

Episode 8: The Big News

Day 92

V

It had been about a month by that time—the time I found myself pedaling with all my might across a deceptively dangerous plain. The tall blades of wet grass tickled my ankles with each push and the cascading rainfall sent chills through me as rhythmic as my breathing.

Normally, I wouldn't have been out in such dreadful weather. However, the life of our closest comrade was on the line and time was running out. The news that Mika had given us continued to replay in my head: *“Blue tricked all of us! He teamed up with Sydney. Brigg’s in trouble. Sydney’s gonna kill him!”*

Those four concise statements were what brought my friend, Bogen, and I into our current mission. We had to find Brigg and Sydney before it was too late. Fortunately for us, the wide open fields of the Terra Sector had nothing to obstruct our view. Surely Brigg and Sydney would stick out like sore thumbs.

Bogen called to me from my right, barely audible through the downpour. “Kay! We should spread out a little further, at

least within distance of a good shout!”

I whipped my ponytail over my shoulder and shouted back. “We’ll keep an eye on each other. Just stop when you find something!”

“Good enough. Let’s do it.”

I veered off to the left to separate myself further from Bogen, standing on the bike’s pedals. I sat back down after almost losing my balance. It wasn’t the time for me to be so careless anyway.

There was an understandable urgency in the way Bogen was pedaling. Since less than a week before that day—after Bogen dubbed us as “Honorary Producers”—he and Brigg had been leading our group. Losing Brigg would be like losing someone he could truly rely on to help in guiding our party in the right direction.

Sure Bogen had a handle on being an authority figure since the beginning of the Revolution. But having to take the lead on the difficult tasks our group had undertaken—namely, searching for Mika’s missing father—would have probably been jarring for him since he barely knew Mika to begin with.

The two of us continued to space ourselves out to cover more ground. Though my mind was on the task at hand, my heart and brain were tied together in what could only be called a total mess. I was racked with thoughts and memories—the latter more painful to recall. It made me wish I had learned to trust Brigg sooner than I did.

Brigg had become a true friend to me. The thought of losing him created a small void in my heart that prepared itself to expand and engulf it. I knew it was something I was going to have to fight off until the time I would see his face again.

Though we didn’t see eye to eye at first, Brigg and I became good friends after a series of incidents that had taken place since the day I met him. Through those events I was finally beginning to realize that not all men were bad people. And knowing there was finally a man out there that I could trust made it all the more difficult to accept that he could have left my life that day.

That’s why I was on that bike, in that field, in that rain.

According to Mika, Brigg was locked into a confrontation with Sydney, one that would surely result in a death.

Our only hope at that time was to attempt to break it up, having the two of them walk away alive. From there, if the opportunity arose, we would try to wrench some information from Sydney.

Sydney was another reason we were in the stormy Terra Sector. He kidnapped Mika and used her as bait to lure Brigg into the very trap Bogen and I were racing toward. This was possibly a plot that Sydney had been putting together ever since he became the leader of a faction of people who abandoned the Revolution—the Deserters.

With no idea what Sydney had up his sleeve, I was praying that we'd be able to find out just that once we broke up the fight.

It was a shame to me to see how Mika—such an innocent young girl—got tied up in this whole fiasco. All she wanted to do was find her missing father. Now she was being used by the enemies of those she sought help from in her search: the Causes, the Revolutionaries.

“Mika,” I muttered, even knowing Mika wasn't there to hear me. “Once we get to the bottom of this, I'll get you back to your father. I won't let this happen to you again.” Saying that, I felt more motivation to find Brigg that much quicker.

In a fortunate turn, the harsh rain began to lighten. Visibility across the fields improved as well. I smiled wide as I spotted Bogen through the fading downpour. This was a much-needed sigh of relief.

Suddenly, I saw Bogen lose control and stumble to the ground.

I diverted my course and rushed to aid him. As I made my way over, I saw him stand on his own.

