

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. In fact, 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. Consequently, most of the social gatherings in Rycalis took place at night, leading to its nickname of “the Nocturnal City”.

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 town. 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 was what clouded on Lila’s mind while she roamed around the large banquet hall like a fish out of water. 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. Once upon a time, waves of questions regarding her academic interests and career choices were ceaselessly unleashed upon her. Now, however, she would no longer be asked about such trivial things. Rather, she would be expected to converse about the corporate world. Especially at this gathering held by her company, topics on financial investments and profits were normal and expected.

With the pressure of moving up in the business world as well as obtaining a favour from her superiors, Lila shoved any doubts and nervousness to the attic of her mind in order to focus on her main goal at the gathering: networking. And so, she positioned her body near the center of the hall and tried her best to capture a few businesswomen's attention. She had never spoken to them before, but Lila had always spotted them at prestigious business events. They were no doubt played crucial roles 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 concerned the income-and-loss statement of a perfume company; though it didn't particularly interest Lila, the Madames discussed with passionate voices. Thus, Lila continued to nod along and replied with vague remarks—but only 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 herself—before that moment, Miss Roosney's stern face paired with the presence of her mother, disguised her youth. After a few more minutes of conversation with Lila, Miss Roosney called Madame Roosney over and Lila was finally let go from the conversation. As she let out a long but silent sigh, Lila perked up from an odd sound that originated 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 by the hosts of the party to give the opening speech. Lila looked at the surrounding crowd, scanning the room for whatever had caused the sound she had heard. Nothing. Nobody else seemed to have taken note of the sound—so Lila quickly 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.

At the east end of the Hall, Lila met up with May, one of the coworkers from her department who was a few years older than her. May waved her over, and Lila started walking more confidently, less unsure of where she was going now that she had someone she knew around her. May greeted her enthusiastically, and the two started conversing about how their night had been going.

Five minutes later, as her conversation with May transitioned to the state of their office, piquing the interest of another nearby coworker, she heard it again, this time clearer. The noise sounded as though it was closer, although Lila was sure she had moved further away from the speakers when she made her way to the east end of the Hall. The noise was staticky, as though it were a radio broadcast at the edge of its range, except the static had been replaced an unnerving silence. It seemed to have been intentionally blocking out the sounds from the party around Lila, so she would be forced to listen to it instead. And listen she did, whipping her head around frantically, trying to find the source of the noise.

The coworkers she had been talking to stared at Lila for a moment, startled by her sudden outburst, before May started 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, the chattering of the party had dampened—everything was embraced in a sudden tranquility as if she was 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. It was clear that she would likely end up reading Lila's brainwaves to find out the truth whether or not Lila replied honestly, and asking her

was only a measure taken to make it easier to do so—Lila would be forced to think about it, and subsequently, her thoughts on the matter would be easily available.

“Yes, that’s right. Now, what did you hear?” prodded the woman impatiently. Lila took a moment to think before replying.

“There was a noise...it wasn’t very clear, and I couldn’t make out exactly what it was.” She regained her confidence as she spoke, comforted by the fact that she had nothing to hide.

“Is that so? Then why is it that you were so worried by it?” asked the woman. She seemed to be losing a bit more of her patience and composure every minute. Lila wondered whether she was being forced to interrogate her.

The question, however, confused Lila. Who *wouldn’t* be concerned by a random noise they couldn’t place, especially one that only they could hear? It might have been a sign of any number of health issues, relating to her mental health, her hearing, or both. Besides, it was creepy, and although Lila had not read too many horror books in her life, she had heard enough syopses from her friends to be bothered by strange occurrences. She opened her mouth to articulate her confusion, but was stopped by the woman.

“Yes, yes. I know it was a strange noise. But why did it make you pass out?”

Lila was startled by the question. *Did I really pass out? It makes sense, given that I have no memory of how I got here, but that’s still kind of surprising.* Again, Lila wondered whether there was an underlying health issue within the situation.

“I...don’t know,” she replied simply. When the woman simply looked at her with a glance that seemed to say, *Really? That’s all you have to say?* she continued. “I think I was just really startled by the situation. I’ve never heard something like that before.” She paused for a moment to think, before continuing. “Well, not without having everyone else around me hear it, too.” Lila was still trying to process the fact that she had passed out during the party. But if she had passed out there, then she was either at a medical clinic of some sort, or still at the banquet hall. The thought pushed her to ask the question that had been on her mind first when she woke up.

“By the way, where am I?” asked Lila, looking at the woman expectantly. “And who are you?”

The woman’s lips tightened into a thin line at the questions, and Lila wondered for a moment whether she had made a mistake by asking. After a momentary pause, however, the woman replied, “Where do you think you are?”

Lila took a moment to process the question. *Why would I ask if I knew?* She thought, on the verge of annoyance. But this caused the woman to glare at her, so she racked her brain, trying to figure out the most likely answer. “Am I still at the banquet hall?”

