

Chapter 1

Overlooking the remainder of the Ross Ice Shelf, perched in the south-eastern-most Transantarctic Mountains, in the still somewhat cold weather of the Antarctic continent, there was a small village. Half-buried in snow, scared and freezing 45% of the time, these people weren't leading the most optimistic of lives. Especially after the calamity that the Consumption Of Regional Property & Services of Energy organization- more commonly known as CORPSE- unleashed upon this land.

CORPSE created a huge energy sink in the form of a mechanical dragon known only as Sephtis, which was made to teach humanity a lesson about destroying the earth that they know. However, its AI went renegade and started to take things a step too far, starting to actually destroy the earth and terrorize the people that managed to avoid the brunt of its devastation. It was easy to find, due to the trail of debris and smog it constantly leaves behind, but extremely difficult to disable, as it had methods of self-defense programmed into it. As a consequence, whoever said they'd go to defeat Sephtis once and for all was either severely injured or never seen again.

Sephtis had started its rampage half a decade prior, and still terrorized the world to this day, as it swiftly and surely continued destroying it. Everyone tried to conserve whatever energy they had by implementing techniques such as ditching the AC, recycling more often or leaving lights off whenever they weren't needed, but Sephtis was an overpowering force that still was no match for humanity. There were people who still had spirit and wanted to fight for what's right, and those people were normally ridiculed for having dreams of ever taking down the bane of society.

Nowhere is that more apparent than the princess of this small society up in the middle of the biting winds and around -50 °C temperatures. Her name was Eudora Watt, known by appearance whenever anyone could see her piercing white eyes and the blue lightning stripe going down her black hair. Eudora, even for only being 16 and a half, had the same dreams as many other now presumed dead people did, and has been publicly shamed by her parents by ever wishing she could achieve victory over Sephtis. Being the more rebellious type, she didn't necessarily stop dreaming, and one day slipped out of her parents' relatively small castle in the dead of night only with rations and her wit.

Over the course of the first week she'd been away for, she met Raz. They're pretty scrawny and clearly have been under the heel of whatever devastation Sephtis had been doling out for quite some time. Their personality screamed 'pessimistic' and they weren't eager to hear Eudora's plan to take down Sephtis at first. However, their mind was quickly changed when they remembered what had happened to them just a year before, and they agreed to help Eudora.

Coming to where they now stood, both of them- perched on a hilltop that overlooked the South Pole- looked across the large swath of devastation that stretched across the far southeastern side of the South Pole. The smog that hung over the air was at least slightly toxic at best and the amount of waste that had sloughed off of Sephtis was immense and worrisome. Both Eudora and Raz had decided to take this journey by skis- it would be as fast as they could go while trying to conserve environmental energy. However, they'd definitely be using up their own stamina in using this method, but it was the best they could do. Both of them were already quite used to working the living heck out of themselves when it came to what they did, so this wasn't going to be too much of an issue.

“Raz,” Eudora starts, “are you ready?”

“If you call what is ‘not ready at all’ over here ‘ready’, then we’re going to be in big trouble,” Raz replies morosely.

Eudora sighs in slight frustration, before she goes on to yell at Raz. “We don’t have *time* to sit around here in order to be what you call ‘ready’, Raz! *We absolutely need to be ready.*”

“Well, you asked...” Raz shakes their head.

Both of them strap on their gas masks- it was actually illegal to wander outside without having one somewhere on them, although it was more for safety purposes than anything else. Of course, the multiple governments on Earth probably wouldn’t be too happy if people suffocated due to the toxins in the smog and then their families laid the blame on them, so they put that law up around 5 years prior to this. Eudora hated having to wear these, as it would make communication much more difficult than it ever needed to be. Plus, Raz probably wouldn’t be able to hear whatever snarky quip she had about them, which was always a bit of a downer for her.

Raz was always swift with putting on their mask, and they’d normally have to watch Eudora struggle with hers before they caved in and helped her out. She wasn’t necessarily too accustomed to having to put on her mask on and she normally was a lot less deft than Raz was with theirs. This was no different, and in fact, it was pretty much the exact same part she was stuck on as last time, so over comes Raz who immediately seals her face into the mask like it was nothing.

Eudora glances out over the giant path of destruction one last time, before she looks back at Raz.

“Shall we?” Eudora motions just in case that wasn’t heard, but Raz nods in response, and they start their descent down the hill they were perched on.

Chapter 2

Marching through the sickening sludge that was the South Pole, approaching its heart, Eudora was thankful for the mask filtering out her sense of smell. All around, devastation bloomed. Snow shoes, skis, discarded clothes, and debris from rampaged houses were scattered around, some of the larger piles coated in a thick, gooey substance that dripped off onto the path below. It was disgusting.

Those whose gas masks had malfunctioned or broken (which is incredibly common in the cities Sephtis has rampaged) lay dead or unconscious in the snow. Eudora didn’t want to know which. Either way, sooner or later the fresh ones would turn blue as their bodies froze, and those big, white government machines would come through to be rid of them. They always did.

Any attention Eudora might waste mourning for those people-turned-icicles would only hurt her, so she forced herself to look the other way as she and Raz traversed the torn-up land.

All was smooth sailing for the two travellers, besides the obvious disarray the South Pole was in, and the houses gradually grew smaller and tightly packed as Eudora and Raz approached the capital city of the Pole.

