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Today is The Day. It's the day that means Everything. It's the first day of the Rest of It.

Our sixteen year grace period is over. There's no more that can be done. It seemed like it would never arrive and now it feels like it got here way too soon. What if it all goes Wrong?

I lay in bed.

Stomach in knots.

Worst Roommate Ever snores in the bed across the room. I could murder her. At least after today, no matter what happens, I'll be shot of Ms. I'm Naturally Good at Everything Except Sleeping Like a Quiet Human. On the outside, she's perfect. Who knows what her NeuroScans say, but it'll be a shocker if Priya isn't anointed a Citizen this morning. Therein lies the rub. The only guarantee in New Amsterdam is that there are no guarantees.

Dawn begins to break. It's useless trying to fall back asleep. I wrap myself in my blanket and shuffle to the window, taking no pains to be quiet. Lady Snores ALOT wouldn't hear a bomb go off with all the noise she's making. I curl up in the window seat, wrapping arms around my knees, snuggling them tight into my chest. Soft blues begin to dispel the darkness at the horizon. Slowly the grounds become visible. Acres of snowy woods tapering off at the coastline, a rocky beach clawed at by frigid January waters. I can count on one hand the number of times I've left The Academy walls, but it doesn't matter. I know enough to know that this sight is breathtaking and that I will miss it no matter where I end up.

I have earned this view.

Years of top marks on assignments. Loads of volunteer hours. Weekends sacrificed to the vegetable garden. Extra enrichment projects. More hours of self-imposed NeuroTraining than I care to count.

I fell just short of the points total to have a room all to myself. How I got beaten out by Tommy - Allergic to Manual Labor Because I'm a Jerkface Piano Savant - Jones, I'll never know. Apparently natural talent earns more points than working your ass off. Lame.

But now, none of that matters.

In a few short hours, we'll all know our fates. Piano savant or not, a flagged NeuroScan is a death sentence. Well, a ferry ticket to The Falls, and life as a Non, but whatever same effing thing. They've shown us only one short HoloClip of The Falls. It was enough to make me sign-up for extra volunteer hours in the Under 5s Nursery, and I'd rather gouge my eyes out than spend Any time with kids, let alone More.

I allow myself an indulgent moment. I imagine hearing Citizen called after my name today, after Harlan's name. I imagine us on the Airrail, waving goodbye to our Teachers, sitting in plush velvet as we're whisked off to begin our shiny new lives in New Amsterdam City.

This is a pipe dream.

Hope is not a state of mind we're taught to indulge in. Hope is frivolous in the face of Action, Accomplishment and Evidence.

Most of us will be shipped off to Voca Training, happy enough to live a life of relative comfort as long as we do what we're told, uphold the pillars, keep New Amsteram running. But, a motley handful will be designated as Nons — Non-entity, Non-mattering, Non-Citizen, Non-nothing. Not worth the time or resources.

I begin to lose grip of the shiny dream of relief and reward.

I watch the Airrail veer sharply away from The City.

What if my NeuroScans are completely mental?

The Airrail whooshes deeper and deeper into far flung darkness.

What if they've always been flagged, and I've been working my ass off for nothing?

I see myself Unceremoniously chucked out into the chaotic mass of failure.

What if my Fiestyness, as Harlan likes to call it, actually means I'm —

My vision begins to blur and I feel a tsunami wave of heavy, leaden fatigue wash over me. The sun has fully risen, along with my panic. I grab frantically for the meditation cushion resting serenely on the shelf built into the window seat. Thrusting it under my backside in some wild attempt to pummel calm into me, I force myself to close my eyes and begin to take the grounding breath that Teacher Rosemary taught me.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Just breathe.

I picture the shoreline, my calming place. I wrangle the raging tempest in my mind, forcing it to transform into glittering waves that lap the shoreline gently. I am there. Alone. No, with Harlan. We eat the sliced apples he's been able to cajole away from Mary the Cook who loves him. We laugh about how much trouble we'd get into if we were ever allowed into The City.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Just breathe.

