

CHAPTER 2 FIRST STEPS



“O, here will I set up my everlasting rest, and shake the yoke of inauspicious stars from this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last! Arms, take your last embrace! And, lips, O you the doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss a dateless bargain to engrossing death!”

*—Romeo and Juliet, Act V, scene 3,
lines 109-115*

ELLIOTT DUCKED INSIDE THE GLEAMING, silver car and relaxed into the seat as the restraints slid around him, locking into place again. Without turning his head, his grey eyes peered over to see Lara tapping her fingers on the virtual keypad to set their destination, preferred speed, and other essential details of the trip, allowing the city’s centralized computing system to plot their route safely.

To avoid staring, he looked up at the car’s roof, eyes tracing the graceful lines down its frame, and lingering on the vibrant interactive console just in front of him. Tiles projected a few inches above the blue-lit surface offered options for movies, music, television, and reading. Below each streamed banners of

text and micro-images detailing the latest news for the respective subject.

Elliott peeked over at Lara who was relaxing into her seat. There was a slight jerk as the car was added to the system and backed up, spun, and re-entered traffic with incredible precision. Immediately, the speed display ticked to an exact forty-five miles per hour.

"Where did you find your grandfather's book exactly?" Lara asked, shifting sideways in her seat and focusing on Elliott.

"It was in my desk," Elliott answered, his voice demure. A rush of bittersweet emotions overtook him. "I had put it in there with some of his things a few weeks after the, um, funeral."

"Oh," Lara said, breaking her gaze in embarrassment. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Elliott replied in a soft voice. "Grandpa wasn't the kind for pity, so I can't imagine he'd want it for me either."

"It's not pity," Lara countered. "I'm just sorry for your loss. I never met him, but you always speak so highly of him."

Sensing it was pointless to bicker over the semantics of the issue, Elliott deflected. "Yeah, he was pretty special. The module that indexes materials and compares them to existing items in the system and then catalogues and transfers books across libraries was his first project. 'The McIntyre Module.'"

The diversion had worked. Lara's nose crinkled up when she smiled. "Don't you feel lucky to be working on it now too? Maybe they'll name a module after you."

"Right, maybe two," Elliott answered, rolling his eyes.

"How are your sketches for this term coming along?" Lara asked, as she turned back to the console and began tapping in some new commands. She already knew Elliott didn't have much interest in the tasks he was required to do as part of his designated degree work.

"Great, if I stop being lazy after classes and work on them," he laughed, mirthlessly. "I love drawing, but I can't seem to find the energy to do much after work. I'm just, drained."

"That stinks," Lara replied and, with a final tap, brought up in the center of the console an image of a complex series of interlocking rings and geometric designs in a variety of perspectives and hues. "I'm still working on mine too, if that helps. It's not the best."

"Lara, it looks awesome."

"Nah," she said and swiped it away quickly. Her cheeks reddened for an instant. "What is yours?"

"It's a scene from *Paradise Lost*," Elliott said. "Or it was going to be." Amongst his favorite inspirations was taking a book and bringing its pages to life with illustrations. Better still if he could capture the emotion of a passage and represent it pictorially. He could have animated things digitally, but everything felt so much more real and enthralling when done by hand. Personal. Digital artistry just felt illusory in comparison.

The car chimed again. They were almost to the parking garage by the student union.

"What are you going to have?" Lara asked with a casual cadence to her voice. She wore a smile of pride as she informed him, "Because I'm definitely getting the chicken tenders."

"Buffalo style?" he asked, almost rhetorically.

"Mm, mm," was her answer. The bliss on her face was enough to dissolve any anxieties about their failed plans or his work woes.

Food from the campus court wasn't bad, but there was an ambience to Rosa's. The feeling was hard to place. Rosa's had live bands, poetry readings, and other arts activities.