A large archway signalled they were crossing into the Heart, which is what the capital city of the South Pole was called. The original name was long-since forgotten, the letters previously hanging from the arch having been destroyed when Sephtis first came through all those years ago.

Of course, the people of the Heart had rebuilt most of what they had lost, though it was done using the scarce amount of resources they could find from the rubble of their old city. Now, a few shabby rows of market stalls make up the only available resources for the common cityfolk. The royal government had private establishments for everything they needed, which Eudora had been using before she had run away. Now, she would never pass as a princess, and Raz was about as far from royalty as anyone could get.

Still, the two were running low on food, and their gas masks weren't going to last much longer before the toxins started slipping through the filters. They needed to stock up.

"Hey, Raz." Eudora has to nearly shout just to be heard by the other person, but it worked. Raz turned to look at her, almost surprised by the attempt at verbal communication.

"We should probably stop to replenish our supplies. We're going to need them." Eudora knew the Heart was probably the *worst* place to buy supplies, what with the insanely high prices, and she also knew Raz wouldn't give up a chance to shoot down one of her ideas if they could, so she wasn't surprised by the response.

"We'd be wasting money if we got anything *here*. You *know* that, Eudora." Raz shouted back, their tone managing to sound dreary. They didn't bother to stop walking, their leather boots dragging through the layer of frozen sludge that covered the mountains of snow below them, their boots scooping up the gross concoction and spreading it with each step.

Eudora sighed, but it went unheard by Raz.

"Raz, I know it's expensive, but we might not get another chance to buy anything before we find Sephtis. If we're going to do this, which we *are*, we'll need everything we can get. So come on, we're going to the market."

Raz's sounds of protest -just loud enough for Eudora to catch- were ignored, and they gave up, following beside Eudora as the two made their way towards the precariously built market stalls.

Eudora glanced around, trying to decide the best course of action. Making up her mind, she shouted her orders to Raz, who she knew wouldn't argue- yelling is a lot of work, and a lot of it could severely hurt their throats. They needed to communicate, even with their masks, so they had to refrain from arguing as much as possible while wearing them.

"Raz, you look for somewhere we can buy better gas masks. I'll get us some more food for the rest of the trip." It wasn't a bad idea to split up- finding proper functioning gas masks was terribly difficult, especially in the Heart, and Eudora was the one with leftover royal coins to pay for everything. Eudora and Raz didn't have much to trade away, and a single one of those coins could buy the two of them anything they might need.

Eudora quickly found a stand carrying enough small food packets to last her and Raz at least another few months, and soon after came across a small, partially collapsed shack carrying coats and boots that were slightly less worn than what Raz was wearing. Eudora didn't need anything, since her clothes were bought from royal government stores, but Raz would love to wear some more high-quality gear.

On the topic of Raz, they had probably found a reliable store for gas masks by now, and they didn't like waiting. Eudora quickly paid for the clothes and left to find them. It took a bit of scouting around, but Eudora managed to spot Raz wandering around the market. Clearly, they hadn't found a good store yet.

“Raz! Over here!” Eudora shouted over the crows of shoppers, waving her arms up over the mass of heads in an attempt to catch Raz’s attention. It worked. Catching up to them, Eudora thrust out her hand carrying the new coat and boots.

“I found a store with some better clothes- here, they these on. They’re probably more comfortable than the scrappy stuff you’re wearing now. It’ll block out the cold better, too. You’ll be less likely to freeze.”

Raz took the boots first, carefully slipping off their current ones and replacing them with the new pair. Then, they reached for the coat and -shivering when the frigid cold hit their arms- sighed in relaxation as they zipped up the warm, fur-lined article.

“Thanks,” Raz mumbled, offering Eudora the smallest hint of a smile. The words were too quiet to hear, but Eudora saw the lip movements and understood what they were saying.

It was the first time Raz had even come close to smiling at Eudora, so she celebrated the moment, though it was short-lived.

“I couldn’t find any masks. Everywhere I looked they were either fake or too worn for us to consider buying. We’d be better off just keeping the ones we have now. Unless…” Raz trailed off, clearly not liking the alternative, but knowing they had no choice but to suggest it. The two of them wouldn’t survive for long if they didn’t find better masks. The ones they were using now were old and worn, and they were about to face Sephtis. *The Sephtis*. If there was any chance of their masks failing them, they needed to find new ones.

“Over there. Look, right where I’m pointing.” Raz extended their arm, pointing towards a dark corner near the back end of the market. There was no movement coming from it, which meant there probably wasn’t any person there to sell anything. However, as Eudora squinted to get a closer look at the darkness, she spotted the glint of light off the edge of something in a window. Taking a few steps closer, she could confirm that they were gas masks. And they looked to be in near-perfect condition.

“Raz, you’re amazing. Those are *perfect!* Let’s go see if there’s anyone over there who’ll sell them to us.”

Eudora knew it was a long shot- there was clearly no one there. But she wasn’t going to just walk right past an opportunity to get masks that good.

“Even if there *is* someone there, they’ll be selling them for more than either of us could afford. Even with those coins you have. It isn’t worth it. Besides, I *hate* it here. Everything’s crowded and dirty and everywhere I step it’s like there’s *more* gross stuff than before!”