It is going to be ok. I am ok. I have done all I can do. I am beginning to feel the lead blanket of Anxiety lift from my shoulders, beginning to feel like I can accept whatever this day brings when an explosion erupts from Priya's demented nasal passage, lobbing a hand grenade into my tenuous calm. I hurl the meditation cushion at her head, grab my uniform and toiletry kit, and storm out of the room to snore-shrieks that sound like my name.

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By the time I reach breakfast, the knots are fully back. My mood is garbage. I cannot find Calm. I grab the tray with my name on it, barely managing to keep the rubbery eggs from careening to the floor, in my haste. Across the room, Harlan sits at our table. The sight of him at once comforts me and makes me want to vomit. This is possibly the last meal we'll ever eat together. As I make my way to him, I attempt a grounding breath, but it gets strangled in my throat. I throw myself into the chair, on the verge of hyper-ventillating.

Harlan reads me instantly.

"So, uh, how's your morning going?" he asks with a smirk, used to my Moods.

I glare at him.

"Deep breaths, Lu," he says. "It's out of our control now."

"I just have a bad feeling."

"Bad feeling?" He snorts. "Don't say that too loudly, eh? Some woo-woo feeling flying in the face of Action, Accomplishment and Evidence? That'll earn you a demerit, Ms. English."

I laugh hollowly as he mimics a Citizen inflection on the word demerit.

"Seriously, though, Harlan, what if we're Assigned to The Falls?" It's the first time I've said it out loud.

"Then we'll start our own gang. I've got the good looks and wildly attractive charisma. You've got the killer left hook. I've seen you in the gym. You'll make a good enforcer for our gang."

I just stare at him, completely at a loss for how he can be joking. Harlan is a wild card. Well liked but not top in grades or accomplishments. As far as resumes go, he has more to be nervous about than I do. But I think at some point over the years, he accepted that he'd never become a Citizen. He knows who he is. I envy his lack of ambition. But today is Too Big not to take seriously.

"What in actual hell is wrong with you right now?" I splutter, spraying bits of toast.

"First of all, gross. Second of all, come on, Lu. Lighten up. It's only the rest of our lives."

"Lighten up?" I yelp. Tommy Jones throws a withering look in our direction. They should add Nosy Shithead to his resume. I attempt to whisper, "How are you not more serious, more nervous, more Something about all this?"

He sighs, relenting.

"You know I am, Lu. It's just that, like, what can we do? Neither of us have ever been brought in for Reconditioning, your grades are top of the year, mine are decent, and we've no major demerits to speak of. Except that time we nearly burned the place down in Year 7."

I laugh at the memory of us attempting to make toast over a bunsen burner at the midnight picnic we had convened — too close to some curtains.

"We did have fun that night," I say.

"We did," Harlan chuckles. "Look, I'll make a good Voca. I'm good at building things and crap. Whatever. You're a lock for Citizen, you have to know that at this point. We only have a couple hours left here. Stop being a drag and let me enjoy myself, will you?"

I give him a small laugh and throw my napkin across the table.

"Hey, if I'm lucky, I'll score one of the poshier Voca assignments and you can hire me as your butler."

I arrange my face into what I think looks like haughty airs, but probably just makes me look like I'm having a stroke.

"Why yes, Mr. Costello, I think that can be arranged," I say in my thickest Citizen affectation.

He lifts his water glass, beckons me to cheers him and says,

"To more fun — in The City."

—

The Meeting Hall is buzzing when we arrive. I look around at the vaulted ceilings and wood paneling of the opulent room that holds Gathering every week. Gathering is always dull as tombs, but realizing this is my last time here, in this room, I am overwhelmed with affection for the stuffy auditorium I've spent years hating. The Academy is the only home any of us have ever known. I have spent so much time preparing for what is to come. I've left only, what seems like, mere minutes, to soak in this place, its memories, its smells, its few, but important comforts.

One of them stands next to me, pulling faces and pointing toward Priya, who glowers at me.