Structurally, the layout was simple and rather rustic. Oak paneling with dark stain covered the walls and a gas grill served for its cooking top. It had few if any computers on site. Furniture consisted of small booths with worn padding placed around circular tables. On a number of occasions, Elliott had seen patrons reading print copies of one book or another.

That was the sense it had. Antiquity. The past was imbued in each facet of the place. Rosa's acted as a window to a past not so

long ago as to be forgotten, but too far to reach elsewhere in the present.

The campus student union was, by comparison, a sales pitch for modernity. Interactive, holographic displays ringed the high walls of the central rotunda and some of the restaurants had even done away with human employees, preparing one's food with completely automated processes. Bright and noisy felt most fitting words to summarize an experience there.

A second later, Lara turned on the full screen display in the car and began searching through the 127 updates she had been following. An update on the war in the Middle East- thirty minutes ago. An enteric disease outbreak in the Southwest – three hours ago. Earthquakes in Southeast Asia – three and a half hours ago. There was unrest in the stock market, along with a couple local, petty crimes and a few major ones thrown in. These were interrupted by celebrity news. This actress wore such and such designer to an event 12 hours ago and it was still being talked about. An award-winning country singer went on a rant about cats and was falling out of favor for intolerance. The release date for the next Marvel movie was being pushed back by a week to compete more directly with DC's latest flick.

Those were all of the notifications Elliott cared to look over before the car slowed to engage its parking routine. Elliott felt a faint sigh escape the sentries of his lips.

"Hey, are you feeling okay?" Lara asked, giving his arm a gentle shove as they got out of the car for the second time. "You've been zoning out every chance you get."

Elliott's cheeks flooded with warmth and he knew their shade had blossomed into rosier hues. "Uh ..."

"Uh huh?" Lara questioned, her hands on her hips. Lara wasn't Elliott's girlfriend, but Elliott behaved as if she was the most important woman in his life. His distractedness during the lunch he had so boldly requested must have been off-putting.

"Sorry," he answered as the doors raised and let each of them out. He hoped she couldn't see his shame in the parking garage's

low lighting. Elliott desperately wanted to say something more meaningful, but that was all he could offer. His silence lasted till they were standing in line for "The Trailblazer." Looking up at the digital display of a pioneer with flames coming off his horse's hooves, Elliott said, at last, "I'm still thinking about Rosa's." He shrugged.

"Wow, you really wanted her Philly cheesesteak, huh?" Lara teased.

"Yeah, I guess," he answered and realized his answers all sounded a bit wistful. Seeing Lara looking away, he knew he had to turn the conversation around. "But nothing a buffalo tender or two won't fix."

"Fine, but just don't get any ideas about stealing mine. I have plans for them," Lara asserted, turning her attention back to him and narrowing her eyes to slivers for emphasis.

He laughed without force and assured her of his noble intentions with regard to her food. The remainder of the short wait to order was filled with listening to Lara talk about her chemistry course for the semester. Occasionally, Elliott would glance up at the menu as he sorted through the potential options. The restaurant had been opened by the school and was themed to go with its mascot. It served spicy takes on normal fast food. Jalapeño burgers, buffalo chicken, wasabi fries, and the like. Lara loved spicy food.

Elliott was still trying to learn more about her. For instance, he knew she was an education major, but had to take some general courses to give her some flexibility as a future art teacher.

Their mutual interest in art was what brought about their meeting. In their sophomore level drawing class, they sat next to each other, though Elliott had never had the courage to say anything to Lara. She was seventeen as well, having been drafted into the early admission program for gifted students like him. He took her mutual reticence for disinterest. They might never have spoken, except one day in class Elliott was drawing

lilies with Prismacolor pencils and Lara noticed. She told him tiger lilies were her favorite. He happily offered it to her and she told him he had to sign it first.

“So, it’s worth more one day, right?” he had joked.

“No, I always want to remember who gave me these flowers,” she had replied.