Raz continued to complain, all the way over to the dark market corner. However, when they finally managed to push through the herd of people and reach it, Raz’s voice died down. Instead of forming words, their mouth was hanging open at the sight before them.

A tall, narrow, dark-paneled store stood, intact, hidden away from the poor scouring mass of civilians. Eudora and Raz pushed open the glass doors, stepping into an old, dusty, cobweb-filled room of treasure.

Inside, there were shelves upon shelves of clothes -coats, boots, gloves, and hats- as well as skis, snow shoes, and other environmentally friendly transportation devices. There were cans of food -tomatoes, beans, and every flavour of soup imaginable-, packets of pre-made meals, and even a section of produce, though by now everything was shriveled and rotten. Best of all, near the register counter was a stack of gas masks, which could only be described as

beautiful. No smudges, no worn or torn edges, the masks looked like they would work and had once been *clean*.

Raz was the first to break out of the shocked state that both they and Eudora had unknowingly entered upon seeing the inside of the store. They rushed over to the counter of gas masks, swiping two up and immediately throwing off their own used one. Eudora joined their side, still peering around the room, as if everything was too good to be true- searching for some signal that this was a trap. Her gaze came to the counter of masks, moving to survey all angles of the table.

Raz handed Eudora a gas mask, and although she took it, she was paying more attention to the floor in front of her. Her face twisted up in horror at it, unable to force her body to step away from the sight before her.

On the floor lay what was probably once a man, the skeleton crumpled and folded over itself. There were insects galore, weaving in and out of sockets and holes, appearing and disappearing in a tangle of miniscule bodies and legs. Without anything to filter out the toxins, the bugs had taken in the infecting gasses and transformed into tiny mutant monstrosities. They looked sickly and half-dead, if that were even possible for an insect, the sight of them appalling enough to raise vomit in Eudora's mouth.

Curious, yet also wary of whatever Eudora was seeing, Raz walked around the counter to look at the dead crumpled man as well, immediately jumping back and having a much more vocal response.

"Ugh, that's *disgusting!*" Raz's face recoiled in obvious repulsion.

"Just *look* at it, Eudora! If I weren't wearing a mask I might actually throw up. Come on, we need to hurry up. Let's just take these and go- I can't stand it here any longer."

Eudora, pale-faced and in complete agreement with everything Raz just said, nodded and turned to leave, Raz following her as they always did.

Once outside the store, Eudora and Raz, with their new gas masks and a handful of food, crossed through the market, and the rest of the Heart, emerging on the other side of the South Pole. They had almost reached Sephtis, the sun was setting on them, and the smoking fumes of toxic gas were stronger than ever, filling the air so as to make it nearly impossible to see clearly. Everything was shades of sickly yellow and polluted gray. There was no civilization, no houses, no people.

No one dared to come this close to Sephtis. Not anymore.

Except Eudora and Raz. The two rogue travellers were crossing through uncharted territory now, and they were going to stop this rampant, destructive metal monster, once and for all.

Chapter 3

A few days go by, and at that rate for both Raz & Eudora, it was day in, day out. They hardly talked to each other during this time, only conversing whenever the monotonous path of death and destruction became somehow unclear. Barely stopping for even 2 hours to rest and recuperate each day, both of them had trudged quite a long distance in about 5 days time. So long, in fact, that they'd both reached the clear boundaries of Sephtis's territory, more commonly known as Nature's End.

Nature's End wasn't called that only to be intimidating, it actually quite literally described the atmosphere of the place. Slush laid absolutely everywhere, the ground that was once believed to be in permafrost now thawing and melting. Skeletons of the unfortunate victims of the chaos caused by Sephtis were scattered all over and there were evident signs of a past civilization written all over the place. With large broken parts of building walls laid helter-skelter across shattered asphalt roads, electrical towers leaning precariously on the brink of falling over- some torn wires still sparking occasionally- and remnants of personal belongings in the rubble of whatever buildings still stood, it pretty much felt like a ghost town. Not to mention, the poisonous gases in the air were as volatile as ever and a thick yellowish-gray noxious fog hung everywhere you looked. This place was a nightmare incarnated, to say the least.

Eudora's heart was pounding like mad in her chest- she was scared out of her mind and definitely tried to hide the fact that she was scared from Raz, who would only mercilessly tease her about that just to save their own sanity. In fact, Raz wasn't doing much better. As always, much more open about complaining about it, too.

"Uugh..." Raz groans, "Eudora, how the heck did you drag me into this?? I mean, *look* at this place!! We are walking on top of the physical manifestation of death right now!!"

Eudora catches a glimpse of a smaller skeleton in her peripheral vision. It was dressed in a probably once beautiful torn and tattered dress, curled within itself, caressing a half-disintegrated doll with a small tag on it. Taking a step closer, she could see that the tag- or what remained of it- had letters that were bleeding out and fading, but still reading legibly: 'Huggable Harper'. Eudora quickly stepped backwards, evidently a bit spooked, since she knew this was probably a young girl who'd been unfortunate enough to have been in this place at the wrong time, and the thoughts of how many innocents died due to a malfunctioned spite operation from C.O.R.P.S.E. were utterly terrifying.

Both of them kept on going. It was midday by now, but the blanket of toxins that were in the area was immense and also blocked out any sunlight that would have been available. Occasionally, Raz would complain about every part of them hurting due to the fact that they'd both been going non-stop for much longer than your average person would really be up for normally. Not like anyone would normally be up for taking down the bane of the 2050's, though.

