

Dystopian Fiction

The treehouse was empty. It had been for a while now. Vibrant vines crawled up the windows, languishing in the soft dewdrops that came with every spring morning. Fresh moss stretched over the damp wooden planks, like a soft carpet, in the misty days that followed rainstorms. When winter came, the plants bled green until they were brown and brittle, hollow imitations of life.

Carson sat with those skeletons. Through small gaps in delicate vine webs, he stared down at the forest floor swallowing everything up whole.

The elven villages would run out of water in three weeks. The golems had mined the caves to oblivion, taking ore and coal and salt that was never replenished. The dryads and nymphs wilted as tree by tree died from the inside out, rotting from infection.

There were no wars, and there had never been any wars. Not in the nation they'd built together. They'd raised every village from scratch, twisting and molding stone and wood for schools that raised children in kindness and selflessness. They wanted to make sure, with feather-light words and warm eyes, that their nation would never raze itself to the ground, never rip itself apart, never die in a crazed fit of rage and fire and greed.

But peace required sustained care, and Carson's Creator had left months ago, and Carson was watching her creations *bleed*. He was watching their towns starve, their rivers dry, and their nation was rotting, dying corner by corner.

Carson was watching their world burn, and the smoke was choking him, stinging his eyes and his heart. He tore his eyes away from the window of the treehouse, sinking down against brittle walls covered in dead tree roots and vines.

He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, sighing. The weight of the nation settled on his shoulders, and Carson stilled, as if the weight would disappear once his consciousness did.

"Hi!" Carson remembered his Creator's first words to him. She barely rose above his knee back then, all charming smiles filled with baby teeth and candy stains. "You're my first! Gosh, you're so cool," she hopped in a circle around his legs, eyes bright with excitement. "You're the *best*."

"Thank you," Carson had replied, the first tendrils of consciousness crawling into his body. Warmth became his first introduction to existence, personified in a little girl who loved him. "You're kind."

She floated to his eye level, swinging whimsically in the air as she stared at his face. "I think you'll be too." Soft smile, soft cheeks, soft words. "Oh! I forgot to name you, huh? Ooh, that's a toughie. I want to give you a cool name, a really cool name— or maybe just some normal name for now before I come up with a better one. Like Carson. Yeah, I like that. Carson." She grabbed his hand and floated forward, dragging a stumbling Carson behind her. "It's you and me from now on, Carson! Got that?"

"Where are we going?"

“That’s the fun part!” She turned back to him, spreading her arms wide as the world shifted around her. Colors and shapes flooded into Carson’s vision, but he was only watching her, the smiling singularity of his universe. “We can go anywhere we want!”

He snapped back to the present, and the wind whistled through the tangled knots of vines in the treehouse, a solemn coo through the quieting nation. From the window of the treehouse, Carson watched another nymph wither away, her arms turning black with rot as her family cried around her.

No one used to die like that. This place used to be perfect.

“It’s so beautiful here.”

Carson’s Creator had once laid in the grassy meadows the elves loved to play in. She was Carson’s height now, though it felt like she barely stood up enough for him to tell. Gone was the Creator that would swing from vine to vine, making trees sprout from nothing as she went. Gone were the spins that would make glowing tiger lilies bloom. Gone was that little Creator. Now, there was only a Creator that was too little. Smiled too little, said too little, slept too little. Carson had once heard her talk about human “death.” He wondered if this was grief.

“It’s perfect, isn’t it?” His Creator stared at the magenta sky she’d painted. “If I could spend the rest of my life here, I would—isn’t that what it’s all about in the end? Spreading joy? Making magic real?”

“Magic *is* real,” Carson had replied, a little lost. “I believe our elves just published a new treatise on healing spells last week.”

“Right, right.” She’d agreed, resigned and a little bitter. “For *you*, magic *is* real.”

Carson continued to watch the nymph's family sob over a loved one's rotted body. The wall of the treehouse, veined with the young branches of the sycamore tree where it rested, pushed his back away.

"What?" Carson muttered at the treehouse. "What do you want?" The moss on the ground shifted, pierced by vines twisting into words.

STOP, it read. OUT OF YOUR CONTROL.

Carson laughed, hollow. "I'm their *king*."

NOT THEIR CREATOR.

"Suppose not." Carson looked at his hands, graying from the dying state of his nation. "She would've been able to fix it. Everything."

GONE.

Gone, gone, gone.

The last time he'd seen her, she'd looked miserable. She'd hardly looked at him then, insisting that she was just aging.

"Something *you* wouldn't understand," she'd laughed, the words biting and acerbic. She was right—Carson didn't understand. Even so, he thought that *this*—the shadows underneath her eyes, the way she trudged, her gnarled and knotted bunches of hair—was something beyond aging.

He followed her as she staggered across the nation, muttering to herself. When she looked at her creations, she no longer smiled. She only pursed her lips in a quiet look of disdain, ashamed of the creatures and worlds that had once brought her so much joy. Carson reached for her, and the look turned to him. He shivered under her passive hatred.

“Wh—” Why don’t you love us anymore? Why don’t you visit anymore? Where are you? What happened to you? “...what do you need?” he’d asked instead, ever her oldest, most loyal king.

“Money.” She hadn’t even met his eyes.