"Go. It's about to start," I say and push Harlan toward his assigned seat, which is thankfully, directly in front of me.

The whole Academy is here today. As the Y16s we hold the seats of honor at the very front of the hall. We are on display. Right now we are still fellows and chums. In minutes we will become warnings, and role models, and cautionary tales, and humble aspirations.

I eye up my competition. For some reason, now that the moment is here my nerves begin to dissipate. Harlan is right. Citizen belongs in front of my name. I haven't had a temper outburst in years - well, a really bad one anyway - and I've curated an impressive, if not savant level, resume. I exhale, lower my shoulders and poke Harlan in the ribs. He turns to retaliate, but a hush begins to cascade toward us from the back of the hall. The procession has started.

A flood of color. Banners, Ministers in their official regalia, New Amsterdam flags, Citizens in the most outrageous fashions I've seen yet, illumination from the Holos recording it all and broadcasting it out to every screen in our world. It is a shock to the senses. I look down at my navy skirt, white shirt and navy blazer, feeling drab and inadequate.

A few gasps ripple across the student body as we see that the First Minister of New Amsterdam has deigned to grace us with his presence. He is handsome and dignified, and he has always given me the creeps. I cannot help but feel there's just something off about him. He smiles unctuously, granting a nod here and a clipped wave there.

When the procession finally reaches the stage and settles into their places, the First Minister approaches the podium to give his greeting.

"We come together today for, arguably, the most important day of the year in our society. It is the day we see what you — and by extension, us, the collective population of this great New Amsterdam — are all really made of. Action, Accomplishment and Evidence. Today is the most sacred display of those enduring truths, our pillars. It is only when we uphold the

sanctity of order that we thrive. To you being Assigned today, I welcome you to this order. No matter your Assignment, you all have your place - a place that has been determined for you based upon where you will best succeed according to the totality of your resumes. While these resumes chronicle your hard work, you know that we place the utmost faith in the science of up here."

He pauses to tap his head with his forefinger. Smug smiles and knowing glances are exchanged among the elites on the stage.

"It is time. Let us find out who of you is meant to be celebrated and who of you will be called upon to support your superiors."

He rings a crusty old bell three times to officially open the Assignment Ceremony.

There is applause. I cannot suppress a shudder.

As the First Minister takes his seat, Harlan turns to me and rolls his eyes.

"Ready for The City?" he whispers "We got this. Aces?"

"Aces."

I reach forward to squeeze his hand. Here. We. Go.

My favorite adult in the room, Teacher Rosemary, has been given the so-called honor of reading our Assignments. Now, installed at the official podium, Teacher Rosemary smiles graciously as a Ministry official hands her a worn leather case. Inside are HoloDrives the size of baby carrots. The front is labeled with our names. The back, our Assignments. Stored on it, our entire history and our entire future. Hard to believe the biggest moment of my life is attached to something the size of an unfulfilling snack. As she places the case on the table next to her, she catches my eye and winks. The knots that have reappeared in my stomach loosen, slightly.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Just breathe.

A Citizen conducts themselves with grace and stature.

Order.

She begins.

Early in the list there are no surprises. A couple Citizens, mostly Vocas. Berenson, Jane becomes a Non and that surprises no one. Absolute psycho.

Carson, Karl becomes a Voca.

Harlan's assignment is next.

Please don't be Non. Please don't be Non. Voca. It has to be Voca. Not Non. I repeat the spastic mantra to myself as fast as I can, as though I can somehow will the engraved Assignment to shapeshift.

"Costello, Harlan."

As Teacher Rosemary flips over the HoloDrive, her eyes widen.

My Harlan mantra is becoming an incoherent garble in my panicking brain.

Teacher Rosemary looks up and finds Harlan in the crowd. She is beaming.

"Citizen," she says.