Raz- despite being overtly hateful towards Nature's End- still had a bit of a wandering eye. Their curiosity was evident- despite the fact that if they looked at anything for too long, they would resent doing that and kick themselves internally for doing so. They didn't really want to get too hung up with feeling sorry for people who had long since been dead, but on the other hand, they also secretly wanted to pay respects to the thousands... heck, tens of thousands of people who unfortunately met their end here.

As they continued on, Eudora came across a more recently deceased body- she could tell since it hadn't been completely eaten away by the same mutated, sickly-looking bugs that had made its home in the skeleton that Raz and Eudora had unfortunately stumbled across back in the Heart. It didn't help that they were still not completely a skeleton- in fact, that only made the sight of the decomposing body even more revolting. Hundreds of tiny little insectoid bodies were popping up in various places all over- a few showing their mutated faces through the now vacant eye sockets of their meal before vanishing back inside the head, some crawling out of unsuspecting clothing folds and creases, others looking out of visible organs where the outer flesh was completely decomposed- some even getting flung right out of them. It was even

more wretched than the first one- she was genuinely and absolutely nauseated by the sight of it and surprised that Raz hadn't spotted this rotting mound that used to be a person yet. Although that quickly changed when Raz glanced just a tiny bit too far to their right.

Raz gags immediately, seeing that unfortunate person sprawled out on the ground, the insects fabricating themselves in the body of the victim. Eudora tries to keep her eyes away from it, tries to move away from it, but is most certainly paralyzed in total fear.

"Eudora, what has gotten *into* you?!" Raz shouts through their mask, "Are you *trying* to will yourself into puking or something?!! At *least* take a step back, look away... uuuugh, just do *something!*"

Eudora takes a few tentative steps backwards, her eyes still locked on the corpse. Her head slowly turns to meet Raz's gaze, her stomach definitely doing cartwheels now.

"O-on the b-bright side of things..." Eudora starts weakly, almost silent to anyone but herself "a-at least we know that t-the rumors of people t-trying to fight S-Sephtis a-are true... r-right?"

Raz sighs, flustered by Eudora's apparent lack of being able to connect the dots between scenarios. Although, it went completely unheard due to the mask they were wearing.

"Eudora, don't you understand?? If we fail to finally bring an end to Sephtis, we're almost *certainly* going to be yet another set of bodies in this graveyard of fools!"

"C-can't you just l-look on the bright side of t-things for once, Raz?" Eudora inquires.

"What bright side of this scenario do you see, Eudora?" Raz snaps back, "The kind of things that kids' stories suggest- underdog heroes somehow save the world by some stroke of luck? Nothing anywhere close to that is going to happen, and you know it."

"Listen, we have to at least try," Eudora suggests desperately, "I've already been publicly shamed for just dreaming about what everyone's wildest fantasies consist of- finally taking down the bane of our existence and living a life that isn't filled with gas masks, sludge, death and waste. If we fail, we at least tried, if we win, then I might not be ridiculed for those dreams I had anymore. Nobody would need to dream about taking Sephtis down anymore, because we would have done it ourselves."

"Eudora, you're being unrealistic," Raz states firmly, "We *aren't* going to win."

"We're not going to win if you keep saying we aren't!!" Eudora exclaims, "We didn't wander out miles away from our hometowns and all the way to Nature's End just to say 'I give up'!!"

"*Eudora.*"

"Raz, I'm not going to allow this kind of 'we can't' behavior. We're giving this a shot whether you like it or not."

"You would not believe how much I hate you right now, Eudora."

"Oh, like I couldn't tell. I can hear the twinge of anger in your oh-so-flat tone of voice right now."

"Cut it out, Eudora. You're *really* getting on my nerves right now."

"Do tell."

Raz growls furiously. Eudora wasn't ever their BFF- she's actually a bit abrasive at times when it comes to important things. That being said, she'd never been this stubborn and oblivious to reason before, and it was driving them up the wall.

"Eudora, I'm serious, there is no easy way out of this," Raz starts, "I should know."

“Mhm,” Eudora mumbles, “And why should you know, exactly?”

“My parents tried to accomplish the exact same thing just last year. I wanted to come along and help them, but they said that I would probably get hurt by Sephtis, plus they didn’t have enough masks to go around, and so they left me behind. They never came back from that. I can only assume that they died because of Sephtis, and I can never forgive C.O.R.P.S.E. for what a metal-cloaked, world-destroying monster they made.”

Eudora stands there, utterly shocked by what they’d said. Raz hadn’t told her anything about their past, so she was actually quite caught off guard by what Raz had just said.

“I wanted to help you due to what had happened in my past, but apparently my sense of reason only just started kicking in now,” Raz states.

Eudora and Raz both stand in the middle of a shattered road of a former civilization, crumbled buildings all around, bones run into the slush and dirt beneath the rubble, both of them completely silent aside from their breathing.

“Raz...” Eudora starts, “Forgive me. For everything. I was being selfish- I wanted someone to come and help me take Sephtis down. Had I known about your past, I might not have forced you to come along with me.” Raz nods slightly in response. “However, despite that, I still need you to help me out with this. Two heads are better than one, as the old saying goes.”

