

The lights were nowhere near “off” in the city of Rycalis, despite the fact that it was a time when, in most other places around the world, most people would have been sleeping. The lights in Rycalis were almost never off, a phenomenon that was catalyzed by the fact that the city kept the lights on in the government buildings in the city overnight, as an added precaution to ward off potential troublemakers. As a side effect, most of the social gatherings in Rycalis took place at night, leading to its reputation of being “the nocturnal city”. Neighbouring towns would wake up, and citizens would make sure to check the news for updates on Rycalis, since if there were any, they almost certainly took place overnight.

Even small children were accustomed to the nocturnal nature of the city, but for Lila, freshly twenty-two years old and attending her first business gathering, it felt almost as though she were a stranger in her own city. This meeting was vastly different from the parties she had attended throughout her life – although the music and lighting were similar, the topics of conversation were centered around work, profits, and networking. At least, that’s what was prevalent on Lila’s mind while she roamed around the large banquet hall. At the back of her mind, she knew that these had always been the topics of conversation amongst the working adults in the room, yet this was the first time she would be attending a party under such a title – in the past, she would always be “a child” or “a student”, and people treated her as such, asking about her academic performance, or what hobbies she had. Now, however, she would no longer be asked about such things – rather, she would be expected to converse about the corporate world. Especially at this gathering, which was purely held, by her workplace, for business purposes.

With the pressure of succeeding at conversing about the business world, and gaining a good reputation from her superiors, Lila forced herself to push any doubts and nervousness to the back of her mind in order to focus on her main goal: making connections. And so, there she was, near the center of the hall, conversing with a few woman she had never interacted with before, but whom she deduced were rather important in the corporate world – a few people had called them “Madame Roosney” and “Miss Roosney”, so they were likely a mother-daughter duo. Their topic of conversation – the income-and-loss statement of a perfume company – was not particularly interesting to Lila, but they weren’t giving any clear hints that they were tired of the conversation, and Lila, being unsure of how to leave the pair without seeming rude, was forced to stay and nod along, replying with vague remarks when necessary.

Eventually, Madame Roosney caught a glimpse of an “old colleague” of hers and went to greet the woman, leaving Lila with Miss Roosney. It was then that Lila realized that Miss Roosney appeared to be only a few years older than Lila – before that moment, the presence of Madame Roosney, paired with the air with which Miss Roosney carried herself, made her seem older. After a few more minutes of conversation with Lila, Madame Roosney called Miss Roosney over, and Lila was finally let go from the conversation. It was only then that Lila noticed an odd sound coming from her right – it was too digital to have been from the live music playing from the front of the room, and it was less clear than the microphones that had been used when the hosts of the party had said a few words near the beginning of the night. Lila looked around her, scanning the room for whatever had caused the sound she had heard. Nothing. Nobody else seemed to have taken note of the sound, either, so Lila followed their lead and brushed it off too. *It’s probably just the speakers acting up*, she told herself. *They probably do this so often that no one questions it*. She shrugged and walked to the east end of the Hall to socialize with the few coworkers she recognized.

Five minutes later, as she was conversing with one of her colleagues about the state of their office, she heard it again. The noise, this time clearer. It was as though it was closer, although she was sure that she had moved further away from the speakers when she made her way to the east end of the Hall. It was staticky, as though it were a radio broadcast at the edge of its range, except the static had been

replaced by silence, and the silence was what made the sound so unnerving. It made the noise sound as though it was intentionally blocking out the noise from the party around Lila, so she was forced to listen to the noise. And listen she did, whipping her head around frantically, trying to find the source of the noise. The coworker she had been talking to stared at her for a moment, startled by her sudden outburst, before starting to speak. “Are you oka—”

“Did you hear that?” Lila asked, cutting her off.

“Hear what?” She replied.

“That noise. Didn’t you hear it, May?” Lila’s eyes widened as May shook her head slowly in a “no”. She searched around more frantically, panic slowly entering her eyes. It was only when Lila glanced over at May’s face again that she realized that May was saying something, but that she couldn’t hear what it was. In fact, she couldn’t hear anything around her – everything seemed quiet, as though she were trying to hear underwater. The only thing she could hear clearly, and even louder than before, was the noise. And then suddenly she couldn’t hear anything at all.

Lila woke up to a sound that was familiar, yet she couldn’t place what it was. Slowly, she cracked her eyes open, and was met with a dull, dark blue ceiling. She blinked, trying to remove the colour from her sight – it was probably just a trick of the light. The colour persisted. Suddenly, she started looking around the room frantically, trying to find an explanation for the coloured ceiling, and then it hit her. The sound that she found so familiar was the noise from the party. She was not at home. With this sudden discovery, Lila tried to bolt upright, determined to understand where she was, and why.

“Stop that, it only makes it harder to run an analysis on you,” came a harsh voice from somewhere beside her, slightly above her head. Again, Lila tried to look at the source of the noise, and this time she found an older woman, probably a doctor based on her white coat.

“Where am I?” Lila asked the woman, wanting answers. This was not a place she recognized – her house didn’t have any blue ceilings, and if this were a hospital or doctor’s office, the ceilings would have been white, not blue.

“You never know, you know? Maybe some of those hospital rooms *do* have blue ceilings,” said the doctor, and Lila’s blood ran cold. How had the woman known what she was thinking? Brain wave reading technology *did* exist, but surely nothing advanced enough to read her mind so quickly and so trivially existed yet—

“Except it does, dear. It’s a reality you’re going to have to face. Now, I’m going to ask you a few questions, and you are going to answer to the best of your ability. Understand?” When Lila nodded, she started her questions.

“What exactly did you hear at the party that you were asking your friend about?” asked the woman, and her tone implied that she did not, in the least bit, trust Lila.

Lila looked around her, scanning the room for any sign of the origin of the sound that had hit her ears. Nothing. She glanced at the faces around her, trying to find any evidence that someone else had heard whatever she had, but everyone seemed to be preoccupied with their own conversations.