I nearly lose my shit. It's all I can do to stop myself from tackling him. Polite applause takes over the room, but the looks on everyone's faces scream What in actual hell just happened? Unlike me, Harlan is liked by literally everyone at The Academy, but not even Teacher Rosemary thought he had a shot at Citizen. Harlan, a Citizen. This day has possibly just

become The Best Day Ever. He collects his HoloDrive from Teacher Rosemary and she breaks protocol by giving him an ecstatic hug. Something big, something Good, has just happened here, everyone knows it. Even the First Minister chuckles light-heartedly. As he returns to his seat and the room settles, Harlan looks at me and I swear there are tears of joy in his eyes. This Assignment buoys me like nothing all day has. If Harlan has been Assigned to Citizen, I feel my chances soar. My vision is flooded with snapshots of us living the high life in The City. We are going to kick so much ass and have So! Much! Fun! I'm buzzing for the ceremony to end so we can finally exhale and begin celebrating.

Teacher Rosemary moves on and the high wears off a little. I recover myself; no longer elated, but no longer in knots. I take a deep breath. The alphabet ekes closer and closer to E.

Finally.

Finally she assigns Ellis, Amira to imminent doom in The Falls as a Non.

Who cares.

I'm next.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Just Breathe.

Teacher Rosemary smiles and reaches into the case for my HoloDrive.

Teacher Rosemary smiles as she reads my name, loud and clear, looking straight at me.

Teacher Rosemary does not look up after she flips the HoloDrive over.

Something is Wrong.

I think I might faint.

It is barely audible when Teacher Rosemary speaks again.

"English, Lucy," she practically whispers, tears in her eyes. "Non."



**Erin M. Gallagher**  
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I feel the floor drop from beneath me and all the air whoosh from my lungs. How I manage to stay standing, I do not know. Harlan reaches back and squeezes my hand as if to say, It'll all be alright. I don't know how it possibly can be. I think I am going to vomit. The word plays on loop in my head, somehow gaining more syllables. A second turns into years. My knees begin to buckle, vision blurs. Harlan pinches my arm as if to wake me from the coma my body is surely shutting down into. He subtly steadies me before I pitch forward into his row. I must move my legs now. I must walk up to Teacher Rosemary and accept my Assignment.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Just breathe.

The walk from my seat to Teacher Rosemary takes seconds and feels like an eternity. I can practically feel the heat from the stares locked on me. Laser beams boring holes into my skull. As I take the HoloDrive from Teacher Rosemary, she makes brief eye contact. Tears have welled up in her eyes and she manages a weak smile for me. I nod at her, remembering that I am to somehow maintain a sense of decorum throughout this whole debacle. As I walk past the First Minister, he nods to me, offering some kind of smug smile that I want to slap off his face. He does not see Me, the Me who has worked her whole life to be Perfect — model student, virtuous human, exemplary representative of New Amsterdam. He sees a flagged NeuroScan, a burgeoning sociopath, a menace to society that must be banished, punished, forgotten. He sees a national security threat, preemptively squashed — a victory for his Administration.

The HoloDrive burns a hole in my hand. What in the actual hell is on it? I don't feel like a violent, deranged, murderer. Only when Priya snores.

My classmates continue to stare at me as I return, shakily, to my seat. Their suspicions are confirmed now. My NeuroScans must prove that I am the hot-headed lunatic they always imagined me to be. Why else would someone of my points rank be reduced to nothingness in The Falls? Always having to make amends for my sharp tongue, now I see vindication in some of their eyes.

Teacher Rosemary has moved on, reading more names, handing out more assignments. As with everything in our stupid world, the pillars of Order and Efficiency must be upheld at all times. I arrange my face into stoic calm, attempting to mask the chaos threatening to short circuit my, apparently already damaged, brain.

How am I ever going to survive as a Non? I have lived behind walls my whole life, have only eaten meals that someone else has made for me. I can't help but think that for all my education, I am sorely ill equipped. I'm not sure how far biting sarcasm and withering glances will take me in The Falls. An undulating wave of nausea threatens to level me when my thoughts alight on the mental image, seared in my brain, associated with the word Falls. For all my morning's doom and gloom, I realize now I never believed I'd actually be Assigned there.