Bogen's eyes were fixed on the ground for a few moments as he waved his hand high to signal me. He gave me a brief glance and swept his arm in an inviting manner, but it seemed that whatever he saw on the ground, it had his undivided attention.

I stood again and pedaled with all of my might. It appeared that Bogen had found Brigg. But the way Bogen was acting, my heart shriveled at the sensation that we were

too late.

“No...” I whimpered, “It can’t be.”

I was getting closer. The warmth of tears gave my cheeks a brief reprieve from the stormy winds.

“Please, God...don’t do this...”

Bogen cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted to me. “I’ve found Sydney!”

My mind went blank for a moment. I couldn’t believe it. “Did you just say ‘Sydney?’”

“Yes!”

I stopped my bicycle next to Bogen’s crashed one. “You may not want to look at this,” he advised.

I stopped in my tracks and caught his eye. “Why? What’s the matter?”

He gritted his teeth. “Let’s just say that the only reason I can assume this is Sydney is his clothing.”

Against Bogen’s recommendation, I peered through the tall grass to see the figure on the ground. “What do you mean by...?” Before I could finish my question, I caught a glimpse of the body’s head. It had been crushed. The face couldn’t be identified.

My stomach turned at the sight. “I told you not to look,” said Bogen, shrugging.

I dropped to one knee to compose myself. “If Sydney is here, then where is Brigg?”

Bogen was kneeling down to examine the body. “Brigg must be close by. If not, he is probably with the person who did this to Sydney.”

His comment surprised me. “What!? Another person!?”

His tone grew slightly condescending. “Come on, Kay! Do you honestly think Brigg would do a thing like this?”

I saw Bogen’s point. Even though I knew that Brigg could be a bit violent sometimes, crushing somebody’s head didn’t seem like something he would be capable of. But now this created a different scenario. Brigg was now missing.

I stood and shouted, ‘*Brigg!*’ I focused my hearing, trying to drown out the sound of the rain.

Bogen turned away and called out in the other direction. “Brigg, it’s us—Bogen and Kay!”

I sounded louder as I took a few steps forward. “Brigg,

where are you?” I decided to call out his real name as well. “*Dartmouth, if you can hear us, say something!*”

Bogen and I continued to pace around the location of Sydney’s body while calling out for our partner. During that time, the rain had reduced itself to an on-and-off drizzle.

With every passing minute, I was losing hope. Each time I called out his name, it seemed less and less likely that Brigg had survived Sydney’s ambush. Bogen’s slim-chance assumption that somebody else had him was the only thing I could pray for. But it wasn’t enough to reassure me.

I dropped to my knees and broke down into tears.

VI

Before too long, Bogen’s hands gingerly gripped my shoulders. He rocked me gently from side to side. “Come on, Kay. The Brigg we know probably found a way out of this.”

I wasn’t buying into it. But if Bogen was going to try to bring my spirits back up, I wasn’t going to stop him. “You think so?” I asked.

“I know so,” he confidently replied. “Brigg has the luck of an Angel; I could almost swear by that. You told me yourself that he always seems to find an answer.”

I remembered the exact conversation with Bogen and recalled my next statement. “He could be surrounded on all sides by the Fifteen themselves and still come out without a scratch.”

Bogen playfully shook me. “Yes, you said that before. Why take it back now?”

In my heart, I felt that there was some merit to my previous exaggeration. Brigg’s quick wits and unorthodox thinking had taken him very far. We could only hope that in that critical time, he managed to cheat fate again.

As those thoughts gave me the strength to stand on my feet, Bogen stood quickly and turned to the left. “Aw, crap,” he grunted.

“What’s the matter now?” I said, peering around him.

He began to step backwards as he put his hand to his ear. “Horses...and a black coach—we’ve got company.”

A black horse-coach could only mean one thing:

somebody else knew about Sydney's body. Whoever it was, they summoned attendants of the Spirit Furnace to come collect the cadaver. "What should we do?" I asked Bogen.

