

After The End

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They're awake.

Cameron stared up at the poisonous clouds as they rumbled, announcing their reawakening. The toxic yet familiar scent crept into his nose, crawled down his throat and almost forced him to retch. The fizzing started again, and he swivelled and headed back towards shelter, wincing as droplets of acid pierced his skin. What once was a gentle relationship with the rain was a broken betrayal.

It never used to be like this. Before *The End*, rain had been Cameron's favourite weather; it had the magical ability to brighten his mood. He gazed out at the fizzing bullets that spewed from the sky, his eyes glazing over as he reminisced.

'Cameron!' Elena said from the entrance to their bunker. 'You shouldn't be out here during a storm.' His mother grabbed his sleeve and pulled him inside. She shook her head in frustration. 'What were you thinking?'

'I still enjoy watching the rain,' he replied, his gaze tracking her as she sighed and headed towards her first aid kit for his new rashes and burns.

The loud zip of the kit informed him that his mother was done. He headed over to where his sister, Millie, was curled up. Her small body was wrapped in thin blankets as she cuddled her overused giraffe toy, her thumb in its usual position. A storybook from before *The End* lay open next to her with images of chirping birds, peaceful weather, and people joined together in happiness. Cameron sighed and sat on his sleeping bag as the radio rambled the daily disasters.

'Another acid storm—Brisbane—recent earthquake—city—now inhabitable'

Cameron glanced over at Millie. *Who's going to convince her that there is no hope for our world?* He massaged his temples as he thought about his naïve sister and how she saw the world with such innocence and hope. Both he and his mother knew they were trying to delay the day they would have to convince her of the hopeless state of the world, and the scary realisation that the day was coming sooner than either of them thought was alarming because he was unprepared to crush his sister's hopeful dreams of curing the world.

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The faint sounds of sirens and a growing tremble against the cold walls of the bunker forced Cameron from his troubled sleep.

‘Another earthquake?’ Millie said, her voice filled with panic, as she held out her arms for support against the quaking ground and walls. He rushed over to his sister and grabbed her giraffe as he nudged her towards the main room and their mother.

‘Mum!’ he called, as Elena rushed into the room, her first aid kit ready and a torch in her hand.

‘Stay in the doorway!’ she instructed as she enclosed them in her arms. The walls calmed down, and the main light shone instead of flickering.

‘That’s the second one this week,’ Cameron said, as he comforted Millie and wiped her eyes.

Elena sighed and they waited in the doorway for the quaking to cease. ‘Alright, I think it’s safe. Cameron, start cleaning in the bedroom and be careful of sharp or broken objects.’

He nodded, walking back into their bedroom, leaving Millie and his mother to clean the main room.

What a mess, Cameron thought, collecting small bits of glass from a broken lightbulb that he put in the bin. He stopped when he noticed some old papers sticking out from under his mother’s bed. Intrigued, he sat and flicked through them. His body turned numb with shock.

‘7 February, 2058: Global crisis, evacuate from cities and gather at checkpoints to prepare for ship boardings to a new world,’ he read aloud. He flicked through more and more articles, rage brewing inside him as he thought about how different his and Millie’s lives could’ve been if these opportunities had been taken.

‘Mum!’ Cameron shouted, as he walked to the main room. Millie stopped cleaning and looked up, alarmed at the tone of his voice.

‘Cameron?’ Elena asked, her confusion morphing into shock when she saw the papers in his hand. ‘I can explain!’ she said, stepping towards him,

‘No,’ he said, fighting to stay in control for Millie’s sake. ‘How could you? You had the warnings and opportunities, but you ignored them and now look at us!’ he continued, emotion winning him over.

‘I was foolish and ignorant. I never took the warnings seriously when I was younger,’ Elena explained, resting her hand on his shoulder in an effort to calm him.

‘You should have,’ he said, shoving her hand off. ‘You had the chance to leave this dying planet and start a new life full of opportunities with us,’ he said, pacing back and forth.

‘But we can still save our planet,’ Millie said, catching up to the conversation.

‘No,’ Cameron replied, turning to his sister and grabbing her shoulders, ‘look around, Millie, our world is gone. It’s time you stop believing in fantasies and face our reality.’

She was silent for a while, her eyes blurring with tears as she looked at her brother. ‘You’re wrong!’ she yelled, sprinting up the stairs and slamming the bunker hatch behind her.

‘That was harsh,’ his mother said, frowning.

‘You’re one to speak,’ Cameron replied, as he grabbed his coat to go after Millie, leaving his mother alone in the bunker.

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The acid rain had stopped during the earthquake, giving him time to catch up to Millie. He looked around for any obvious signs of where she had gone before heading towards the city and the Botanical Gardens. He knew he would find her there. She loved visiting the last place in Brisbane where there was any chance of finding life in the vast, grey city. He sped up; bad things happened to kids who went off by themselves.

Cameron shivered, as he picked his way through the rubble and entered what was left of the Botanical Gardens, searching for any signs of his sister. A familiar yellow neck poked out from under some upturned roots. Cameron shot towards it, kicking the roots away and picking up the dirty giraffe. He looked around, scanning again for Millie.

A sparrow chirped from somewhere nearby, and he jumped as its healthy voice rang around the clearing. Cameron looked up in surprise, pinpointing the bird as it flew by and disappeared in a ripple of air.

He paused, unsure what he had witnessed. Dropping the giraffe, he walked to the place where the bird had vanished and held out his hand. His fingertips brushed against a thick, water-like portal. He shrank back in shock before focussing on the strange invisible portal.

This was it.

Millie was on the other side, and he knew it.

Cameron hesitated, braced himself, and stepped through.