“Yes, you—”

The woman was cut off abruptly as the door in the room, which Lila had barely registered earlier due to the low lighting, suddenly burst open, and another woman walked in, wearing a costume mask. She said a few words to the woman interrogating Lila in a voice too low for Lila to hear, nodded at something that was said, and left. As she closed the door behind her, Lila could swear that she saw the woman glare at her, although it was hard to tell through the darkness of the room.

The woman interrogating Lila, whose mouth had been pulled into a tight line during the entire interaction—Lila briefly wondered if that was one of her *only* expressions—turned to face her again, saying. “Now, where were we?” After a brief pause that almost seemed to be done purely for dramatic purposes, she continued, saying, “Ah, yes. I remember now. Yes, you’re still at the banquet hall. As for me, you can refer to me as Doctor Emmaline.” Lila took a moment to register this new name, but was quickly cut off

by the doctor—*Doctor Emmaline*, she reminded herself—saying, “I think we’re done for now. I’ll take off the wires connecting you to the brainwave reading machine, and you can look around the room. The only rule is that you cannot leave this room.”

Lila opened her mouth to ask why, or any of the countless other questions rushing through her mind at this statement, but the Doctor simply unplugged the wires, wrapped them around the machine, and started to leave, pushing the machine out of the room on its cart, which Lila hadn’t noticed before. Right before she closed the door behind her, she paused for a moment, turned to look at Lila, and said, “Oh, and by the way, Mr. Doordin will be by to see you shortly.” With that, she left, leaving Lila alone in the room.

Lila took a moment to look around the room more thoroughly than she had when she had first woken up. It was quite barren, with just the small bed Lila was in, which had dark blue sheets that matched the ceiling. Lila wondered momentarily who had decided to make dark blue the primary colour in the room, and why, before her thoughts were once again filled with questions about her situation. *Who is Doctor Emmaline? Why did she have brainwave-reading technology? I thought that was still in primary development? And who is Mr. Doordin? Why did I pass out at the party? Are those three things connected? Why—*

Lila’s thoughts were cut off once again by the door opening, this time with a man, who Lila assumed was Mr. Doordin, walking through. He carried the air of someone important, and Lila thought he might have been a businessman, a thought that was only supported by the fact that he was wearing a suit. *Is he someone from the party? It would explain why he’s wearing a suit.* Lila racked her brain, trying to remember whether or not she had seen him at the party. It was difficult, with the low light obscuring most of his face, and Lila found that she could not remember him. In fact, Lila had never even heard his name before, despite the fact that he had the air of someone important. Confused, Lila blurted out, “Who are you?”

The question seemed to startle the man, who took a short while to respond. “My name is Edwin Doormin, but I think you should have known that already, no?” The man seemed suspicious of Lila, just like Doctor Emmaline had, and Lila wondered whether there was something she was missing. Why would they be suspicious of her? She hadn’t done anything questionable—not to her knowledge, at least—so it didn’t make sense for everyone to be suspicious of her, especially when they were complete strangers. *Maybe it has something to do with the fact that I fainted,* she thought to herself. *They might think I have a disease, or that I was faking it.* But then, her mind registered the question Mr. Doormin had just asked her.

“Yes...Doctor Emmaline mentioned you would be visiting. But who exactly *are* you? And why are you here?” asked Lila, voicing her confusion. The man seemed slightly annoyed at the question, as though it had offended him. Lila felt panic rise within her. Was this man someone she was supposed to know? She racked her brain again, trying to find any recollection of this man, this time aided by a name to go with the face. Still, she could not determine who he was.

“Well, Lila,” he started, and Lila felt guilty as she realized the man knew who she was, but she had no clue who he was, “I think I should be asking you the same thing. Who are you? And where is Miss Roosney?”

Lila felt her mind spin from all of the confusion. “How would I know where Miss Roosney is?” she asked. “I’ve only ever talked to her once, and that was today, for a few minutes.”

Mr. Doormin only narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know how you know, but I know that you know. Now, where is Miss Roosney?”

“I don’t know!” Lila exclaimed, exasperated at the situation. She had no clue where Miss Roosney was—she hadn’t seen her since their brief conversation, after which the noise had started and she had moved to a completely different part of the room.

As she said this, the man’s eyes widened, and he whipped around and left in a rush. To Lila, it seemed as though he was frantic. *What is going on?* She wondered. *And what happened to Miss Roosney?* Lila got up, dread coursing through her as she realized that this situation might not just be about her fainting anymore. She dashed to the door and tried the handle. It was locked. She started turning the handle frantically, captured by fear as she finally registered the creepiness of the entire situation: people she didn’t know were walking in and interrogating her, she was having her mind read by a form of technology that shouldn’t have even existed efficiently yet, and a woman who was influential in her field was missing. *This isn’t good*, she thought to herself. And she tried the handle again.

