

Rat king

It was a murky, bitter night in February, when the clock stroke witching hour. The bells bellowed their deep, echoing rings, shaking the streets with their tolls.

"It is now 3AM. Workers 001AB to 001BB can return to their stations. Workers 002BB to 001CB please prepare for incoming shift."

At the sound of the feminine robotic voice, ricocheting off every corner, a ragged jacket trembled. From beneath it, a boy arose from a light slumber. He stuck his head out— his hair a ball of untangled brown locks, his sunken cheeks dusted with dirt, and the pale skin of his lips cracked like dry soil. The boy was alone, a tiny, scrawny heap of bones and grimy rags on the empty road. He would be turning 13 this year, yet didn't look any older than 10. His short frame never bothered him—he wouldn't know if he looked his age or not anyway. He had no birthday to mark the years, no parents to tell him when he was born; in fact, he didn't even know what name he was given, or if he even had one at all. His earliest memories were of waking up on a pavement cold like this one, with hunger pains similar to these, when he heard deep voices hushing in the shadows around a corner. He was too young to understand anything of the conversation, but a single word he managed to remember,

"Khaana," the men kept whispering. *"Khaana... khaana, khaana."*

So, the boy called himself Hana.

Hana blinked, his eyes adjusting to the dark streets. A thick mist made it hard to see further than three streetlamps lining the road: the soft, yellow light of each bulb weaker than the next. The fog cast a rust-colored hue in the air, and if the boy were to take a breath too deep or fast, a dry taste would get caught in his throat. A livid wind hurled through the street, sending loose papers and empty cans scattering along the wet pavement like marbles. Hana's knees creaked as he shifted to stand upright, but the sudden movement caused his head to submerge under a wave of haze. His vision darkened, and he wobbled on his spot, the bones of his legs bumping against each other for support. As his sight slowly cleared, he noticed the faint silhouettes emerging in the distance—workers shifting between hours. Hana envied them. Even though the conditions in the mines were demanding, they had the privilege to work and get paid. Not many positions were open for men; most were occupied by various machines, whose work was faster, more efficient, and cost less. All the workers returning to their homes — or dark nooks of alleyways — tonight, were lucky enough to get the positions of robots that were temporarily out of order.

The grumble in Hana's stomach demanded his attention, so with a tremble in his step, he began walking. The concrete was wet and cuttingly cold, the loose stones slicing at his heels, but the skin of his soles had grown thick enough to endure the sting. There wasn't a certain location he could go to soothe his aching hunger; he could only hope that if he kept wandering, he would maybe stumble upon a dead rat or loose cat around a corner.

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Light slowly illuminated the dim room. Each furniture grew brighter with every passing second, the shadows shrinking before until disappearing completely. The beige covers on the bed stirred, a body shifting below their warmth. A birdsong sounded in the distance, at first pleasant, before it amplified to a level of intrusive volume.

"Siri, snooze," a voice, groggy and hoarse with drowsiness, called from beneath the sheets.

"It is 9.30 AM," a robotic tone echoed through the room. *"Today is the opening ceremony, your presence is required."*

A muffled whine of protest followed. The bed stirred once again but soon fell back into stillness. A moment of serenity passed, and beneath the sheets, everything was still comfortably dark and so pleasant, it would only take just one moment longer, and he could fall back into peaceful slumber...

"BEEP, BEEP, BEEP."

The birdsong, however obnoxious, was much preferable than this alternative. A head of golden blonde

hair arose abruptly from the blankets, cheeks flushed and eyes tired, squinting at the bright overhead lighting.

“Okay, okay, enough! I’m up!” Micah announced, raising his voice in an attempt to drown out the loud alarm. He cursed his father’s system—installed specifically to prevent him from snoozing through important events. The sensors measured the rhythm of his breathing, alerting the alarm to when he was on the brink of falling back asleep.

“Breakfast is awaiting in the kitchen.”

