

**“After”**

The alluring figure passed the edge of the ruined treeline and stepped into the open. All around her, the fires quieted to embers, then embers into ash. Her white dress trails softly behind her, a stark contrast to the burnt, charcoal ground. In her wake, creatures big and small appear out of hiding, curiously studying the silhouette clothed in white as she passes by. It had been a long while since they had seen anyone like her.

What could she be doing here? The woman paused, looking out across the scarred land. The blackened earth bore large marks across great swaths of the surface, the after-effects of the great fires. She studied the ruins. Charred remains of a once-great forest stood tall over the scorched earth behind her. Thousands of years of history wiped out almost instantaneously.

“Ah yes, the dangers of pride,” she mused. “Believing that they could bend her creation to their will. Such a foolish and arrogant dream.”

The mysterious woman’s eyes fixed upon the hill before her as she began to glide along the path to the top of the great hill. More and more creatures flooded out of hiding to follow her footsteps. Her presence brought a sense of peace to the creatures as she passed. Their spirits felt lighter and the burden of tragedy fell off their shoulders as they reawakened from their dream-like states. Their chattering stopped when she drifted by, yet she gave no acknowledgment to the masses who trailed in her wake. The ashes floated down softly as she passed as if the winds had calmed in her presence. The woman began her ascent to the top of the hill with soft steps. At the cliff edge, the woman stopped to peer below. The grand city lay wasted. Few walls were left standing as the last of the fires swept through the streets. The creatures had gathered around her, looking up at her with wide, imploring eyes. Finally, she spoke, her voice carrying through the open forest.

“It has been hurt, yes. But not ruined.”

She paused as a small, humorless laugh bubbled up her throat.

“There was never a way they could have destroyed this place. They have only destroyed themselves.”

She looked around at the creatures gathered and felt overwhelmed by the suffering and losses. She knelt suddenly, her face sinking as she touched it to the ground. And as she knelt, she wept. Her tears flowed freely down the dark complexion of her face as she mourned the suffering of her children and the scars left on their home. She wept for their arrogance, ignorance, and blindness to the truth. She grieved for the end of an era. The creatures came closer to comfort her as she lifted her head. Above, the clouds gathered in mourning and opened up, as if weeping with the woman.

“It’ll be better now, my darlings. Only now can we begin to truly heal.”

She stood shakily and looked out over the city, watching the rains extinguish the last of the flames. She tilted her head up and let the rain wash away her tears and the last of humanity’s remnants. Finally, at long last, Mother Nature and her beloved children reclaimed their home.