After that, they had a few more classes together and talked often. Later, once Elliott’s engineering major required he work in the campus library’s role in Project Alexandria, he found out Lara was needed extra money and got her a job as an assistant. The hours were odd and the work boring, but it was money for her and a chance for him to spend more time with her. Not to mention Project Alexandria had to look good on resumes.

Lara received her food first and offered to fill their drinks and get their napkins and other essentials. She told him she would be by the doors leading to the library and said ever so quietly, “Don’t take too long.”

His heart quickened a little, finding a faster rhythm as memory of the melancholy of minutes before dissipated. Elliott watched as she walked over to the condiments island. Her steps were fairly agile, without being intended to look that way. Lara wore a dark blue hoodie and some old jeans, all well-worn. It suggested Elliott would be wise to not read more into the outing than a lunch between friends, but all the same, Elliott couldn’t resist smiling. Her dark hair fell in just the right way to frame her face and draw attention to the curve of her pale cheeks and the intensity of her sincere eyes. It was as though she was the embodiment of poetry, a beauty he could never recreate in his art.

As he took his food, Elliott imagined himself someday having the courage to ask her out on a formal date. To some place nice—candle lit, intimate and romantic. The places you would find in books. Not the newer ones, always jumping straight to the high energy, dramatic moments to illicit immediate emotion and interest. Elliott often took longer than

necessary to transfer some of the older works into their digital formats before turning them in. To enjoy their slow burn to a brighter finish.

True enough, he could find the same books in the system to read in digital format, but he seldom found them as enjoyable once the screen's refresh rate began to force his eyes to break from their hold on the text. There was something pleasant about the ache he felt after thoroughly working his way into a story.

When his grandfather was alive, the project had been going much slower in the Appalachians. Converting the books to digital formats in most cases were trivial processes. The great works, like Shakespeare, had already been entered long ago and only required acknowledging another copy's existence in the system and confirmation of recycling the print copy. Thereafter, if the particular edition existed or there was previously unentered commentary in the book, these were added and associated with the underlying narrative's master file. Smaller works or periodicals and journals from the local region required more express attention.

"Order 58 is ready! Thank you for your business!" a synthetic server informed Elliott, intruding in his thoughts. Soon after, a brown paper bag containing his food was conveyed along a belt to his waiting hands. In yellow action font inside a bright red circle it read, "Trailblazers—Blazing the Path to a Better Tomorrow!"

Elliott navigated the sea of tables packed with students gobbling down their meals while streaming various content to their mobiles or entering homework online. The room was swollen with those escaping the weather.

From amidst the crowd, Lara waved to Elliott. Waving back, he picked up his pace and caught up to her. His brows raised as he appraised the packed room. Lara noticed his anxious expression and handed him a few napkins.

"To the library?" she verified.

“Yeah, my cubicle should be relatively clear for once,” he confirmed.

“That would be a first. Lead the way,” Lara answered, after he held open the door for her. With a nod, Elliott took off. Lunch time was quickly fading, and he found his pace ever quickening as he led Lara down the sloped sidewalks toward the library.

Lara was busy looking at her mobile device for most of the trip, checking comments from friends on her inter-blog. It was the newest trend in social media. Personal thoughts shared, compared, and contrasted against people of one’s choosing to create a web of back and forth exposes and thoughts ending in a single interwoven composition.

Elliott avoided such things, but Lara seemed to make apt use of them. She was always two steps ahead of where he was with any event. Sometimes he wasn’t sure whether he envied that trait or not.

Ahead, Elliott could see the library, the rain droplets still clung to its massive window panes. They covered the five-story building’s expansive glass surfaces, as reluctant to let go and leave it as Elliott was to be there day-to-day.

Automatic doors welcomed them at each interval of travel through the library. Within the massive, open enclosure of the library’s first floor, Elliott had to squint. The lights were bright and most surfaces were styled after modern aesthetics, stark whites and stain finished metals. Recently there was an emphasis on sharp angular furnishings, so most of the furniture was accentuated to fit this style. How long this would last Elliott wasn’t sure. He felt fairly confident he remembered rounded elements with a more diverse color palette had been in favor when he first arrived at the university.