“I’ll be there in five,” Micah said in between a yawn. Silence followed as the boy took in his surroundings through squinted eyes. From the pale carpet and polished desk to the chalk-white walls, reaching up and meeting the ceiling, where the sharp lights dotted the surface in symmetrical, precise lines like soldiers frozen still in their perfect positions—everything was so bright it hurt to stare too much.

“Siri,” Micah called out. “Turn on sunrise-mode.”

“Sunrise-mode activated.”

With that, the light softened and switched to a less intrusive yellow hue. Micah stretched his arms above his head—the shade of his skin kindred to the walls—a small groan escaping his lips, and he slowly crawled out of bed. He circled around the furniture, undoing a smooth plastic button with each step, until his silky shirt slipped off his shoulders and fell at his feet. He stood facing the eastern wall of the room where a window twice Micah’s heights opposed him. A solid light-insulating screen pressed tightly to the glass, kept any actual sunlight from the room. This was so the sun’s rhythm wouldn’t disturb the boy’s sleeping pattern.

“Siri, pull up the blinds,” Micah requested.

“Retracting cellular shades.”

The quiet rumble of a small motor on the other side of the wall filled the room, and while waiting for the sight of the outside world to come into view, Micah turned and headed for his wardrobe to dress. “Pants.”

Upon his word, a section of the wall, just below his knees, extended to reveal rolls of denim neatly folded side by side. He reached for a dark pair of dress pants, tossing them over his shoulder.

“Polos.”

The lower drawer started closing shut, and a similar motion distorted the upper bricks to display dozens of pale-colored polo shirts. Micah took the first one his eyes lingered on. With lazy movements he dressed and then turned back toward his window. His face twisted in a frown at the sight of the barrier of pasty grey still covering the glass.

“Siri, I said pull up the blinds,” Micah called out, a sense of ticking frustration on his tongue at the robot’s incompetence.

“The cellular shades have been reeled in,” the voice echoed from each corner of the room. Micah raised a questioning eyebrow, and the machine continued. *“The weather forecast predicts fog today. Quite the cloudy atmosphere, they say.”*

Micah sighed, his shoulder slumping. “They always say that.”

His stomach grumbled at that moment, urging him for breakfast, and with a grunt, the boy turned his back to the colorless landscape.

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The city had slowly become more crowded now; the streets bustled with people scurrying in different directions. All their shoulders were hunched, their faces either hidden under dark hoods, protecting them from the wind, or their lips shielded by masks, keeping loose sand from getting caught in their mouths. Some of them had long, black coats reaching below their knees—the wealthier class, the ones working in the mines could afford them—but most wore thin scraps of clothes similar to Hana’s own. The boy kept walking with the moving mass of bodies, hoping to find something to eat. A trash can with leftovers, if he was lucky. At this point, he would accept anything to subdue the jabbing pain of hunger in his gut.

Further down the road, the press of bodies grew thicker, the muffled hum of voices rising into an anxious murmur. Drawn forward by the commotion, Hana drifted closer. His small frame weaved through the sea of shoulders with little resistance, slipping between the gaps, until he reached the front of the gathered crowd.

“They’ll pass through here today!” A bearded man, standing with his torn shoes on top of an empty plastic beer crate, called out. “Just this afternoon, the train will pass right from down here!”

He flung an arm toward the staircase leading to the underground. The train station below was barricaded by thick iron rods, spaced just close enough together to prohibit access. It had always been this way for as long as Hana could remember. Sometimes, he heard the rush of a train pass through below, but the passengers boarding the big metal machine were unknown to him.

“They’re headed to the northern side of the city,” the man continued, “but the train stops briefly here. If we gather enough, we can strike!”

“Access to the underground is prohibited!” someone shouted. “If we get caught, we’ll be arrested!”

“We’ll lose our jobs!” another protest sounded. At this, the crowd grew rowdier; the hushed murmurs of curiosity twisted into warnings and fears.

“Hear me now!” The man on the box raised his voice. “If we get one of them, take them as a hostage, they’ll pay sums unheard of to get them back! A price so high that people like us will be able to feed our offspring for generations! Our grandchildren won’t have to starve on the streets like us, and for them, it’ll be spare change!”