He took a moment to answer. "Let's wait. We've probably been noticed. If we run, they may think *we* did this."

"What if there are Gray Policemen?"

Trying to stay positive, he answered, "I'd say that you should have thought of that sooner so we could get a head start on them."

The coach slowed as it made its approach to our location. The dark-coated mares pulling the cabin seemed to look us over as they came to a stop. The coach itself was a little longer than the standard ones commonplace throughout Eden. Just the sight of such a transport being driven by what looked like a long, black, hooded cloak sent an unreal chill up my spine.

Our moment of awe was cut short by the sudden burst of a young girl's voice. "Well, well, well, look who's here!"

"I knew it!" Bogen grinned. It appeared that he had guessed correctly about something.

"What?" I wondered.

"It's Morie."

"Morie!? You mean *the* Morie—member of the Fifteen Morie!?"

The door of the coach opened and three more figures in hooded cloaks stepped out. Bogen took a couple of steps toward the cabin and called to the girl. "Morie, it has been a little while."

The girl showed herself, standing just inside the entrance to the coach. Although she was a member of the Fifteen, Morie appeared to be just around Mika's age. Clothed in an elegant, lacy, frilly, decorative black dress, she exuded the same authoritative air that any member of the Fifteen would, despite her age.

Morie was finishing putting her dark red hair in a bow just off the left side of her head. "It's a shame that I forgot your name. All I know is that you're one of the Producers." Morie spoke in a dignified tone. She was all business.

"Bogen," he replied.

"Who is your friend?" Morie asked.

Remembering to keep my nickname out of the Fifteen’s ears, I replied, “My name is Susan.”

Morie began to step out of the cabin. “So...Susan and Bogen...”

She found herself interrupted by one of her attendants. “Miss Morie!”

“Rudeness!” Morie shrieked shrilly. “Can’t you see we are in the middle of an introduction here?”

“My apologies, Miss Morie,” the attendant cowered, turning back to the body.

Morie tugged at the cuffs of her flared sleeves, which were not attached to the dress, but gently tied to her arm just above her bean-pole biceps. She cleared her throat and introduced herself. “I’m Morie—collector of the dead, operator of Eden’s Spirit Furnace, *and* the youngest member of the Fifteen.”

Bogen pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. “Well, you’ve come to the right place!”

With her chin high, she walked between me and Bogen. “Yes, I know. Stay put, you two. I’ve got some work to do.”

While Morie walked over and addressed her attendants, I leaned in to Bogen. “You never mentioned anything about a member of the Fifteen being that young.”

“I didn’t think it was relevant,” he admitted. “The Fifteen are all the same when it comes to their level of power.” He looked over the scene of Morie and the four attendants and produced another thought. “However,” he resumed, “I don’t think they have the power to magically know where a dead body is.”

“What do you mean?”

Bogen answered my question rather darkly. “Somebody tipped her off.”

“Then again,” I countered, “maybe Sydney called Morie in advance to let her know of a body to collect. Like Mika said, it was Sydney’s intention to kill Brigg.”

He nodded. “That *does* make more sense.” Continuing to stack ideas on top of one another, he added an interesting theory. “If Sydney went through this much preparation, chances are that Sandra was on standby for first aid as well.”

“You think so?”

“Not really,” Bogen sighed, stroking his goatee, “I’m just trying to list off more ideas of where Brigg ended up. He obviously isn’t in this field.”

Our side conversation was diverted by a sudden burst of laughter from the location of Sydney’s body. Morie seemed to find the whole thing amusing. “See, Sydney!” she snapped, kicking the corpse. “This is what you get for being an idiot!”

My heart froze in a grip of fright. “W-what is...?”

Bogen backpedaled. “That’s a bit creepy...”

Morie continued to speak to Sydney’s lifeless frame. “Hey, you didn’t go into rigor mortis just yet. Thanks for making your carcass easier to move than the rest of the ones you left behind!”

