

PROMPT #2: You open a book and a note with a letterhead falls out. At the top it says: If you are reading this, ...

## The Little Things

by **Reese Hickok**

By the time I turned 18, the city had already been torn to ruins. Almost nothing was left; it was like the area hadn't been inhabited in years. But I remembered what it was like before the apocalypse: bustling with energy, with soul, with *existence*. I remembered watching people go on about their lives, fascinated with the simple fact that everyone else was living a life just as vivid, complicated, and real as my own. A stark contrast to now, in which I waste most of my days away just waiting. Waiting for *anything* to happen. My parents had already been taken, presumably to the same place they had taken my brother so long ago. The only problem is, I don't know where.

I released my hair from its loose bun, letting it fall to my shoulders and frame my face. I sighed, twirling a strand between my fingers. My mom used to cut my hair every few months, only when it got so long that she couldn't stand it anymore. She'd take her place behind me in the bathroom mirror with those useless kitchen scissors and snip away, a gentle smile twisting her lips. I always admired her like that – in her relaxed state, just being a mom and not having to deal with the intricacies of the world. Sometimes she'd catch me observing her and her smile would grow, her movements becoming more precise and transparent as she silently taught me how to cut my own hair.

I let the strand of hair fall gingerly from my fingertips, tears forming in my eyes. Mom... I jumped to my feet, rage flooding my veins as hot tears streamed down my face. "Damn it!" I screamed. I kicked the bookshelf I had been leaning on and fell against it with clenched fists, my forehead resting on the pitted wood. A loud thud near my feet shocked me out of my petulant tantrum. I sniffed, glancing down at the culprit. It was a small brown book, plain and uninteresting in appearance. I wiped my nose and eyes with my sleeve as I bent down to pick it up and return it to its rightful place, but as I lifted it, a small piece of paper fell from its yellowed pages.

“Hm.” I picked it up and unfolded it.

*If you are reading this, I'm already dead... which means the world, as we know it, is over Carla, I trust you with the task of delivering this to Eriot. Only then will what's left of humanity be salvaged. You are my most loyal comrade and friend; even in death, I will be with you.*

*Sincerely, P.*

I stared down at the parchment in my hands, eyes wide in disbelief. I took a deep breath, shaking my head. What does any of this even mean?

Carla, as in *my mom*? What does this have to do with her?

What's Eriot?

And who is P?!

With shaking hands, I moved on to the second note.

*P., you can trust me. I will not let you down. If you somehow make it out alive, find me in Eriot. Your sacrifice will be forever remembered, and your memory honored. Humanity, the cause infinitely greater than you and I, thanks you.*

*Sincerely, Carla*

Suddenly, I noticed a faint outline on the back of the note. I flipped it over to find a map, or at least what I believed it to be. It was a confusing set of buildings, sketches of interiors and hallways and rooftops, city names that I didn't know. My eyes scanned the whole thing, trying to take in all of this new but seemingly irrelevant information. It was too much but at the same time not enough. After a while of searching, I did manage to find my region, Port Arodius.

Then, a few inches to the right, I saw it. My breath hitched. Everything went silent.

Eriot. The place from the letter.

I flipped the paper back over, re-reading the message again and again until I had almost memorized it. *Eriot*.

Would it be stupid of me to...? I can't...

No. I have to, don't I?

This is the only progress I've achieved in months. This tiny scrap of paper could lead me to the truth, to safety, to the promise of *life*... to my family. I tucked it away in my jacket pocket, quickly threw my hair back up, and ran to my bedroom.

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With a knapsack full of as much food and water as I could manage, a backpack with my (basically useless) electronics, and my own fierce determination, I left my old house for probably the last time ever. As I walked away, I glanced over my shoulder, just for a second. It sat forlornly against the rising sun, its creepy shadows seemingly waving goodbye.

"See ya," I whispered.

I gazed out at the barren landscape for the first time since it all happened. I'd been barricaded in the house for safety, too scared to brave the wild like the others. Houses were completely destroyed, their lone chimneys jutting from the dry earth. Stray animals roamed about, looking for food. The sun cast a warm glow on the dilapidated skyscrapers falling apart at the beams. Pools of red stained the ground. Pieces of ripped clothing littered the vicinity.

It truly was a nightmare.

A low growl brought me out of my internal dread. I whipped my head up to stare the dog in the eyes, a smirk twisting my lips. "We're both hungry, pal. Lighten up."

I untied my knapsack and tore off a sizeable chunk of my last loaf of bread and tossed it to him. He sprinted for it, retrieving it off the ground and running away without a second thought.

I sighed to myself.

It felt nice to just... see movement. To see something else *alive*.

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The trees swayed in the evening sky, calls of animals ringing out over the palpable silence. My footsteps created thundering crunches on the fallen leaves. I rested my stuff against a tall oak tree and tilted my head back to gaze at the darkening sky. The setting sun painted it pink, purple, and deep orange. The most beauty I had seen in a long time.

I smiled gently and let the cool breeze blow the long hair away from my face. I let it wash over me and take over my senses.

*Maybe, Mom, you'll get to cut my hair again soon.*

Right then and there, that tiny semblance of peace was all that mattered. Not the dying earth, not miserable existences, not confusing maps or strange messages. I knew my life was about to take a dramatic turn, but for the worse or better I didn't know. Things could always go wrong, but what if this was it? What if this was the turning point? What if this mysterious little city was the reason for me to go on in this war?

This life, in all of its unfairness and violence, was about enjoying the little things.