When Teacher Rosemary finally sends Zane, Wanda off to eat bonbons in New Amsterdam City, I exhale the breath I didn't even realize I had been holding. I inwardly congratulate myself on making it through the entire Assignment Ceremony without vomiting, screaming or burning the building down.

Younger students file out of the Hall first, returning to their lessons and activities. I want to tell them not to bother. It's all effing pointless. Harlan turns to me and begins to speak, but I shake my head.

Not here.

Too many people.

I still don't trust myself not to crumple to the ground.

We exit the hall with the rest of our class. There is an antechamber to the right of the stage where light refreshments and cordial goodbyes will be breezily passed around. Harlan and I beeline to the corner farthest away from the cluster of acolytes surrounding the First Minister and the cheese plate. I needn't worry, however, as people avoid us, well me, like they would something highly contagious. I look around at this place and these people that now seem so very alien. It is hard to believe that I had been so excited to leave, to see What's Next. My body feels heavy, the leaden blanket from this morning is back.

"There must be an appeals process," Harlan is saying.

"Huh?" It's clear he's said more, but I realize I haven't been paying attention, and possibly also talking to myself aloud, as I drift in and out of my plagued ruminations.

Harlan grabs my shoulders and shakes me lightly.

"Lu, you gotta focus up here. Now's not the time to give in."

The layer of gloom that has settled on me begins to burn away with blinding rage. It's all I can do not to harpy-shriek at him.

"Give in? Harlan what am I supposed to do? You know as well as I do that those Assignments are non-negotiable. We have been watched, taught, trained, Scanned, everything

— our whole effing lives," I say. "This is it. There are no redos. There are no appeals in New Amsterdam."

"But it just doesn't make sense," he says. He looks as defeated as I feel.

"Maybe it does," I wave the HoloDrive at him. "Maybe I am just a total sociopath. Maybe one of these days I'm going to snap and one of my empty threats to strangle someone won't be so empty."

"I don't believe that and I know you don't either," he replies.

"It doesn't matter what I believe."

The others who have been exiled to The Falls are nowhere to be found in the room. Even though I am unsurprised by this, since most of them were loners anyway, it renews my irate sense of injustice. I want to overturn the table of polite canapes and dainty desserts. How dare people enjoy coconut cake when there is a countdown clock ticking away the remaining minutes of my safe and comfortable life.

Harlan misinterprets my intense staring at the refreshment table.

"You should probably eat something, Lu."

"I don't exactly have an appetite right now," I say and return my gaze to him.

"Yeah, sure, I get it, but you don't really know—" he stops himself short.

"When I'll eat again," I finish for him. I can barely speak the words.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to," he trails off.

"I know. I'm just — it's just — it's a lot to wrap my head around is all," I reply and attempt to put some life back into my voice. "Enough about me, whatever. Citizen Costello. Are you beyond psyched?"

He smiles shyly. It is clear he's mediating his absolute elation for my benefit, and I both love and hate him for it.

"It's a surprise, that's for sure," he says. "Depending on what Ministry I end up in, maybe I'll be able to have you reevaluated, eh?"

I offer him a small smile of thanks and say Sure, not pointing out that the way his voice goes up at the end, belies that he knows how impossible his suggestion is, how fantastical.

"In all seriousness, I am so so very happy for you. You're going to kick ass in The City," I tell him. And I mean it, with the part of my heart that is capable of being generous in this moment. I just wish, with the rest of my heart, that I could be there with him. I am about to ask him which Ministry placements he'll apply for when I see Teacher Clark enter the antechamber.

I elbow Harlan. We both groan. Teacher Clark is The Worst. A math teacher, he inexplicably always smells like onions and dust. Teacher Clark makes his way over to us and I just know he's here to tell me it's time to go. He has always gone out of his way to make me feel like a world class moron in math class. It feels fitting that'd he be the one to speed along my departure.

"Harlan, congratulations are in order. Well done," he says, ignoring me completely.

"Thank you, sir. I'm honored and humbled. I hope to be of the utmost service to New Amsterdam City."