“What is that?” Carson asked. “How can I get it for you? Or ask one of the villages, you know they’ll give you anything—”

“They *can’t*.” She’d whispered, tears slipping down her face. “They *can’t!*” This time, angrier. “This,” she’d gestured to the flower field around them, freshly bloomed lilies and roses swaying to the peaceful winds of the nation. “This won’t make me *anything*. This won’t *sell*. This is just...” She flailed her arms around helplessly. “...this is nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I... I need to fix it,” she’d whispered, before fading away.

Carson had woken up to a tree-rot pandemic the next day. The place beside him was empty, and she was gone.

Gone, gone, gone.

The wooden sword, worn and splintered from overuse, plunged through the still king’s heart. Carson’s body limped on the top of the blade, silent, as he had been for years and years before.

He blinked, bleary and slow, staring lazily out the doorway the attacker had entered through. A path of bloody destruction followed this rebel, Carson noted, a golem who was created in this nation long after it had begun to burn, who’d only ever known the rotting corruption and irresponsible management of a failing world.

The rebel troops fought each other outside of the treehouse, burning each other's supplies and killing each other's families and friends. Soon, there would be nothing left.

Carson's blue blood soaked into the treehouse, which trembled with sobs under him. The rebel's hand on the blade remained steady but not confident. Carson smiled.

"You're pleased, for a dying man," the golem rumbled.

Carson's eyes burned as he looked past the golem at the burned flower fields, the blood-stained roads, the collapsed homes. A carved wooden horse stood on a pile of rubble, and its rider, an elven child, laid bleeding beneath it. What tragic irony. What else could Carson do but laugh? His kingdom was unrecognizable. Some days, Carson thought he was too.

"So are you," Carson whispered, lifting his head to give the golem a pitying smile. The golem twisted the blade in Carson's chest. Carson continued anyway. "What'll you do after this? After I pass, after this nation falls? Do you plan to die?"

"What of it?"

"I had hoped you wouldn't have to," Carson rasped out. "...what do you think will happen once we go?"

The golem did not answer.

"Perhaps you'll return to the earth, earth that you are, and I... well. Where will I go?" Carson murmured. It took a transcendent strength, but he turned his head up to the sky. He froze.

"They might like this a bit better," She said, chewing on her thickly applied lipstick. "Now that I've cut out the exposition a bit, yes, I think this version'll be far more palatable."

"Creator?" Carson trembled.

“Ah, hello,” she replied absently. “I might cut you out of the final manuscript, though. It’s surprising an old character like you was in here for so long in the first place. What did I call you? Cameron? Maybe it’ll be Cael from now on...”

A giggle escaped from Carson. Oh, how they matched—she was unrecognizable, too. And yet, this was the punchline, wasn’t it...

“I love you,” Carson declared, smiling still. “I still love you, isn’t that ridiculous?”

The Creator finally looked at him, a crease between her eyebrows.

“I love you, I love you, I love you.” It was getting harder to breathe, now. Blue blood dripped down his bottom lip, and warm tears soon joined. “I do. I’ll forgive you, I promise. Please, just fix it.” His smile finally broke. “...Why... why did you do this?” He slumped over in a sob. “It’s almost gone... all of it.”

“Why do you love me?” The Creator asked him.

“I don’t know.” To him, the Creator would always be the center of his universe. His singularity. The sun rose each day, life breathed, and he loved his Creator. She was different, now, but Carson still held an irrational hope that one day, the misery and bitterness would lift from her, and they’d start again—just Carson and a little girl who loved him. Two children holding each other’s hands from the beginning to forever.

The Creator’s face fell. Perhaps she’d been hoping for a different answer.

“Isn’t that great,” She replied flatly. “That was all this used to be, wasn’t it? Just perfect love and kumbaya-ing with no reason nor history. That’s not how life works. It was just some stupid fairytale I believed when I was small. And since I’ve grown, I’ve realized life isn’t at all like that. Life hurts.”

Tears continued to fall down Carson's face. She had spat the sharp, sad words at him with vitriol, and worse, belief. All at once, Carson realized that he would never see his little Creator again. The sword wound in his side began to sear with pain.

"Must there be a reason for joy in a world you mold yourself?" Carson murmured. The Creator heard him anyway. "I don't know much about the world you live in. But here, we could've been better."

"That kind of story doesn't sell. I have to care about that kind of thing—"

"Why not care about *us*?" Carson spat, tired anger filling his draining body. "Do you only care when we suffer? Are we only beautiful when we're broken?"

"I'm sorry it has to be this way."

"It *doesn't* have to. Is joy not intellectual enough? Is empathy not interesting enough? Kindness, development, support? You weren't always like this, so when? When did you start thinking life's greatest gifts were only meant to underscore pain?" Carson could no longer hold his head up as he laid in the pool of blood. "What happened to you? I loved you." His voice was barely over a whisper, and his ears rang. He barely heard the last word from the Creator he would ever hear.

"Carson?" She called out for him. He could not answer.

The golem sat beside him, a calm, lonely listener. Soon, he'd be the only one left. "Mr. Golem."

"Yes?" He sounded tired.

"I'm sorry." Carson's mouth tasted of tree sap and elven wood. "I thought we would be better."

"I don't know what you mean."

“That’s alright.” Carson’s voice was beginning to fade, his body growing paler and paler on the blade. “Look at this ruined world. ... You know what would be incredibly brave, Mr. Golem?”

“What.”

“Being happy.” Carson’s dying breath echoed through a mourning treehouse, leaving the golem alone.