



This is it.

Edinburgh was always freezing this time of the year but everyone was still shocked by this year's violence. As Richard stood in this frozen landscape, he felt a sense of awe and reverence for the power and majesty of nature. The cold was bitter and unforgiving, but it was also breathtaking and magnificent, a reminder of the incredible diversity and wonder of this planet. The moon made the ice on the tree branches, stripped of their leaves, glisten and stand against the darkness of the sky. The only lights that seemed bold enough to defy them were the stars. They seemed to dance and twirl, their positions shifting imperceptibly with the passing of time. But soon enough, he was reminded by their situation.

Richard studied at an elite school, the Hilltop Academy. He got accepted on scholarship and he still remembered the moment he opened that letter. His father was sitting with him in the middle of the quiet living room, staring at this piece of paper that was going to change their life forever.

They cried when they got the answer.

He wondered if his father was crying now too, just like he was.

It didn't disturb him when he learned about the situation. They all knew what was going on and decided to ignore the signs for years. He didn't understand why Harper cried, thought it was naive, foolish and reckless. They all sensed the end was getting closer, they just weren't sure how everything was going to end. He had passed sleepless nights thinking about it. Maybe Harper was just unimaginative.

But here he was. Appreciating the cold, just like he always did, ignoring the morbid feeling that kept creeping inside of his chest. He liked how everything went numb in his body, in his brain when he stood on Hilltop's roof in the middle of December. And he needed this feeling now. He took deep breaths, as if trying to overcome his fear and fully appreciate the view. Standing on a roof can be exhilarating, but it can also be dangerous, and it's clear that he was grappling with his own anxieties.

He was scared. And the heights beneath him were only a small factor. He knew how ridiculous it was but he couldn't change that. He felt it the second his professor looked at him while entering the room. He knew it was time for the sleepless nights to end. "This is it," he thought. "This is when I get all of the answers."

When they learned that a snowstorm had already destroyed most of Scotland and was coming their way, most people started calling their family, as if these last words to them could compensate for all these weeks, months and years lost. They latched onto these words

hoping it could rescue them. But he felt different. He wanted his last moments to be shared with his own thoughts. He'd been a bit disappointed when he learned the news. Of all the scenarios he had imagined, it was one of the most mundane and uninventive. Maybe nature was also unimaginative.

These recent years, multiple events have made maps smaller and smaller, the rising of sea levels, the extreme weather events, the diseases... But people preferred to look the other way. Especially at Hilltop. When you are surrounded by high white walls, you think that you're invulnerable and your castle inviolable. You keep building these walls with your own greed without noticing how blind it makes you. Until the walls collapse and bury you with the harsh cold truth. Governments have crumbled, and law and order have broken down, leading to widespread violence and chaos. Survival was a daily struggle they had the chance to avoid. But you can't run forever.

Richard heard the screams get louder inside as the air got colder. His last calm moment had just disappeared in a split second. He couldn't cover his ears anymore to all of the voices. He always appreciated the chaos. He could feel himself coming alive again. The cold, now sharp and biting, encouraged him to come back down and look one last time at what he was leaving. And his melancholy, accentuated until now by the cold, disappeared the second he stepped inside.

The world made sense again.

He couldn't figure out where he just stepped into, the fourth or fifth circle of hell, but he knew he was back home. He waited for this moment. The moment where the human kind would finally do penance for all of their sins. For ignoring the signs. For giving up so early in their home. People ran in the corridors, screaming intelligible words between two sobs or two punches. No one seemed to notice the landscape they were creating, no one except him.

His eyes stopped on a girl. Sitting on the floor, her tears streamed down her face in glistening trails. Her body and shoulders shook as she struggled to catch her breath. Her face was twisted in anguish, and her eyes were red and puffy from the force of her tears. As he watched, he couldn't help but feel a sense of empathy and compassion for the girl. Crying can be a difficult and painful experience but it can also be a cathartic release. But empathy was for heroes. And he had long since stopped thinking he had the makings of a hero. He didn't want to be nice. Nice came from latin "nescius", "ignorant" or "stupid" after all.

This is how people react when they learn their fate is coming to an end. Pure chaos. And the fear he felt a few minutes ago felt like a long gone memory. A laugh escaped his throat ; hysterical, helpless, because it was so very funny. He was confronted with the truth, the truth he kept ignoring until now. This wasn't Dante's hell, but his own purgatory.

This deranged, anarchic scenery was the last one he'll ever see.

He was leaving his father in a world where the line between war and peace was blurred, where survival was the only word that defined people, where the earth herself wanted her vengeance, her retaliation. And he only could accept this retribution.