Most people in the library, as elsewhere on the campus, were engrossed in content from their mobiles. Devices of varying size, shapes, and degrees of sophistication abounded. Elliott cringed a bit as his sneakers squeaked with each step along the polished floors. Lara seemed not to notice, but Elliott caught a sharp look

from one of the patrons, irritated to be detached from concentration on his media. The glare was short-lived. It seemed no one was possessed of a long-lived attention span.

Relief abounded for Elliott when the pristine and new faded into the dusty and neglected. As they wound through halls with cobweb tapestries and ductwork handrails, Elliott relaxed and was able to strike up another conversation with Lara.

They agreed to modify their plans and eat in her cubicle space, down the hall. Lara's cubicle at its worst was generally more kempt than Elliott's at its best. "Art is messy," he had offered when Lara raised her brows at the chaos.

They ate making light conversation, both avoiding talk about work. Sometimes they would finish the other's thought about this piece of music or that bit of artwork. Elliott relished the ease between them.

Time moves much too quickly in such instances. While Elliott was finishing up, Lara pulled his backpack to her. Arching a thin eyebrow, her cocoa eyes sparkled with an implicit question.

Elliott nodded as he drained the last of his water and let an ice cube drop into his mouth. Crunching the ice cube with contentment, he watched as she unzipped his bag and pulled out the book. Every time he saw the frayed tails of fabric from its cover a memory of his grandfather would come to him. Not one of his maternal grandfather smiling or focused on him. Rather it was of Grandpa McIntyre sitting over a book, reading, and Elliott's father looking out a window nearby. There was a heavy silence.

"It looks like your grandfather was a big fan of *Macbeth*," Lara noted, her large, bright eyes glimpsing him from beneath her long lashes.

"Well, Scots-Irish," he said with a shrug and chuckled in spite of himself. The historicity of *Macbeth* not being an issue, there was some measure of ancestral pride simmering beneath the surface in his family.

"Hmm, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?"

"I don't know," Elliott said with a shrug. "He enjoyed the occasional comedy too, I guess."

"What about this one?" she asked pointing to the boldface font of the title.

Leaning closer as he wiped his burning mouth for the third time, Elliott saw the title, *Romeo and Juliet*. Instantly his heart rate picked up and he swallowed too fast, coughing. "I guess he knew a good romance when he saw one." His gray eyes leapt to meet hers.

A little color flooded Lara's cheeks and she looked down at the book. "Yeah, or an awful tragedy."

Elliott leaned back chuckling. "True, I never did like how that went down. Romeo should never have jumped to conclusions and killed himself like that. But I guess if the mail service had been more reliable back—"

"Woah, woah, what are you talking about?" Lara asked. "You've read the play, right? Juliet and Romeo kill each other out of family loyalty."

Looking at Lara in confusion, Elliott wanted to question her, to contradict what she was saying. He had to fight to keep his hands from reaching for the book. His eyes could not help but flick to it and Lara definitely noticed. Sighing a little, she flipped to the close of the play and gestured to it, beginning to read silently for the point she searched for.

After a moment her brows raised in surprise and she said, "Huh, you're right." The relief Elliott felt was somewhat mitigated by his displeasure over the brief moment of pleasant tension having been lost in a plot point of a play.

Confusion clouded Lara's expression for several moments as she re-read the passage. At last Lara looked up at Elliott as though she was living in an alternate reality and could not explain the discrepancies. "That's so weird," she said. "I just read it ..."

Into their conversation drifted the notes of an alternative rock

song. Lara's alarm on her mobile was going off, letting them know it was noon. Their brief lunchtime rendezvous was over.

I guess I better get back to work," Elliott announced with reluctance.

"Yeah, see you," Lara answered, half absorbed in the book.

Elliott grabbed his backpack and slipped it on in a ginger motion. Then he walked out of the cubicle and down the hall, leaving the book with Lara.