“Okay,” I mumbled, “I’ve seen enough. It’s time to go.”

“Seconded...” Bogen muttered with urgency.

We began to shift slowly over to the bicycles. We didn’t get too far before one of Morie’s attendants spoke up. “Miss Morie, what do we do about those two?”

The eccentric young lady turned to face us in such a fashion; it was as if she had forgotten about the body in a split second. “Don’t move!”

Officially scared out of our wits, Bogen and I stopped.

Morie delegated her authority. Turning to the two attendants on her right, she ordered, “You two, get the body into the coach.” She then addressed the two on her left. “The two of you—stay close and spot me. If they move, tag them.”

All four of them sounded off, “Yes, Miss Morie.”

I swallowed hard. “What does she mean by ‘tag’?”

“I’d much rather let that remain a mystery,” Bogen nervously chortled. “Let’s just cooperate.”

Morie’s icy, menacing gaze alternated between me and Bogen as she approached us. As ordered, two of her attendants stood to her side as bodyguards. “Here’s a tip to get you through the next few minutes,” Morie growled. “Making a false move is a *very bad* idea.”

Stuck in place and afraid to move, I thought to myself, “I see the rest of the Fifteen trained *her* well.”

The residual winds from the storm that had passed seemed even colder with Morie’s mere presence. My heart

was shaking and every centimeter of my body seemed paralyzed. Bogen, on the other hand, suddenly seemed calm and prepared, confidence that I am sure came from his previous escape from the Fifteen.

The controlling little Furnace Keeper began to order us. “I’m going to ask the two of you to separate.” She pointed to a spot to my right. “Susan, you will stand there.” Likewise, she pointed far to my left. “Bogen, you will stand there.”

“What is this?” I whispered to Bogen.

“I don’t...”

“NOW!” Morie shouted. On that cue, her two on-guard attendants produced clubs from their cloaks.

I threw my hands into the air. “Alright, alright...” My legs wobbled all the way to the spot Morie assigned me.

Morie took the opportunity to taunt Bogen. “It’s a bit harder with nowhere to hide, isn’t it?”

“Just a little,” he sarcastically shot back.

Once we were in position, Morie took three steps forward and looked to me. “Before I begin, I just want you to know that your friend is alive. Sandra has assigned a medic to take care of him.”

Despite their source, those words swept through my ears with the sweetness of an Angel’s song. I choked up a bit as my heart lifted, pushing a tear of joy from my eye. A wide smile naturally found its way from one end of my face to the other.

Bogen, seeming to ignore the joyous news, continued to communicate coldly to the Fifteen youngling. “Why would you tell us a thing like that?”

Morie giggled with surprising femininity. “Two reasons. One—since he is your friend, you have the right to know of his condition. And two—by saying that, I’ve deduced that I am talking to the right people.” She pointed to me. “Her reaction alone was enough to prove it.”

Bogen shrugged in a confused manner. “Didn’t you already know? I mean, me being one of the Producers is proof enough too, right?”

“Oh, I’m not talking about your little Revolution,” she scoffed in dismissal. “I needed to make sure I was talking to the right people on a different topic.”

I pressed her. “Which is...?”

In response, Morie reached into a pocket on the right side of her dress and pulled out a piece of off-white cloth canvas. She leaned on her hip and let the item unroll in front of her. On that canvas was a hand-drawn picture of a man’s face—the face of Mika’s father. “I’m talking about this...”

My first impulse at the sight of Mika’s picture was a furious outburst. “How did you get that!?”

“Your friend had it on him,” she answered; unaffected by my change in attitude toward her. “We have another one of your friends: a girl dressed in black, like me. She told me about this picture and requested that I give it back to you.”

From his distant position, Bogen looked over to me. We both knew what this meant. Not only did the Fifteen capture Brigg, but it seemed that our other ally, Black, was captured as well.