Eloise Emmaline had always prided herself on her analytical skills—ever since she was a child, she had constantly been praised for her attention to detail, and her ability to notice small discrepancies that often went unnoticed by her peers. This skill fuelled her interest in human analysis, which she poured her heart into, engrossed by the complex and shifting nature of human behaviour. For over fifteen years, she had worked in the field, steadily creating more complex ways to analyze human behaviour and being able to determine the reasoning behind the actions of the people around her with only fifteen minutes of analysis. And yet, this case stumped her beyond belief. Almost nothing about it made sense, and Eloise could not, for the life of her, figure it out.

It was a simple case, in theory. She had been hired by Edwin Doormin, a man well-known in his sphere, to analyze a young woman for business purposes. But even after reading the girl’s brainwaves for over half an hour while she was sleeping, and a further fifteen minutes while interrogating her, she could not understand why Edwin had asked her to analyze the girl. There was nothing strange about her, and she reported this to Edwin, who had simply glared at her and told he was going to analyze the girl herself. When he had come back, he had simply told her that her work was done, and there was no need to further analyze the girl—she was not who Madame Roosney claimed she was, and he was going to interrogate the Madame herself to find out the truth.

But Eloise was nothing if not persistent—fifteen years of pursuing a career she adored, but which often had leads that seemed like dead ends, put her into the habit of being unable to rest unless she got closure for her subject of research. And right now, her subject of research was the girl she was hired to interrogate, Lila. Even if Edwin Doormin said her work was done, there was a reason she ran a private practice: so no one could tell her what to do. Not even her clients. In fact, she made it a habit to analyze each of her clients as well, in order to best understand the situations she was presented with, and his assertion that he would interrogate the Madame himself only piqued Eloise’s curiosity more. *This is becoming an interesting case*, she thought to herself as she set up her machines to keep an eye on Edwin.

After five minutes of trying the door, Lila finally gave up. The handle wouldn’t budge, and with no way of telling when she would be let out—if at all—she decided to save her energy for when she needed it. Besides, there was nothing in the room that could help her escape, and she had no idea what the situation outside the room was. If they had locked her in a room, the people around her might be dangerous. *I need to be careful*, she thought to herself. *There’s no way for me to tell whether the people I spoke to are trustworthy or not.*

Looking around the room for something she could use to pry the door open—there was no keyhole on the doorknob—she noticed something that was obscured by the low lighting, but which was visible if she focused: the room was filled with a thin dust. *No, not dust*, she corrected. *It's mist*. Lila reached her hand out to touch the mist, which seemed to be particularly thick around her, and it dissipated instantly. For a moment, Lila second-guessed herself, thinking she had just imagined it. *No*, she told herself. *It was real*. But the mist didn't reappear, and eventually she pushed it to the back of her mind, focusing on the main task at hand: figuring out the situation around her, and how to escape it.

After a few minutes of pondering, however, she gave up. There was nothing for her to use as a tool, and the only exit in the room was the door, which stubbornly remained locked. All she could do was sit on the bed and wait for someone to open the door for her.

Edwin Doordin was livid. Not only had he allowed himself to be tricked, he had managed to rope an unsuspecting civilian into his life's work, and would now need to keep an eye on the civilian to make sure his secrets were never revealed. Storming through the hallways of the laboratory which was becoming more of a home for him than his actual home these past few months, he racked his brain in an effort to cover every possible situation he might be facing. Madame Roosney had tricked him about the identity of her daughter, and then had blatantly lied to him when asked about the whereabouts of her daughter. It was only because of Doctor Emmaline that he had discovered her ploys, and was able to thwart any further steps in the wrong direction.

He had never fully trusted the Madame, of course—it was hard for him to trust anyone, especially those who had enough wealth and influence to have a reason to trick him—but he had underestimated the severity of the deception she was willing to put him through. Now, he would be paying the price of his underestimation—he had no clue where her daughter was, and by now, she could have fled anywhere, most likely with her mother in tow. The only lead he had was the girl that Madame Roosney had pretended was her daughter, and even then, she had no clue where Miss Roosney was. There was only one course of action to take: Edwin would chase down Madame Roosney and make her reveal the truth.

Lila was almost falling asleep, exhausted from boredom from sitting in an empty room, despite the hectic situation she was in, when the door finally opened and Doctor Emmaline stepped in. This time, she didn't have her brainwave reading machine, a fact that Lila was thrilled about—it was unnerving to have someone who could read your every thought in the same room as you, and removing that ability made it much easier for Lila to relax around the woman. Not that she fully trusted her, though—with the strange behaviour of everyone around her, she was almost certain that she was not where she was for purely medical reasons, and while the Doctor might have been genuinely trying to help, she had also been irritated throughout her conversation with Lila, a fact that set her on edge. Besides, Lila was skeptical of anyone involved in locking her in a room with no further explanation, and the Doctor was one of two—maybe three if the masked woman was counted—people who Lila was sure had a role in her predicament.

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.