The crowd quieted, whispers shifting toward intrigue—consideration.

“We’ve had enough of this!” the man roared. “Enough of misery, of living in inhumane conditions! We can’t keep going like this. Someone has to pay!”

The response was instant. A wave of voices erupted in cheers, their yells twisting into chants. Hana didn’t know what inhumane meant, and the rumbling in his stomach was getting louder. The press of bodies had doubled, squeezing in tighter, and by now, Hana wanted to push himself back out, but he was too weak.

The shouts turned into roars. Stomping feet escalated into a march. The surge of bodies lurched forward, forcing Hana along with it.

This wasn’t the first riot he had seen. He never understood what the people were fighting for or against. It all seemed futile, everyone ended up arrested by the end. One thing he did know though, and that was that hunger and desperation could blur the line between man and animal, and in times like these, it happened often. He usually tried to stay out of it, though this time, he didn’t have a choice.

Trapped in the stampede, he staggered forward as they stormed the underground. The crowd shoved and tripped over one another, forcing their way down the stairs. Pressed against the iron rods, Hana could finally see the station below, but he still couldn’t understand why these people wanted in so badly. It was a cold, dusty place like the ground above, with the only difference being the consistent vacancy and the shelter it provided from the wind.

His head throbbed in sync with the stabbing pain in his stomach. Figures towered over him, taller, stronger—even the ones just as malnourished as he was. The thick stench of unwashed bodies filled the air, years of filth and sweat clinging to flesh. It brought bile to Hana’s throat, but he had nothing in his stomach to vomit. He just swayed with the crowd, doing his best to stay upright, to not be trampled underfoot.

All he could do was hope, more than anything, that this would end soon, so he could go back to searching for food.

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The dining room’s tile floors buzzed pleasantly with heat against Micah’s socks. The room was just as bright and pristine as the rest of the house, its sterility making it feel more like a showroom than a home. Floor-to-ceiling windows stretched along the right side, flooding the space with pale morning light, yet there was nothing to see. Just the same pasty grey clouds.

At the end of the long table, his father sat in his usual chair, a news-screen raised in front of his face, blocking him from view.

“Good morning,” Micah said. As he approached the chair across from his father, it pulled itself out automatically, granting him space to sit.

“Morning, son,” his dad greeted, his voice steady, monotone.

A plate was already waiting for him, but the sight made Micah frown. A small pile of pink pills sat on the porcelain. He reached out, picking one up between his fingers.

“Can’t we have real food?” he sighed.

“We’re in a hurry.” His father’s face remained hidden behind the screen. “I ordered your favorite taste.”

Micah tutted, letting the pill roll off his fingertips and drop back onto the plate.

“I don’t have a favorite.”

“Not the strawberry kind?”

Micah stared at him, waiting for his father to lower the screen, to look at him when he spoke. He waited. A moment passed. Micah sighed.

“It’s the strawberry *jam* I like,” he muttered. “Y’know, the *real* food we occasionally have with *real* pancakes or *real* toast?”

“This is just as nutritious,” his dad said, his tone firming into authority. “If not more. And it’s faster. Like I said, we’re in a hurry.”

At last, his father put the screen away—but only to stand from his seat a moment later. His slick dress shoes clicked against the floor as he walked down the length of the table.

“Swallow your breakfast.” He brushed past Micah’s shoulder. “We have to take the underground in thirty minutes.”

Micah turned in his chair, calling after him. “Where’s Mom?”

“France,” his father answered shortly. “She has been checking on some of the production sites. She took the plane this morning and is probably waiting on us at the station.”

With that, he was gone. His footsteps echoed into the hall before fading into silence, leaving only the hollow stillness of the dining room behind.

Micah turned back to his plate. A neat little pile of pink pills. A glass of water. He sighed and picked one up, setting it on his tongue. The glass was icy to the touch, condensation dampening his fingertips. He lifted it to his lips and tipped his head back. The water felt refreshing against the drowsy dryness of his throat. As soon as it was down, he could already feel his stomach filling—immediate, artificial fullness.