With a casual attitude, Morie critiqued Mika’s work. “This is actually very well done. My only complaint is the erase marks all around the eyes and ears. But something about this picture brings a question to mind.”

“Oh no,” I thought. “What could possibly come of this?”

Morie called to her attendants. “You two, get ready to tag them if I give the word.”

My body suddenly lost its ability to stand. I stumbled to the ground as the sight of a dark cloak proceeded to gradually block my view of Morie. Desperately, I called to Bogen, “What do we do?”

“All we can do is keep Morie from giving them ‘the word’.”

In my panic, I didn’t quite understand. “What?”

“Morie said ‘*if*.’”

Jovially, Morie responded. “I like this guy! He’s on top of everything I say. Most people would have wet their pants at this point.”

Bogen’s knack for pinning out key words was still not enough to calm me down. I still feared what questions our enemy had in store for us.

Once the attendants were in position next to us, Morie gave us her instructions. “I am going to ask you one question—just one. Your answer will provide all I need to

know.” She took a beat, looked at the piece of canvas again then continued. “The reason I separated you two is to make sure that you will not lie to me.”

“How will you know?” Bogen inquired.

Morie chuckled sinisterly. “I know that both of you know the answer to my question. So I am going to *highly recommend* that the two of you answer the question at the same time.”

Understanding the immediate threat, I fearfully nodded to the demanding young girl. “Alright, we’ll answer at the same time.”

“That’s not all, though,” she resumed, “Not only will you answer at the same time, but you will answer immediately. If you hesitate...tag!” Then, before Bogen and I had a chance to react toward each other, Morie shouted out an additional command: “The two of you will now face away from each other.”

Her attendant roughly gripped my shoulders and turned me away. All I could see was the open plain of the Terra Sector.

It seemed a little extreme to me. Whatever question Morie had for us, she sure went out of her way to make sure that we gave her a truthful answer. Bogen and I were set up in such a way that it would be impossible to both lie *and* escape. All I could do was hope that telling the truth would not affect the Causes or the Revolution, but most importantly, Mika.

After a few moments of silence, Morie prepared us. “I will now ask my question. Remember, I know you know the answer. So be ready to answer immediately and truthfully.”

I had no choice. “I am ready,” I quivered.

“Me too,” Bogen faintly sounded.

Anticipation welled within me as Morie spoke loud and clear. “About the blonde girl—the one Blue sent back to you...”

“Oh God help her,” I silently gasped. Morie was going to ask a question about Mika. I took a deep breath and braced myself.

Morie finished her question, “What is her name?”

I gritted my teeth and spit it out, “Mika!” Fortunately, Bogen was a millisecond in front of me in his answering. He

told the truth as well.

After that, Bogen found the need to object. “Come on, Morie, all this setup for such a simple question!?”

Seeming uncaring toward his opinion, our interrogator was more focused on our answer. “Mika, eh? That’s a pretty name. How do you spell that?”

I turned back to face her, “M-I-K-A.”

Morie pulled a marking stylus from another pocket and wrote it down on Mika’s canvas. She then began to look it over, appearing to have had her mind slip out of the Terra Sector completely. Before she got too deep into thought, she called to her attendants. “Come back, you two. We’re going to let them go.”

One of them protested, “But, Miss Morie...”

A cold glance from the young lady was enough to stop the cloak in his tracks. Bogen snickered audibly at the attendant’s reaction. Morie’s announcement of our release and the smile on Bogen’s face were enough to put my shaken heart at ease.

Morie reverted back to a serious, businesslike state. “Susan and Bogen, you are free to go.”

As the two of us walked back over to her, we couldn’t believe what we had just heard. “That’s it?” Bogen asked.

“But,” she interjected, “as far as this picture is concerned, I am going to keep it.”

I was shocked. We couldn’t let her keep Mika’s picture. “No! You can’t! We need that!”