I inwardly roll my eyes, annoyed at Harlan's ability to charm anyone and everyone.

"I'm sure you will, son. The Scans don't lie, right?" He chuckles as if in on some private joke that only people with normal brains can understand.

"Speaking of Scans," he says as he turns to me, "Time to go, English. Ferry leaves at 13:30 sharpish. Can't keep destiny waiting, eh?"

I see a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

I wonder if my fate could get worse if I were to shove a cocktail fork into his jugular.

I search the room for Teacher Rosemary but she is nowhere. Even she has forsaken me. I force back tears. I need to toughen up if I'm going to survive The Falls. The Academy is no longer my life. These are no longer my people. I nod to Teacher Clark, not trusting myself to speak.

"I'll come see you off at the dock," Harlan says and squeezes my hand.

As I turn to leave, I hear Teacher Clark say, "Time to let go of deadweight Citizen Costello."

I am allowed to pack the few belongings I have. A medal won for a debating competition, a shell collected from the shoreline on a peaceful weekend outing, a small plastic dinosaur toy that Harlan must have stolen on a rare trip outside The Academy walls. I chuck the items, unceremoniously, into a small box, one I made in some dumb art class. The shell cracks in two. Awesome. I don't know why I even bother. The Transition House featured in that one HoloClip — the HoloClip that I now wish I had paid more attention to - looked like it housed about 10 times as many people as it actually should. A shiny little locker for my wimpy personal effects doesn't seem like it'll be on the menu.

From down on the grounds, I hear the sounds of Lower School recess. Year 4s and 5s screech like hellions, running themselves ragged in a game of hide and seek. The forest always did provide good cover for a killer game. I sit on my window seat, looking enviously out the

window, trying to imagine the bliss of feeling that unencumbered, that free. Since I don't own anything, I am packed with time still left before I need to leave. It seems a good moment to attempt some grounding breaths, to center myself for what is to come. I reach down, but my hand grabs air instead of threadbare velvet.

My meditation cushion is missing.

It is one thing too many.

I ransack Perfect Priya's side of the room, even though I know I won't find it there. Priya might be a noisy cow when she sleeps, but she isn't a thief. Perfect Priya, who will likely become Teacher Priya once she begins her Voca training, respects boundaries and wouldn't steal and isn't a sociopath who would tear apart her roommate's side of the room.

My breath comes in ragged jags. What kind of degenerate would steal a meditation cushion?

I sit back at the window and stare at the glittering waves. Inhale. Exhale. Just breathe. Pushing away the feelings of acute longing that accompany the loss of a treasured belonging, I remind myself it is pointless to be sad. Sadness will get me nowhere. Where I'm going, I must be calm, level headed, alert. Keep breathing. Find grounding.

There is a knock at the door.

I jump.

My heart leaps naively. Maybe there's been a mistake. Maybe Teacher Rosemary has come to tell me I have been Assigned as a Citizen, after all. I open the door and there stands an expressionless Guard in a nondescript uniform. He sucks and I hate him and everything he represents on this dumpster fire of a day.

"Time to go," he drawls. "Boat leaves in 10 minutes."

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An hour from now, the whole school will gather at the Airrail station. A cheerful band will play peppy music. The younger children will toss colorful confetti, trying to steal glimpses of the plush first class cars. The older students will block their view, peering through the windows enviously, ambitiously. The Teachers will uncork champagne, enjoying with a pop and fizz, their once a year indulgence, celebrating the new crop of Citizens they helped shepherd off to The City. It is an annual holiday, an afternoon of buoyant spirits and dreamy unstructuredness.

But the Nons must be disposed of first.

For the Nons, there is no one.

They — We — are a shame, a pox, a danger to ourselves and our society.

We must be isolated.

Starting now.

The Guard escorts me from the building. In the hallways and on the staircases, I hope to catch a glance of Teacher Rosemary, to try to convey in glance or a nod how much her mentorship has meant to me and how much I will miss her guiding hand. There is no one.