“Minor correction- two *cooperating* heads are better than one,” Raz points out. Eudora nods in agreement.

Just as they finished saying that, rhythmic earth-shaking tremors start to travel through the ground. Almost as if they were footsteps, each impact was perfectly spaced apart in timing, and getting louder and more violent with each jolt. That’s when Eudora realizes they *are* footsteps. Raz comes to this conclusion at precisely the same time, and immediately braces themselves accordingly.

“Welp...” Raz states worriedly, “If that’s what I think it is... oh boy, are we in trouble *now*.”

A deafening and unusually mechanical roar rings through the poison-soaked skies. Unpleasantly shocked by how diabolical the cry was, both travellers immediately covered their ears to prevent any potential damage. On top of that, they were also trying to block out the atrocious sound- which sounded like a combination of dissonant metal-on-metal screeching, a bullhorn siren, a pterodactyl, an earthquake and the multiple buildings collapsing in said earthquake, to put the sound into context. Just think ‘nails on a chalkboard’ but on a scale that’s about 1000 times larger than that, and that’s the feeling that sunk into both of them as they heard it.

“Well, Raz, there’s definitely no leaving now...” Eudora states nervously, as she glances over her left shoulder. Looking around nervously, she spots a large moving mound of metal and debris, with toxic smoke coming out from a set of pipes sticking out of it. Two flaps of metal that looked like wings spread out, debris tumbling from both of them and smoke coming out from the tips of each flap. Two crimson red lights had locked onto both of them- they’d been spotted by the very thing they came here to take care of. Sephtis had just caught its first glimpse of its newest challengers.

Chapter 4

The noise rang out across the expanse of the wasteland- a feral, ear-splitting bellow and the release of what was probably a hundred different toxic fumes.

Sephtis faced them now, its entire frame having rotated to take in its latest victims. The monstrous heap of metal and waste dipped its rusting head low, unlocking its jaw and releasing a growl of lethal gas. Eudora could feel the thickness of it in the air as it encompassed her and Raz, shuddering at the sick feeling it gave her. If there were any doubts of a leak in the new gas masks, they had surely vanished by now. Even the slightest weakness in their durability would mean Eudora and Raz had died from Sephtis' gust.

Yet they continued to stand.

Glancing at Raz to make sure they still had their wits about them, Eudora took a deep breath and readied herself for the battle she had entered. Carefully, steadily, and confidently, Eudora took a step forward and began marching towards where Sephtis stood.

It was difficult, but she and Raz managed to keep their faces brave and devoid of any vulnerable emotions-- they didn't flinch at the sound of the thousands of bones crunching beneath their feet or the squishing sensation when their boots accidentally sunk down into the rotting flesh of some of the more recent corpses, coating their fabric-covered legs in a murky liquid from the putrefaction. Raz didn't even bat an eye when they felt the tiny gripping legs of dozens of mutilated insects scurrying up into their clothes, biting and ripping into their flesh to begin consuming another meal.

Now that she was finally facing the ever-feared Sephtis, seeing the mass of destruction with her own two eyes and experiencing the horror of its existence, Eudora understood why Raz was so reluctant to keep going, even when they had gotten so close to confronting the dragon.

Though she knew she had no choice but to continue on forward towards her near-definite demise, Eudora wanted nothing more than to turn around and run back to her castle and feel the comforting embrace of her parents' arms around her.

And then her sensible, reality-accepting side took over and reminded her that not only was that not possible right now, but *she* was the one who ran away and pledged to defeat Sephtis. *She* was the one who continued journeying on, even when every odd was against her and everyone who spoke with her warned her against facing Sephtis. *She* was the one who had just dragged Raz into this mess because she knew, she *knew*, that if she couldn't find a way to beat Sephtis, then no one would.

She had to do this.

Though at first it was her choice, it is now her obligation to do anything and everything in her power to stop Sephtis.

The creature of metal, waste, and toxins towered over Eudora and Raz, staring down at them as if it was waiting for the *real* challengers to come out from wherever they were hiding. Clearly, the dragon didn't think *these* people would be insane enough to try defeating it.

Sephtis' lack of movement gave Eudora a chance to eye up her enemy. She examined its shell, thick layers of bones and debris picked up from all the cities it had rampaged over the years, stuck together with odd pieces jutting out here and there. Steam, smoke, or some other ugly fume rose out of every uncovered area. The bright ruby lights of its eyes glinted from the faint light of the sun's rays that managed to escape past the imprisoning layers of toxic gas covering the horizon. As ugly a sight as it was, Eudora could only imagine how pristine and beautiful the creature must have looked before it had gone rogue. The sharp, shining, precisely carved metal scales that she knew lay beneath all the destruction would be a fascinating - albeit terrifying - sight. It would definitely be preferable to the current monstrosity she was staring at.

Suddenly, in a clear attempt to catch them off guard, Sephtis swung low and knocked them both to their feet. Quickly regaining her position upright, Eudora steadied her breathing, dragging Raz to walk around Sephtis, getting a good view of its form and avoiding the swinging clunk of the tail that aimed to swipe at them.

When she was somewhere near the back of the dragon, Sephtis whirled around at what was probably the fastest speed it could, what with all the detritus hanging off it. It was still fast enough to startle Eudora, causing her to jump back a step, hitting Raz and knocking them to the ground.