Morie looked to me, presenting the picture in an inviting fashion. “This is a picture of Mika’s father, right? That girl in black told me that your party was looking for him.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Well,” she exhaled, “now that I know the girl’s name, it will be easier to get a search party together on our side.”

Bogen laughed heartily. “Are you serious!? You’re going to *help* us?”

Morie glared at him and pointed at his face. “Don’t even think that this means you’re getting off scot-free for starting a Revolution. I’m doing this for the girl.”

“...For Mika?” I asked.

She clarified her statement. “Mika told me several times

that she wanted nothing to do with the whole Revolution. She was only traveling with you for your help.”

“More or less,” I agreed.

Morie sighed, looking at the picture again. “I’ll take this to Joseph and Cenia. Since Mika isn’t really involved in your cause, we are going to treat this as a missing person case.”

Bogen—back to his old, casual self—folded his arms and replied. “You sure know the ins and outs of your job for being so young.”

Her only comeback was, “I’m a member of the Fifteen. I have to know...” After saying that, she zoned out with her eyes fixed on the canvas again.

Bogen and I looked to each other out of the corners of our eyes, slightly discomfited. Morie had a bizarre and mysterious air about her that seemed to shoot out in spurts whenever she spoke. Perhaps it was from having to deal with dead bodies all the time. Maybe her mind was affected by the ways in which the rest of the Fifteen trained her for her duties. Whatever it was, we knew that crossing her path again was something to be avoided.

“Come,” the young one invited, “take a seat on the back bench of the coach. I will take you back to the farm house you came from. You need to get out of those wet clothes before you get sick.”

Bogen replied, “We’ll ride the bikes back; we need to return them. Thank you anyway.” It went without saying it aloud that he did not trust her seemingly innocent request.

“Have it your way,” she huffed. She then clapped twice and shouted back to the dark coach as she walked toward it. “Alright, everybody! Let’s get going back to the Spirit Furnace.” Her sudden, voluminous burst startled the horses awake.

In a relieved exhalation, I quietly said, “Thanks, Morie.”

As the Collector of the Dead and her attendants left the scene, Bogen approached me from behind and embraced me. “Everything is alright now. Brigg is alive.”

His unexpected touch startled me and the way he spoke those words filtered through my ears in a surprisingly disquieting manner. The only words I could think to utter were, “Hands off!”

He slowly released his grip and backed away. I looked behind me then turned to see a puzzled and uneasy expression slathered across his usually-laid-back demeanor. That reaction alone made me feel like he was trying to take advantage of my vulnerable emotional state.

I wasn't going to have it.

He tried to justify his actions. "I was just trying to..."

I raised my hand quickly in interruption. Another moment of silence accented by a gentle breeze passed by us as I continued to stare him into apology. He didn't seem to catch on, though. Either he felt no remorse for violating my personal space, or he really had no idea what he had done wrong.

A memory flashed before me—a memory of the last time a man got that close to me. I felt that finger touch my chin again and recalled that lusty look on his face. Then his voice—Brigg's voice—spoke yet again. "*Are you nervous too?*"

My hand quickly clasped my forehead as I recalled those words yet again. "Argh!"

Bogen took a quick step toward me with his hands out. "Are you alright?"

My left hand rose quickly to meet his advance. "Stop, I'm fine."

He backed off and stood relaxed. "I'll give you a few minutes. Let me go grab your bike."

Since my clothes weren't going to get any wetter, I set myself down onto the damp, grassy field to compose myself. During that time, I made an effort to regain my focus on what had transpired and what it all meant. We had just survived a brush with a rather erratic member of the Fifteen, which was enough grounds in itself to breathe a sigh of relief.

I sobbed slightly as I turned my head up to look at the sky. The cloud cover was moving out and the beams of a late afternoon sun were shining through to create a brilliant manifestation of silvery cotton and radiant orangey luminescence. The grand display up above brought but one sentence from my heart to my lips:

"Thank God you're alive."