When we arrive at the harbor, I see two boats. Too many Nons on one boat must just be asking for trouble. One of the ferries is already pulling out of the slip. The other waits. For me. I might vomit. The dock is deserted, except for Harlan. Judging by the handful of Guards standing idly around on the stern deck, the others in my shipment must be already on board. Something breaks in me when I see Harlan standing there alone, going against protocol to say goodbye. He should be readying himself for the Citizen Induction and his own journey.

Already out of his Academy uniform and in his Citizen clothes, he looks nothing short of dashing. The guard nods to him, and I sense his outfit choice may have been strategy on Harlan's part.

"I'd just like to say goodbye, if that's alright," he says to the Guard.

"Strictly speaking, not supposed to let you. But guess it can't hurt since you're off to The City yourself, eh?" the Guards fawns at him and releases the arm that he has been sternly guiding since we left my room.

"You shouldn't be here," I rasp. Nerves have left my throat dry, my mouth cottony.

"You're not shot of me yet, English," he chuckles softly and lightly punches my arm.

I've only ever cared about two people. I don't know how to say goodbye to the one standing in front of me. The words stick in the cotton in my mouth.

"Harlan, I — I don't, I just," I stammer with my head down. "Just. Everything, ok? Everything."

I look up. He hastily wipes tears from his green eyes.

"Everything," he nods. "Aces?"

I take a deep breath.

"Aces," I reply.

The Guard clears his throat.

"Alright, Lu. Give 'em hell, eh?" he says and manages a weak smile. "I'll see you soon. I know it."

Then he hugs me.

This is really happening.

This is really it.

I completely lose my shit

As the Guard takes me under the elbow, a wave of panic eclipses the decorum I've been trained to exude at all times. I hear primal, unearthly sounds that can't possibly be coming from me. I don't understand what I've done wrong, why I'm being sentenced to this half-life. My legs become jelly. The Guard must actually hold me up by my arm now. I become deadweight. He leads me toward the boat. I attempt to resist. I fight to look back at Harlan. He is telling me it's going to be Ok, but he is cut off by a latecomer.

A call comes from the top of the stairs leading down to the dock.

"Wait!"

My funeral march is paused as the Guard turns to identify the offender.

Teacher Rosemary jauntily waves my meditation cushion aloft and once again calls for the guard to wait.

The Guard grumbles, but stops his ushering of me onto the ferry.

She jogs past Harlan, to where we stand, flushed and short of breath but there is purpose and composure in her eyes.

"Can I have a minute please?"

I am at once impressed and unnerved by Teacher Rosemary's boldness. Her crisp air recalls me to myself. The Guard starts to rebuke her, but his eyes catch the Distinction Medal pinned to her lapel. Knowing she has been personally signaled out by the First Minister, for services to New Amsterdam, must give him pause. He lets go of my arm, rolls his eyes and walks

toward the boat. Seeing Teacher Rosemary has buoyed me and I am apparently able to stand unassisted, again.

"I patched this for you. One more use and I think the material would have disintegrated." she says nonchalantly, as though we were sipping tea in her office.

I take the mediation cushion from her in a haze and brush the tears from my cheeks. She's the thief?

"I thought you might need it — on your travels," she continues.

I'm not quite sure where she thinks I'm going, but I nod. Her gesture is kind, as always.

"Thank you. Thank you for everything," I say. I want to say more but the Guard has clearly had enough interruption.

"Time's up ladies. We got a schedule to keep," he barks at us from the ferry.

"Well then, I guess if it's time, it's time," Teacher Rosemary smiles at me and pulls me in abruptly for a tight hug. She cradles my head roughly and whispers frantically in my ear. "If I'm right — and I hope I'm not— about where they're actually taking you, it's not The Falls. You'll need to escape. As soon as possible."

In an instant she's let me go. She backs away, her face the picture of calm, smiles at me and waves airily.

"Don't forget, Ms. English. With your temper, that cushion is your friend. Inhale. Exhale. Just breathe."