Sephtis roared, releasing another round of fumes and smoke into the air, further clouding the two humans' vision through their masks.

Eudora and Raz didn't bother trying to communicate with one another through it all. There was no way they would be able to hear each other over the scratching sound of metal on metal- the spinning gears working Sephtis' movement were much too loud, not to mention the dragon itself was not shy about vocalising its distaste of living humans.

Seeming to grasp that Eudora and Raz had no intention of striking first, Sephtis swung one of its massive claws at them, trying to swipe someone up to finish them off quickly. Eudora didn't see it coming, preoccupied with trying to come up with a good fighting strategy, but Raz was quick enough to haul them both to safety.

Panting from the fear and exhilaration of finally confronting *the* Sephtis, Eudora gave Raz a small thumb's up to signify her gratitude, before turning back to dodge another weak attack from Sephtis.

The dragon, now annoyed that the two intruding humans were still breathing, got cleverer about its moves, determined to be quick and accurate with each blow to its opponents.

Though they managed to avoid the brunt of Sephtis' attacks, both Eudora and Raz had taken significant damage and still had yet to come up with any idea of how to beat the giant metal monstrosity.

With Raz standing guard at Sephtis' front, Eudora stumbled over to try climbing the beast to see if she could find anything stuck *on* it. Both of them knew that if all the skilled professionals before them who had tried fighting Sephtis with weapons had failed, then there was no use for them, two people with zero experience wielding any sort of weapons, to scrounge for a rock with an especially sharp edge or maybe a lucky sword from one of Sephtis' previous victims.

Anything that could allow them to defeat the dragon would have to be *on* it, *in* it, or in some way *a part* of it.

Caught up with finding a way to climb Sephtis without immediately being killed, Eudora was unprepared for the foot that slammed directly into her.

An audible crunch signified a definite broken bone in her leg, though the pain she felt from it reached every inch of her body. Eudora let out a cry of pain, catching the attention of both Raz and Sephtis. As Sephtis turned to investigate the source of Eudora's noise, Raz was caught off guard, losing their footing and falling to the ground as Sephtis nudged them when it turned.

It was immediately evident that that was the turning point. Raz had fallen down, Sephtis was close enough to move in for the kill, and Eudora was too far away to do anything to help.

Raz screamed as the giant dragon scooped them up, trapping them in its hold.

"Raz, no!" Though she hollered in protest, Eudora was powerless to stop Sephtis from taking her friend.

Sephtis curled its metal claw around Raz' fragile human form, their gas mask getting torn off and tossed away in the process. Raz immediately felt the effect of the impure air coming in contact with them. The air was barely even air anymore. Toxic gas, dangerous fumes, and poisonous vapours all swirled in the open sky, unseen by the human eye. Raz held their breath as long as they could, but even without directly inhaling the gases they were already greatly affecting them. If Eudora didn't find a way to stop Sephtis *now*, Raz would die, and it would be her fault for dragging them into all of this.

She had to think fast.

Eudora scanned every inch of Sephtis, looking for any possible weakness, when it hit her. Sephtis was a robot. A machine. A human creation, running on power and using up energy. Sephtis, who was solely focused on squeezing the life out of Raz, didn't notice Eudora move around to the other side of it.

In fact, Sephtis was so wrapped up in finally catching one of them that it didn't feel Eudora ripping through the layers of debris, chaos, and death, sloughing off the disgusting pile of wreckage from its outermost layer. It couldn't sense when Eudora's eyes landed on the prized gem- a grimy, rust-encrusted hatch encased with a thick gooey substance-- probably something from all the old sludge that was usually covering it.

Eudora went to twist open the hatch, but before she could a small opening appeared, releasing an onslaught of smoke into the open air. Eudora peered forward, thankful for the gas mask protecting her from the stream of pollution, looking down into a deep cave of red and black. There was some sort of process happening, and something was burning- that's where the red was from. The opening slid shut just as it had appeared, giving her only a few short seconds to take everything in.

Eudora had never seen anything like it, though she had heard tales of boilers being used to produce electricity from coal. She assumed this was something similar to that, producing enough energy to power Sephtis. Given coal was one of the most harmful sources of energy back when it was used, responsible for 72% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions and 46% of the world's CO2 emissions, trapping heat, and being the single largest contributor to climate change worldwide, it's no wonder Sephtis was able to mercilessly destroy everything in its path with about as little effort as taking a breath.

Once again, a small circular metal bit slid open to reveal Sephtis' interior, giving Eudora a second look inside. Just above the pit of burning embers, Eudora spotted a lever. If she could reach her arm far enough in to pull it, she could stop the coal burning, which would stop the supply of energy to Sephtis, which would shut down the dragon...

Eudora had it.

She was about to defeat the greatest enemy in human history, and the giant metal waste dragon in question was too preoccupied with Raz to notice what she had discovered.

Sephtis' claw curled tighter around Raz, crushing them as the sound of snapping bones filled their ears. All they felt was pain. Pain everywhere. Pain from the invading toxins, pain from the lack of oxygen, pain from the claws of the monster that ripped the life from their parents doing the same to them, and pain from the knowledge that if they died there and then, Eudora wouldn't be able to defeat Sephtis alone. She, too, would die here, and Sephtis would never be stopped.