He took another. This one left a sweet aftertaste, a faint strawberry scent lingering on his tongue. He let it sit in his mouth for a moment, playing with it before taking another sip of water. He reached for another. Swallowed it with water.

And then another.

And another.

His hunger was gone now. He was full, yet he kept going, plucking another pill from the plate and placing it between his lips. The sweetness coated his tongue, the rush of water washing it down with ease. By the time the plate was empty, his stomach felt heavy, full to the point of discomfort. Still, as he pushed his chair back and stood, Micah barely thought about it.

He took his time walking down the corridor, glancing at each painting, lingering on a few. The elevator played a soft melody, and he hummed along absentmindedly, taking a trip all the way to the highest floor before finally pressing the button for the underground level. Micah and his family didn’t take the train often. It was filthy, always busy, and dangerous. Some of his dad’s employees—engineers, for the most part—took it to and from work, therefore it made a stop in the middle of the city. The air was severely polluted that close to the ground, and he was always told to wear a mask unless he wanted to catch some lung infection. Normally, he travelled by plane or helicopter with his parents, but today, they were going to the observatory on the other end of town, and the helipad was under reconstruction.

The elevator doors slid open with a high-pitched ding, and an automated voice announced his arrival. The station beneath their building was vast and open, all gray concrete and bright overhead lights, the rails stretching across the middle of the space. The train didn't usually stop here—after all, not just anyone had access to their station—but at Micah's parents' request, it would. It wasn't here yet, but his parents were already waiting by the edge of the platform.

His father stood with his back to him, phone pressed to his ear, his free hand gesturing sharply in the air. Andreas, one of the butlers, stood beside him, holding his luggage.

"Mom!" Micah called out.

His mother stood poised beside his father, arms crossed leisurely, a cigarette smoldered between her fingers, its faint scent of tobacco and vanilla perfume already thick in the air. She was a tall, slim thing, with long legs and an elegant neck, her hair always tied neatly back. Her lips, painted a deep red, pursed slightly as she exhaled a slow breath of smoke. A white, fluffy coat was draped over her frail shoulders, somehow worn effortlessly, like it had simply fallen onto her.

"Hello, dear," she greeted as he reached her. Her hands rested lightly on his shoulders as he hugged her, a small, careful smile tugging at her lips. He wrapped his arms around her thin waist, pressing his nose into the soft coat and inhaling the scent of expensive fabric, perfume, and faint traces of smoke.

"Careful now." She pulled back, pressing a hand to his chest to create distance. "This is a one-edition Prada coat, dear. The designer tailored it specifically for me—I don't want it dirtied."

"Oh." Micah took a step back. "That's nice of him."

His mother scoffed, lifting the cigarette to her lips.

"Hah, no, dear, he had to. They don't make them in my size," she sighed, exhaling a curl of smoke. "I need to go on a diet again. Those stubborn five pounds..."

Her voice trailed into a distracted muttering as she pulled a screen from her pocket, already turning away from him. Micah knew better than to expect anything more from the conversation, so he simply turned away as well. His own set of screens were always on him—his watch, his phone, and of course, the mini-pad, a device developed by his father's company. It was a thin chip, embedded into his right sleeve on every shirt he owned, able to project a floating holographic display at the tap of his fingers. He had thought it was cool at first, until his parents started using theirs constantly, always hiding behind technological walls, barely even glancing at him. It hadn't taken long for him to resent the thing. Out of spite, he ignored the itch in his fingertips, the impulse to reach for a screen in search of entertainment. Instead, he let his gaze settle on the empty tracks, waiting in silence. Soon enough, the train came rushing down the rails, and Micah and his family were escorted onto the vehicle.

