

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

A Human's Guide to Surviving in a Firefly-Driven World

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Fire.

A suffocating heat, everywhere in the air. Replacing the oxygen. Burning it. Until what once was a verdant forest, speckled with the greenest leaves, the strongest vines, and the healthiest bark, have faded completely into ashen fumes. Until the little star-shaped breaks of light in the canopy, until the rays of holy fabric, until the shimmering ocean of white; the fires will burn until their smoke paints all light as black. Until the multitude of green and yellow become the same dead shade.

It burns.

Not directly. Suffocating, all enveloping. An invisible burn, marked only by the remains of something once alive. It burns, of a stench. Something bitter, like the empty stomachs' hunger. Something salty, like the liquid that turns to gas. Something burning, like the moving trees, darkened with ash. Something burning, like the moving trees, with an outstretched branch. They melt, not snap. They scream, not wail. They fall, not crumble.

It burns, directly, and not.

But it burns, regardless.

The boy with invisible burns walks into the graveyard of fireflies. His heavy legs, laden with invisible burns, blackened with soot, carry him through the burning fire. He, who does not

think, only walks. He, who does not feel, only walks. Regardless of his invisible burns, the ones *they* faced, the ones imprinted along the stained steel, the ones abducted by the sullied earth, the boy walks. After all, what else beckons for a reason to walk, if not by walking itself?

It burns, the fire does.

And it crackles, as *they* did.

The boy, who does not think, does not hear the reapers of death. He does not hear the otherworldly requiem, the ones sounded by an unnatural tool, the ones carved out of fear and despair, but also out of honor and necessity. But of course, as with any art, such a form is beholden only to its beholder. To the boy, the requiem has long since faded into the fumes of fire. It is a crackle, as any other crackles. It is a crackle, something along his (endless) walk. To *them*, it was the sound of death. It was a warning, one casted too late to matter. And to the reapers of death, in their dauntless armor, with their stained steel, so far above the boy and *them*, the requiem of death is not so. It is a requiem of the future, of something imagined, yet still far away.

It is, in a sense, the same as the fires they burn.

They both end in death.

The boy, who only walks, stumbles over the darkened flames. Whether it was a tree, or it was *them*, does not matter to the boy. Something else, something different, had entered the mind of the thoughtless boy. Against the fire that burns of a stench, the boy smells something else. Something sweet. Something... sweet. The boy, ruled only by his body, moves. He moves, and walks, and moves, and walks, until, finally, he stops.

A reaper stares at the boy.

The boy stares back.

Around them, the fires crackle, feeding on the life of everything green, everything alive, and everything dead. It crackles, again, for it is never full, only ever hungry. It crackles, yet another time, to laugh. For it has eaten, for it has burned. Invisible burns. Visible burns.

The reaper draws his stained steel.

The boy stares back.

Around them, *they* scream. *They*, who, like the boy, are facing the reapers of death, scream in agony. In despair. In flames. *They*, who, like the boy, like the fire, are never full, only ever hungry. Burning. Aching. For something, for anything. *They*, who are the invisible burns, die through the visible burns.

The reaper lunges forward.

The boy stares back.

Around them, nothing else matters. The world they live in, the world of fire, of black, of smoke and of ash, is not theirs anymore. For the reaper, he wishes to walk, to be free of his stained steel, but he cannot. For the boy, he walks, free of life, free of thought. In the view of the fire, in the end—

The reaper hesitates.

The boy does not.

—the one free of thought lives.

The reaper falls.

And it burns, the fire does, indiscriminately. The steel of the reaper melts, as did *them*. The body of the reaper screams, but he did not. The reaper, so constrained by his chains, so constrained by his (invisible) burns, did not scream. He only thinks, unlike the boy, and he thinks of everything, unlike the boy. And at the end of his thinking, at the end of the fire, he decides.

The boy, who no longer feels, watches as the reaper tosses a bag.

It does not reach the ground.

In an instant as short as a crackle of a fire, the remaining half of an apple disappears into the bitter body of the boy. And the boy, who no longer feels, feels something. It passes, existing for an even shorter time. But in that short, short time, it had bloomed and died brighter than the flames. Still, in the end, the fire burns. And it burns, directly, and not.

The boy, controlled by his body, rips apart the bag.

Only a book falls out.

The boy, controlled by his body, rips apart the book. A note, heavy with everything and nothing, drops. Amidst the fire, everything burns. The words burn, although the boy (will) not read. The feelings burn, although the boy (will) not feel. The memories burn, although the boy (will) not think. For what had bloomed and died within the boy, in that tiny moment, that tiny, unchangeable moment, had burned away long ago.

Still, even so.

The boy...

He picks up the fallen note. Even if the visible burns continue to burn all around him, even if the invisible burns continue to burn inside him, the boy, who does not think, who does not feel, reads the note. The soil that had been burnt will only become richer. The land that had been sullied will, eventually, be reclaimed.

And for the boy, he reads the note:

If you are reading this, then I've... died.

I can't excuse my actions. I know they are wrong. I know I am wrong. But I believed that... in the end, someone was not. Because if there's just one person, just one single person, out there that is not wrong, then all of this slaughter, this massacre, this genocide – all of it was done for the right purpose.

I know history will not remember me.

I am a villain. I am the bad guy. I am a murderer. A killer. A heartless maniac. I've killed because I was ordered to. I've killed because I had to. This, as long as, in the end, whether it's a hundred years from now, or a thousand years from now, led to something good, then... I am content with my death.

I... I am content with being forgotten.

But, if I could just request one thing. Just one thing. I know I do not deserve this. I know I deserve to be forgotten. I know. But. I just– Could you, whoever you are, whoever sees this, please, keep this with you? Please, keep me with you. I don't... want to be forgotten this early. I want to see the world change for the better. For that one person out there that is not wrong to appear and change this world.

I just... want all of this to mean something.

Please.

The fire burns.

For it is the suffocating heat that surrounds death. For all it consumes becomes what consumes. For even the greenest of leaves, the strongest of vines, the healthiest of barks – they all eventually fall to the fire. The fire burns. For that is its purpose. It burns, for the sake of burning. It burns, without knowing why it burns. The fire burns, for it is fire. The fire burns, for all see it as fire. No matter what it consumes, no matter what it devours, the fire burns.

The boy has long since been burned by the fire. Invisible burns. Visible burns. The boy has long since forsaken his feelings. His thoughts. His words. For, when the boy can just walk, what use are feelings, thoughts, and words?

Still, the boy holds the note.

He does not know why, for he does not think. He will not say why, for he does not speak.

The fire burns, directly, and not.

But.

Perhaps, somewhere inside the boy, somewhere along the fire that burns, along the black ash in the sky, covering the stars of the night, along the black ash on the ground, indiscernible from each other, along the darkened flames that hold the moving trees, the snapping and melting and crumbling trees, along *them*, who scream, not wail – somewhere along the boy's walk, however long it may be, however far it may be, and however tiring it may be, the boy will live again.

In the view of the fire, the one free of thought lives.

In the view of the living, the one chained by thought lives.