There was nothing Raz could do. Throughout their journey, they had always tried to protect Eudora, masking their advice to turn back with sarcastic quips and pessimistic opinion. Now, though, they were trapped in the grip of an unrelenting beast dead set on ending their life. Raz was helpless.

But there was no way Raz was going to go out without a fight. Not after everything they had been through, not after what this monster did to their parents. No way.

Raz kicked and thrashed, trying to get enough space to escape the suffocating hold of Sephtis. Nothing worked.

Sephtis was too strong, and Raz could feel the fight fleeing their exhausted body. The dragon tightened its grip a diminutive amount, but that was all it took. Raz felt consciousness fading away, accepting the darkness that came after, alongside what sounded like the release of steam into the air and the halting of whirring gears. And then they were released, falling freely with nothing to stop them.

Falling, falling, falling, until suddenly-

“RAZ LOOK OUT!”

Eudora watched in horror as her friend, companion, travel buddy, and battle partner plummeted towards the ground at an alarming speed, rushing to try to catch them. She screamed a warning, but Raz didn't show any sign that they heard it, or that they were even alive. Thinking fast, Eudora dragged Raz's unmoving body towards their discarded gas mask and quickly reattached it, fumbling slightly with all the latches she had to do up.

The last one seemed set on refusing to cooperate, worrying Eudora even more that it could be her fault if she loses Raz over a silly gas mask.

Trying the strap over and over, Eudora was just about to give up when Raz's skilled and helpful hands shakily reached up to help properly secure the mask.

Immediately, Eudora felt a sense of relief rush through her, and she quickly lifted Raz to embrace them, though they quickly pulled away.

“First of all, don't hug me. Second of all, *ow*.” Raz winced in pain again as they moved to stand up, turning to stare at the heap of scrap and metal where Sephtis' body lay.

“You're really reminding me to not touch you *before* acknowledging your pain?” Eudora shook her head in mock disappointment, standing to join Raz in front of Sephtis and take in the fact that they had succeeded in defeating it. The silence that filled the air around them was a welcomed change from the constant clanking and whirring of the metal dragon.

As the two victorious travellers watched, the small metal door Eudora had seen slid open, releasing a steady stream of pent-up steam. Sephtis' frame began to violently shake, almost as if there was something alive inside it trying to escape. The debris, garbage, waste, and sludge that coated the shell of the monster were all flung away, and the metal scales crafted by C.O.R.P.S.E. fell away as the entirety of the metallic beast collapsed into pieces. The burning embers of coal from inside, which were only slightly red from the remaining heat which was quickly dissipating, joined the pile of junk Sephtis had been living in. All the deadliest fumes and toxins, which had previously been trapped inside Sephtis, were allowed to leave their metal prison, exploring the open air and polluting everything around them. It was a tidal wave of death, spreading to nearly every part of the continent.

And Eudora and Raz were caught head-on by the worst of it.

“W-what’s happening, Raz?” Eudora knew Raz had just as much of an idea as she did, but she didn’t know what else to say.

“I- I don’t know. I think it’s... *decomposing*.”

“...What’s going to happen to us? I mean, we have gas masks, sure, but.. I don’t think they cover this much stuff.”

“I don’t think we’re gonna be okay from this.”

Eudora shot Raz a glare, because *of course* they would be okay. They had just *defeated Sephtis*, after all. There may be some complications, but soon enough everything would be okay.

“Fine, you don’t like it when I say that stuff. Here’s a question you’ll probably like: What do we do now?”

Eudora pondered the question, not having thought this far through her plan when she’d set out to defeat Sephtis. Everything was just supposed to fall into place from here on out- and obviously that wasn’t the reality of the situation.

“We have to make sure everyone’s okay, and we have to rebuild Antarctica.”

Raz looked bewildered, clearly not believing they were capable of doing all of that alone- which was true.

“Oh come on, be sensible, Eudora. That would take us forever, and all these fumes have probably taken a good chunk of our life away already. We’d need so much help from people who *definitely* won’t be willing to do anything for us, and *rebuilding Antarctica*? Are you insane? We can’t do that- it’s *impossible!*”

Eudora, though, is not one to be dissuaded simply because a task may seem impossible.

“I guess we have a lot of work ahead of us, then. Come on, Raz, let’s get going.”

Chapter 5- Epilogue

The sky was clouded with yellow, orange, and greenish toxins so thick that they blocked out the sun’s rays. Humans were forced to adapt, constructing a sort of lamp that had the same benefits as the sun in order to stay alive.

Eudora and Raz spent 5 years undoing the worst of the damage caused by Sephtis, though they still only managed to clear the debris and waste from the majorly populated cities. Around a third of the Heart’s population was safely evacuated and rehabilitated near the former kingdom, and the empty Heart was then defumed and reconstructed to be a better, safer home for the remaining human population.

Cars, buses, airplanes, and other machines that pollute the environment were completely eradicated from use. People were taught to walk and bike, reduce water usage, and conserve energy. The environment became the top priority of everyone. No one was willing to risk unleashing anything resembling a second Sephtis.

At first, no one believed their tale of defeating the dragon, but once presented with proof of the slain beast, Eudora and Raz were greatly idolized.

Still, though, they continued their work of environmental rehabilitation without pause.