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All the yelling and chants blurred together into a single, deafening roar; each push from the crowd came harder, rougher, more desperate than the last. Hana's knees buckled, his legs growing weak beneath him. The only thing keeping him upright was the crush of bodies pressing in on all sides—shoulders digging into his own, elbows jabbing against his ribs. He swayed with them, a ragdoll caught in the pull of a storm, shoved and dragged wherever the tide decided to take him.

The pressure built, an unrelenting force driving him forward, until— *slam*.

His face hit cold iron. The bars rattled under the weight of the mob, his forehead knocking against the metal with every shove from behind. He tried to turn his head, but there was no room—just more people, more pressure, more heat, the stink of unwashed bodies and breath thick with hunger. The distant rumble of the train sent a jolt through the crowd, electrifying them into a new level of frenzy. Screeching brakes in the distance.

A wall of voices, screaming louder.

More force, more bodies, more pain.

Hana felt his skull being crushed against the bars, his vision going hazy from the pressure. Desperate to stop the pain, he tilted his head—just slightly—just enough to shift into the narrow space between two rods. And then—his body slipped through. It happened so fast he barely registered it. His frail, malnourished frame fell through like water, spilling onto the concrete on the other side of the gate. He

landed hard, the shock of impact rattling through his bones, his hands scraping against the rough ground. Gasps and whispers rippled through the crowd, for once not yet growing into something sharper. Then, a voice cut through the stunned quiet.

“Go to the rails!” someone shouted. “Go stand by the rails, and once the doors open, snatch one of them!”

The hesitation in the crowd snapped. Cheers. Howls. Orders barked from all directions. Dozens of faces, twisted with hunger and fury, sneering and snarling at him like a pack of starved animals.

Hana’s feet moved on their own, dragging him toward the platform. He stood by the edge, waiting. He watched the rails stretch in front of him, his body aching, weak from exhaustion, surrounded by chaos and desperation, and still so, so hungry.

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At first, the train was empty. Micah sat comfortably, arms crossed, watching the concrete blur past through the window. But as the train made its stops, more people began to trickle in. Then more. And more. Within minutes, the train was packed. Micah was pressed against bodies on all sides, shoulders jabbing into him, the heat of strangers making his skin crawl. The train lurched forward, and he stumbled, his cheek brushing against someone’s scratchy coat.

“Hey, watch it,” he snapped at a man in thick glasses.

The man muttered an apology but didn’t move—he couldn’t move. There was nowhere to go.

Micah wrinkled his nose, turning to his father. “It’s so claustrophobic in here,” he muttered. “Why did we have to take the stupid train with all these people? Couldn’t we have booked a private one?”

His father barely spared him a glance, eyes fixed on his watch. “No, Micah. It was too last minute.

How was I supposed to know the helipad was under reconstruction? I only got the email last night.”

Micah groaned. This was unbearable.

“Quit your whining,” his father snapped, irritation lacing his voice. “The next station is the final one for the workers. They’ll switch trains.”

His mother barely looked up from her phone. “Go stand by the doors, sweetie. There’s more space there.”

She waved a dismissive hand in his direction, still typing.

Micah huffed but didn’t argue. There was no point. He hated this—hated being stuffed in with these people, swaying with every movement of the train, forced into their space, their sweat, their breath. If standing by the doors meant he didn’t have to be suffocated in the press of workers, then he would go do that. He pushed his way through the crowd, grumbling under his breath. The train slowed, nearing the next station. Then, a voice crackled through the speakers.

“Attention, all passengers. There has been a disturbance detected in the next station. The authorities have been called, but to prevent any potential danger, we advise you to stay inside the train until the next stop.”

Micah let out an exasperated groan, tilting his head back. *Great. Now I have to stand here, crammed against all these people, for another half an hour.*

A few minutes passed, and the train began to slow anyway. The route was automated, so it had to.

Micah barely paid attention, fidgeting with his phone, waiting for the delay to pass. The doors started sliding open. Micah barely looked up, but then he heard it—the yells.

