

It all started with a fire not far from my home (for that is what this place truly is to me: a home).

Oh, how the word spread of the all-enveloping flame and demonic voices; it was the talk of the town. Never could you go to Lo' Bill's—as was the supermarket's name at the time—and not hear the ladies gossiping about, their words scrambling truth beyond recognition.

"Oh, you would not *be-lieve* how that smoke rose! It was as though the devil himself was making an appearance! And myself being so close!" one would say, great flourishes of hands mandatory.

The others would then fan themselves—as though they actually believed the first's story.

I would never engage in such idle chatter; I was not a no-life elderly woman, nor a girl looking for attention (sometimes differentiating between the two was a chore within itself). I kept my sharp wits to myself and suppressed the words that threatened to burst forth from my soul. Despite the times evolving, to speak as I wished was not a good idea.

But how my face flushed! How dare everyone take this so lightly!

Juveniles had set the blaze; mere children! The fire harmed no living person, but thousands were killed! Did no one around understand the crime?

Obviously not, I had conceded to admit. The children had not been shoved away and locked soundly, no; but the monsters had been put up on the highest of pedestals and given gold by the interpreters of His word! The world had turned upside down, everything I ever thought I knew flowing an alternative path: Crimes were not to be punished here, but rewarded.

So many deaths, unseen, untold. Children so careless, to toss the lives into the heat, watching them—carefully constructed and real in ways unreal—being turned to ash.

For a whole week—but it seemed much longer—I kept the stamp on my mouth, refusing to submit to the words I wanted to shout. Such power, on my part; shocked, was I, at the control I hardly had knowledge of possessing.

Even surrounded by these beings (students similar to the murderers a town over), I kept my tongue, never beating the children with my words.

For that week, I worked as normal, strolling around my "home" and organizing the other occupants. Concentration was rather difficult to possess; I was quite unfocused. Such a profound sense of fear had settled within me; never had I feared more for the safety of my friends (such a long acquaintanceship between all of us would leave our relationship on said comfortable terms,

surely).

I understood I was not alone in my discomfort and unrest; so many of the children were actually of good heart. They collected my friends, taking them to safety for the time. It was them, I believe, that had a chance to fight off the dreaded disease that plagued the minds of the other youths. That, in addition to my guardianship over my home and the help of others (those who—of their own volition—chose to patrol about, eyes steely as they searched for murderers amongst our own).

In spite of the frequent visitors I had received as of late, I jumped at the master of the entire establishment's arriving at my desk.

"Yes?" I questioned. Hardly did he ever visit, siding from the occasional meeting or coffee offer; he was busy and he needn't often concern himself with my "home" and its affairs.

Grim, was his expression. Tired and ill, it almost seemed. He, like most, had been affected by the flame; probably more so than anyone, what with his position. Should something dreadful occur in these harrowed (or perhaps hallowed?) halls, he should take the fall before the rest.

His mouth was set straight—as was his back—and he spoke in clipped tones. "I have something of importance to discuss with you."

I nodded, though uneasiness gripped my heart. Deep within, perhaps I knew what he would say; a bit of indignation and anger bled into my features, try as I might to ward it off.

"You know of the burnings?" Did I? The question was nearly laughable. Everyone knew of that hell, where the demon children lived, where they burned so many...

"Of course," I spoke, my tones probably too sharp—though he said nothing of it.

Instead he paused, looking so old; this was not a normal, nor natural type of old. No, this was an aged-weariness that had taken residence upon a young man's brow. Hard, did I try, to soften my own expression; anger really shouldn't be directed at him, though I knew he would become my victim that afternoon.

"That cannot happen here, you are aware," he said gently. His voice and words only served to twist my lips and twitch my eye.

"Yes. What are YOU going to do to prevent it?" I questioned, my tone sharp. He knew, of course, what he would say next—we both knew. Yet here we were: Beating around the bush and denying the fact that neither wanted to believe the future words.