Fossil fuels of the past were twisted into children’s horror stories, and tactics used to conserve and save energy were the norm. Hot water was saved for special occasions, there was a drastic decline in the use of any sort of electronic devices, and those that were used were carefully powered off after their allotted 30 minutes of use, and unless something was completely

unsalvageable it would be transformed into something new- even so, the materials it was made from would be recycled. Nothing ever went to waste that didn't absolutely have to, and society saw a turn for a better.

Unfortunately, the wave of toxicity released by Sephtis when it broke down was enough to kill Eudora's parents. They hadn't been wearing gas masks, alone together in a field behind the royal castle, when it hit them. They hadn't stood a chance.

Eudora was devastated by the news, but she always had Raz to fall back on.

2 years after society was reformed in the Heart, at the age of 24, Eudora was crowned Queen. She's the royal heir to the throne, not to mention she had a hand in defeating Sephtis- if anyone should protect people it should be either her or Raz.

The evening after her coronation, Eudora and Raz were approached by a doctor who informed them that, since they were so close to Sephtis when it "died" and all the toxic gases were released, they both contracted a fatal disease that would slowly shut down their body's ability to function. They had just under a decade left to live.

Upon hearing this news, Raz was, understandably, devastated and in shock. Eudora shared the same emotions, but she knew that if she was to die so soon then she needed to begin working on something to leave her people with after she was gone. She contemplated every idea imaginable, each one never enough to satisfy her.

Raz, though, knew exactly what to do when Eudora explained her issue. The solution was genius, but it would take work. A *lot* of work.

Sephtis was a reminder to all what happens when climate change and pollution could do if they get out of control, and if they remodeled the broken bits of the dragon maybe they could create something powered by a clean, renewable energy source that helped others to remind everyone what happens when the environment is safe, healthy, and protected. The new Sephtis would go around helping those who need it and keeping the environment safe, as opposed to how the old Sephtis destroyed everything in its path without regard to anyone or anything.

They, of course, enlisted the help of professionals who understood how to turn their vision into a reality. It took 8 years for everything to be completed, and when the new Sephtis was completed, Eudora knew it was exactly what she wanted to leave the people of the Heart with once she was gone.

On the 15th anniversary of the defeat of Sephtis, Raz revealed the New Sephtis to the citizens of the Heart. It was a controversial idea, given all the trauma the population has from the metal dragon, but with the design changes it underwent and the promise that this new dragon would bring good to the community, people gave the New Sephtis a chance. As it turns out, the idea was a huge success. Not only does the New Sephtis represent how an environmentally-friendly population thrives over one that destroys and wastes resources, how climate change affects everyone on the planet, and how important it is to conserve energy and use renewable sources, but it also helps the community enforce an energy-efficient lifestyle and corrects those who slip up.

Back to the day the New Sephtis is introduced, though. As citizens were taking in the new machine, a faint beam of glowing light was seen shining through the fume-filled atmosphere, shocking everyone.

Could the layer surrounding the Earth have finally dissipated?

Could the sun have returned?

As everyone was entranced by the new hope, Eudora broke down into a coughing fit, her lungs unable to function properly from the horrible toll of the coughs. She tried to pass it off as a cold, but Raz could tell it was time. After all, it had been nearly a decade since the doctor had delivered the news of their disease- they couldn't have lived much longer anyway. The gathering was adjourned, and Raz escorted Eudora to lie in a meadow behind the castle, just as the Queen's parents had been doing when they were killed by Sephtis' post-mortem toxins. This meadow was illuminated by a hundred or so tiny sun lamps, which Eudora quickly turned off. She lay in darkness, with Raz kneeling at her side.

She broke into another painful fit of coughs, and Raz reached to hold one of her hands. An act of comfort- something Raz rarely does.

A golden shadow suddenly pierced through the haze of no-longer-toxic gas, casting a beautiful glow onto Eudora's face against the grass.

She coughed again, and clutched her stomach in pain.

She looked to Raz, who was watching with tears welled in their eyes, both of them knowing Eudora wouldn't leave the meadow.

She looked up at the sky, at the sun, which she'd always hoped to see again.

She opened her mouth, her lips quivered, no words escaped. She closed it.

She tried to convey the words she wanted to share with her friend, her companion, but they wouldn't come out. She wanted to tell them how she always wished to live to see the sun's rays shine through the yellow-green mist of the sky, and feel the genuine blanket of heat beyond what humans could artificially produce. She wanted to tell them that finally, she was happy, and she was at peace. Her kingdom was safe and under the care of her closest friend and the most loyal protector. She wanted to thank Raz for that, and for everything else, too.

Instead, all that came out were 5 short words.

"Finally, I can sleep now."

Raz tried to be brave beside her, but was unable to remain composed as their friend died before them.

Eudora's eyes drifted shut and her last breath escaped as she lay peacefully under the soft gaze of the hazy coloured skies and warm sunshine glow.

Raz, who was on their knees beside Eudora, felt the hand they were holding fall loose into the soft grassy meadow below. Something in their chest tightened at the sight of their lost friend, a foreign feeling overtaking their mind.

They shifted to curl around Eudora's lifeless corpse.

Corpse.

What a funny word.

The name of the organisation that manufactured the monster who cost Raz, Eudora, and so many others their lives, and the name of the object Raz lay clinging to as they waited desperately for the last breath to leave their spent body.

[And they didn't live happily ever after.

The end.]