They cut through the quiet drone of the train, sharp and chaotic. Micah frowned. He lifted his gaze, but only to flinch at the sight ahead of him. A thin, filthy thing stood in front of him. Bones jutting beneath muddy skin, eyes wide—bulging, wild. He was staring, locked in place, his breath coming out in sharp pants. Micah’s stomach turned.

A second later, the screams brought Micah’s attention back to them. So many voices yelling.

Chanting. Demanding.

What the hell is going on?

“What—”

Before he could react, the boy lunged. He grabbed Micah’s arm and yanked. Micah stumbled forward,

pulled off balance. He barely had time to process what was happening before the boy used the full weight of his frail body to drag them both backward. The next second, Micah was on the ground. The pavement was cold against his hands, and behind him, the train doors shut.

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“Bring him over here! Bring him here!”

The voices echoed off the concrete walls of the underground station, bouncing between the rusted beams and flickering fluorescent lights. Behind the metal gates, the crowd surged, hands gripping the bars, faces twisted in rage and desperation. Hana barely registered them. His skull still throbbed from where it had been crushed against the iron. His limbs felt weak, his stomach hollow.

The boy he had pulled from the train groaned, standing up from the ground and dusting himself off. He stood before Hana, his skin smooth, his hair neatly styled, his clothes without any holes, stains, or frayed edges. He had a scent, too—something artificial, floral, foreign.

Hana had never seen anyone like him before.

The train roared past behind them, its wheels screeching against the tracks as it disappeared down the tunnel. The boy rubbed his head, blinking down at Hana.

“What... Who are you?” he asked, voice weak with bewilderment. “Why are these people yelling?”

Hana opened his mouth, but his throat was so dry. His tongue felt like sandpaper against his teeth, and the words scraped against his throat like broken glass. Then, before Hana could muster up any words, the boy’s expression twisted, and his nose scrunched up.

“Ugh,” he muttered, taking a small step back. “Why are you so dirty?”

Hana just stared at him. He didn’t react. He didn’t know how to.

The boy’s hand suddenly flew to his mouth, his eyes going wide.

“Oh, god,” he whispered. “I’m not wearing a mask.”

This, Hana could respond to. He knew people wore masks, but why would this boy need one here?

There was no wind, no sand in the air.

“Why do you need a mask?”

The boy shot him a look. “Because of the air!”

Hana blinked. “The air?”

“Yes! The air!” the boy snapped. “The pollution, I’ll catch some disease! Some— Some lung infection!”

Hana had never heard that phrase before. Lung infection. He rolled the words around in his head, unfamiliar and strange. “A... what?”

The boy gave him a strange look. “A sickness. You know, when your body stops working right, and you feel unwell.”

Hana frowned. “Sick...ness? Everyone here is... sick.”

He tried the word, shaping it the way he understood it. Everyone was unwell. Everyone’s bodies weren’t working right.

The other boy hesitated. His gaze flickered to the crowd behind the gate, then back to Hana.

“...Everyone?”

Hana just nodded.

The boy turned to take in the station—the mildewed walls, the rusted tracks, the flickering lights. He looked at the people, really looked this time, and something in his expression shifted. Like gears, turning in his head. He stared at the crowd, at their hollow eyes, their clawing hands, their sunken faces. Then, he shook his head. “No, that’s not right. This place—there aren’t people living here.”

Hana frowned. “What?”

“This part of town is abandoned,” the boy said, voice tight. “No one’s supposed to be here.”

Hana’s frown deepened. What did the boy mean by that? There were people everywhere. People in the tunnels. People in the alleys. People pressed against each other in the dark, fighting for scraps, struggling to breathe. People had always been here.

“But... people are here. They live here. I live here. Everyone does.”

The boy's lip curled. "No, not everybody. Nobody should... Nobody should be living here. They shouldn't."

Something about that stuck in Hana's brain. Shouldn't be? But this was just... life. This was all there was. Hana didn't understand.

Noticing his confusion, the other boy just shook his head. He reached a hand towards Hana, who flinched at the gesture.

"C'mon, get up," the boy said. "I'm Micah. What's your name?"

