash louder than she expected. Then she heard a thud.

She felt for the handle, realizing it had dropped to the ground. She used her shoulder and pushed against the door, watching it open swiftly.

"William, let's go! I got it!" Lilith yelled, no longer caring who heard her.

William moved his legs quicker than she had ever seen, reaching her position swiftly. She could hear the lift getting closer to their level, knowing they didn't have much time.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

He nodded slowly, smiling a toothy grin. They walked through the threshold together, knowing how close they were to the outside.

Just as they heard the lift doors open, they shut their door with a low creak. He turned around and shone the flashlight ahead. All around them was scattered, old furniture. Pea green loveseats, dark wooden benches, bright yellow stools with flowers covering the legs.

She walked deep into the room towards a rather large rose sofa, looking above.

“Shine that light above me, towards the ceiling,” she said.

The flashlight revealed a latch on the ceiling, exactly where Lilith’s father told her it would be. William lifted the end of the sofa, setting it down sideways so him and Lilith could reach the latch.

“Here, stand on my hands and climb on top,” he said.

She stepped on William’s enclosed hands, pushing down to catapult herself atop the sofa. She slowly stood up, careful not to let the couch fall back to its rightful position. Steadily, she pulled on the latch, feeling an inch of dust puff into her face.

It opened with ease, revealing passage that was barely big enough for them to fit through. Looking up, she saw that one side of the passage had a ladder attached that went up as far as she could see.

“I think we can climb up this thing,” She said.

As Lilith climbed in, she heard rather loud voices.

“I think those kids made it into one of those rooms!”

Loud footsteps proceeded, and she assumed the voice came from one of the many officers now searching for her and William.

“Get up here! We need to move quick,” Lilith whispered.

He dragged one of the flowery stools towards the sofa and stood atop it, pulling himself onto the couch.

“Start climbing, I’ll be right behind you,” William said.

She began climbing carefully, making sure to grasp each step as tightly as she could. As he held onto the first step, they both heard the door burst open.

Light shone brightly into the room like the headlights of those automobiles on her father’s pages. He pulled himself up two more steps, when suddenly a shot rang through the room.

She looked down, seeing William’s face change from focus to fear.

He took one hand off the ladder and touched his side. Pulling his hand back up, Lilith realized it was stained with blood. William looked down, seeing where the bullet went through his shirt.

“It’s okay, Will. Keep climbing. You can do it” Lilith said, quiver in her voice.

She began to panic, seeing him slowly deteriorate.

“William, please. We’re so close. Look at me. We can make it.

William, don’t”

She watched him stumble backwards on the sofa. He looked up at him and spoke at a barely audible volume.

“Keep going.”

William’s foot slipped off the top of the sofa, causing him to fall to the ground. She watched the Stonehollow elders walk up to William’s still body, one of them bending down to feel his pulse.

“He’s still breathing,” he said with his fingers still touching William’s neck.

The other Stonehollow elder held his gun steady, firing it directly at William’s head. Lilith watched blood splatter the floor, covering her mouth to stifle her sobs. She couldn’t go the Old World without him. She could barely stand going without her father by their side, but now she was alone.

Feeling tears run down her face, Lilith looked back down to the scene below. As the Stonehollow elders search the immediate perimeter, she watched the Stonehollow elders holding the gun look up to where William had fallen from. With a slight flick of the head, he locked eyes with Lilith.

“There you are!” he yelled up to her.

Lilith climbed up the old latter as fast as she could, knowing that he wouldn’t hesitate to shoot her as he did William. As she continued to ascend, his voice slowly drifted away. She didn’t think the Stonehollow elders would follow her up the ladder, but she moved quickly just in case. Just as her fingers became numb, so did her heart. She had now lost the only two men she had ever loved. Yet somehow, she could hear William and her father’s voices encouraging her to go on. She let her eyes close for a brief second, allowing her to see the two men standing side by side. She knew they would always be with her, even if they really weren’t.

Glancing above, she searched for the end of her climb with no luck. According to her father, Stonehollow was buried almost 10,000 deep inside the mountain and since she had only been climbing for ten minutes, she assumed she still had a while to go.

So she continued to climb, only stopping three times to catch her breath. As Lilith’s legs began to quiver, she looked at her watch for the

time. Finding it to be 7 p.m., she knew she had to be close. Just as she was about to stop for her fourth break, she felt the air change; it was crisper, colder, different.

She felt a burst of adrenaline run through her veins, climbing up the latter at a pace she didn't know she could reach. Looking above, Lilith could finally see the end of the claustrophobic tube she was climbing. Light peaked through the cracks of a latch similar to the one she entered from below. Could it be moonlight? Lilith had seen it secondhand through her skylight, but never had she felt the real light it could emulate.

Lilith wondered if this was it. Had she made it to the Old World? Had she done what her father so desperately spent his life trying to do? She wished him and William were with her in this moment. She wished they could feel the wonder she could feel pouring out of her soul.

Timidly, she pushed on the latch, opening it with little struggle. As she put one hand out, she could feel slick, plastic-like fuzz below her hand.

Pulling herself up out of the passage, she sat on her knees and realized what she felt was grass. Her father's pages were filled with it.

Lilith looked to the left and saw what she knew to be a tree, something that also filled the pages tucked safely in her backpack. It stood taller than anything she had ever seen, filled with a million little leaves and at least a thousand bendy branches. To the right, she could make out a body of water. A pond? A lake? She couldn't remember the exact word, but that didn't matter. It was water.

She stood up and walked towards the water, lightly dragging her finger on the surface. Looking closer, she could see her reflection. Brown hair tangled and face clammy, shirt slightly torn at the shoulder from the climbing.

Bringing her face towards the water, she could see the stars behind her. They shone all around her face, gleaming almost as vivid as her eyes. Turning around, she smiled.

There they were. The thing she dreamt about since she could remember.

Lilith stood up, pulling her backpack off and unzipping it to pull out her father's pages. She sifted through them until she found the one she was looking for.

Holding the page up, she compared it above. Moving her eyes around the never-ending sky, she spotted it. It was beautifully crooked and wonderfully perfect: Cassiopeia.