"We must get rid of them."

Such simple words, such harsh lines drawn forth. Spoken in apologetic tones, yet hardened with resolve, his eyes glinted guiltily; he wished nothing more but for this time to be gone, and sense to once again rest in the minds of the people.

The same wants were held steadily in my own heart. But it was with resolve equally as strong, that I straightened my back and said one word: "No."

"We have to," he shot back immediately. He was desperate, so early in the conversation; or perhaps he hadn't ever not been desperate. As though seeing my eyes steeling, my pulling further away from him, he added, "You know we have to," to his previous statement, some deluded part of his brain convincing him that I would concede.

"We don't have to do anything," I replied. "They are my responsibility. If anything were to happen, it would be me to take the fall. You know that."

He replied quickly once again. "Nevertheless. We do not want anything to "happen". We want to avoid that. And getting rid of them would ensure that-

"Nothing will happen regardless," I snapped suddenly. A fire (that I knew was stronger than all of the other ones consuming those lives) sprung up in my soul, and I would not let it sputter out. All the raw fury that had been tumbling around within came pouring out into the next sentence I uttered. "I won't allow it to."

He stiffened, his lips pressing into a thin line. "Is that a threat?"

"Not to you," I replied.

We stood there, staring at each other, locked in a war that nary a soul could understand.

Finally, he took half a step back. His eyes weren't bitter or angry, then, only tired.

However, there was something else swimming within their depths: Awe.

"Do as you please," he muttered, his tone rough. "As you said, if anything happens, it will be you who takes the fall."

"Nothing will happen," I repeated. They were just words, but they gently caressed his mind, relaxing his shoulders. Then again...words are not "just words". Their power over us was and is something that will never cease to be.

As he was walking away, he reached out, gripping one of my friends firmly.

"I don't understand it," he spoke quietly, more to himself than me.

"What?" I questioned him regardless.

"Why risk everything for this? It's just..." he allowed it to tumble to the ground, a hollow sound echoing throughout my home. "...paper."

I laughed. It seemed peculiar for me to laugh, though I did so all the same. I laughed long and hard, and it was completely devoid of humor.

"I am not risking my life for paper!" I sneered at him, as I went over to pick up my fallen soldier. A moment of clarity struck me suddenly, and my laughs died in my throat. "No...I'm risking it for the words..."

He paused allowing my words to sink in, if they could. "It's not only your life your risking. It's-"

"Everything. I know," I said calmly, probably a bit too much so to be talking about such a serious matter. "But do you know what else I know?" He didn't answer, not even looking me in the eye. Regardless, I continued to beat against the current, the words bubbling up from somewhere deep within myself that I have yet to even explore:

"Everything is worth it."

When he spoke next, his voice was dry, disbelieving. "Really? Is it?"

"Yes," I answered, with no hesitation, whatsoever. He seemed unconvinced still, but there was nothing I could do for him; he would believe what he wanted to believe because he was human, and humans don't change. That simple fact was one I had come to know quite well, through the years. Human nature has always been something of an ambiguous sort: Nothing is ever proven or disproven, because nothing applies to everyone.

"The *words*," I said suddenly, in a desperate way, not even realizing I had spoke until after the fact.

He looked very uncomfortable, for some undeterminable reason. Perhaps those simple two spoken words had convinced him of something all the others previously spoken had yet to do. He bowed his head, tucking his hands away (the perfect picture of a chastised child) before exiting my domain.

I fell back against my desk, some bit of relief flowing through my system. I felt my heart slow down, the furious pumping that had previously been occurring within my body all but grinding to a halt.

I knew, deep within myself, that the war wasn't over yet; however, with that one victory, in that one battle, I felt better. That horrible and oppressive cloud that had been lingering about

seemed to lift, if only slightly. I felt, for the first time in a while, that there was such thing as a future...and that feeling—that little glimpse of hope—was wonderful.