"I'm... Hana," Hana muttered, getting up on his feet on his own. He didn't want to touch the other boy—Micah. It just felt wrong. He was too clean, too different from everything Hana knew. Micah laughed then, a sound so easy and relaxed, even that sounded so foreign. "Khaana?"

"Yeah," Hana said. "Why is that funny?"

"That's seriously your name?" Micah blinked at him, turning serious. "Your parents named you food?"

"What?" Hana frowned. "I... I don't know my parents. I'm not food, I'm Hana."

"Khaana, or Hana, means food," Micah said. "In Hindi. That's what your name means."

"Oh," Hana said. He didn't know names could have meaning. He didn't know what Hindi was either. Micah shook his head. He looked like he was about to add something more, but then his gaze flickered to the crowd. The screaming had grown louder, echoing through the station. He let out a sharp breath, and for the first time, Hana saw something familiar in the boy—fear.

"I need to get back up."

"Up?"

"Yes, up. Back home."

Hana stared at him blankly once again. "Up? You want to go up from the train station?"

The boy shook his head and tried clarifying, "No, the skyscrapers."

It didn't help. It was almost like the boy was speaking another language, his words foreign and strange. Noticing Hana's blank stare, he tried again, "The big, tall buildings reaching into the sky? That's where people *actually* live."

"People... live in those?" Hana's voice was quiet.

Micah blinked at him, like he had just said something insane. "Yes. Well, okay, not on the first fifty feet. That's too close to the ground. The pollution is too thick. And then you have the ground floors and such, and above that, people live."

Hana's stomach twisted. He had seen those buildings, those monstrous giants, looming over everything. Cold. Unreachable. Those buildings—the ones he had slept besides, pressed his hands to when he was burning up from fever—people had been inside them? Living?

He thought they were empty. He thought they were just ruins. But this boy lived in them. He lived above it all. Away from the filth, the disease, the starvation.

Hana's breath hitched. His hands curled into fists. He glanced over at the people still shouting by the gates. Their voices burned in his ears, raw with suffering, thick with rage. Slowly, their anger started to resonate. Micah... Micah had never starved, had never felt his stomach hollow out until it hurt, had never clawed at the dirt, searching for scraps. To him, this was hell. To Hana, this was normal. His life—*everyone's* life down here—wasn't just suffering. It was suffering while others lived so high above it that they didn't even know it existed.

It reminded Hana about the word he heard earlier. *Inhumane*. It echoed in his brain. He thought he understood it now.

Micah glanced at him, then at the people behind the gate. "What do all these people even do?" he asked. "They're not engineers, are they?"

Hana's fingers twitched. His nails dug into his palms. "Huh?"

"You know," Micah frowned. "The people who design the machines?"

"People... design the machines?"

"Yes," Micah said. "Of course they do. You've never met an engineer before?"

Hana shook his head, jaw tightening. "I thought people only worked in the mines."

“The mines?” Micah scoffed. “No, people don’t work there. It’s way too dangerous. It’s the machines and robots that get that done.”

Hana’s shoulders tensed.

“No,” he said. “Some people work there. When some machines break.”

Micah’s mouth fell open. “What?! Why would they do that?!”

Hana’s breath came out slow and sharp. His fingers curled tighter. “Because... they get money that way.”

Micah was staring at him. Staring at him like he was some strange, broken thing.

To Micah, the people behind the gate weren’t starving. They weren’t suffering. They weren’t *real*.

He didn’t understand.

He didn’t understand the filth, the hunger, the cold nights spent curled in the dark, ribs grinding against skin. He didn’t understand what it meant to *exist* like this, to live in a world where survival meant gnawing on bones and hoping you found another meal before your body ate itself.

Micah had never been forced to chase down and eat rats, had never curled up in the dirt, shaking from sickness.

Hana’s eyes dragged over him—the smooth curve of his arms, the softness of his stomach. There was no sharpness to him, no sunken cheeks, no ribs pushing through skin. He had flesh. More than even the biggest sewer rats. More than anyone Hana had ever known. His stomach twisted violently, his mouth filled with saliva, and he was reminded that he was still so, *so* hungry.

Micah shifted under his stare, brow furrowing. “What?” he said, sounding almost irritated. Like Hana was the problem here. Like he was the one who shouldn’t exist.

Hana’s breath came in short, sharp bursts. His fingers twitched.

Micah wasn’t clean. Not really. He wasn’t like the rats that scurried through the tunnels, covered in grime, dragging their worm-filled bellies across the concrete. No, he was worse. Filthy in a way Hana didn’t have words for. His stomach clenched, and the hunger blurred his vision—it wasn’t the kind that gnawed and ached, the one that made him weak, but the kind that sent adrenaline burning through his limbs. The kind that made him move.

Micah barely had time to react before Hana tackled him to the ground.

“Hey! What the—get off me!” Micah yelled, his voice shrill, his hands shoving weakly against Hana’s chest. Hana’s hands scrambled for something—anything. His fingers curled around a loose rock. Micah’s eyes widened. This was finally another thing Hana could recognize. Panic.

Hana wanted to drown Micah in all the things he had lived in his whole life. Wanted to paint him in it—pain, misery, desperation. He wanted him to understand it, to know it in his bones the way they all did.

Micah’s lips parted, his breath shaking.

“Hana—”

CRACK.

The first hit sent blood splattering onto the pavement. Micah screamed, his body jerking under Hana like the rats did when he snapped their spines.

CRACK.

The crowd roared. Some cheered. Others screamed for him to stop.

“He’s worth more alive!” someone shrieked. “We can ransom him—”

CRACK.

Micah’s body twitched violently. His fingers dug into Hana’s arm, shaking, but his nails were too short, too neat, to do any damage. Not like the rats. They fought. They bit and scratched to survive. Micah didn’t even know how to do that.

CRACK.

The twitching slowed. Micah’s eyes watered, bloodshot. There it was. That look. That moment of realization, when there was nothing left to do but pray. Claw at the ground. Hold on to the last slivers of survival. It’s how everyone felt here. Every single day was a fight. To outrun hunger. To dodge sickness. To live.

Hana slowed, staring at him. Micah had never had to fight. Never had to feel it pressing down on him, tightening, crushing the breath from his lungs. He should.

He *should*.

Hana let the rock fall from his hands. A flicker of something crossed Micah's face. Hope. Then, Hana reached for his throat.

Micah inhaled sharply—more of a hiccup than a breath—as Hana's fingers curled around his neck.

His skin was perfect. Pale. Soft.

Hana squeezed. His own hands—grimy, bloodstained, broken at the knuckles—left smears on that porcelain-white throat. Staining it. Ruining it.

Micah thrashed, gasping, hands scrabbling at Hana's wrists, but eventually, his body grew limp like all the rats would.

In the end, they all died the same.

There was silence.

The crowd had gone quiet. Somewhere in the distance, sirens wailed. But Hana... Hana was still hungry. His eyes dragged over Micah's body.

So much flesh. So much meat.

Hana's hands moved before his mind could catch up. It was instinct. The same instinct that had driven him before, when his stomach had been so empty it felt like it was devouring itself. When he had no fire, no time, no patience—just the gnawing, mind-breaking hunger that made him shove raw meat into his mouth before the body even cooled.

His fingers clawed at Micah's clothes, tearing through fabric like he had torn through the fur of sewer rats. Then, he pulled. The skin split. Flesh gave way. Blood welled up, thick and dark, slipping between his fingers, warm.

The smell hit him instantly—iron, salt, meat. Hana's hands shook. His breath hitched.

And then, he ate.

His teeth sank in. Flesh tore.

Another bite.

And another.

Warm. Soft. Not stringy, not tough, not like rats. Blood ran down his chin, soaking into his rags. His shoulders shook. The sirens grew louder. Tears burned in his eyes and streamed down his cheeks, mixing with the blood.

And for the first time in his life, Hana's stomach felt full.