

Chapter 1: Eleanor

Eleanor was late.

Which was odd, because twelve-year-old Eleanor Gwinn was never late. Not if she could help it.

In fact, the only time she had ever been late before was exactly one month ago, when her mother left home. Eleanor missed half a day of school due to “circumstances beyond her control”—at least that’s how her father explained the situation to her principal.

And while *that day* had been strange and unpredictable, this day was well on its way to being unremarkable and not even a fraction as chaotic, which gave Eleanor no good reason to be late, she noted with frustration.

She couldn’t have been more wrong.

Eleanor had an inkling that the painful memories from a month ago had sidetracked her thoughts and waylaid her punctuality, but she tended to ignore vague notions. So, she packed the painful memories away in a dark corner of her mind like you might stuff a shirt you didn’t want to wear into the back of your closet. And she focused on the task at hand: Meeting her best friend Leah at their usual spot, Castle Rock.

Eleanor checked her phone, a flexible flat-screened device that wrapped around her wrist and doubled as a smartwatch.

8:12:04 a.m.

Commented [CS1]: HEADS UP! We accidentally chose this resubmission that Cameron and I critiqued for a Hot Seat Critique back in December. We normally don’t do that, it was a mistake. It’ll probably color my feedback a little because I read a previous draft. Aliah, Kristen, and Ben all haven’t read it before, so be sure to listen to their feedback in the episode and read the end notes posted here.

I have been TAINTED.

Also, I don’t remember what I said before 😊

Commented [2]:
Don’t need this detail here, it feels forced.

Commented [CS3]: Nice character marker

Commented [CS4]: Oooh not cool. Nice clinical description that says a lot.

Commented [CS5]: nice

Commented [6]:
This has a very narrative tone to it. That’s not a bad thing, but it’s very hard to maintain, as is evident in the final sentence here, where you jump into the character’s head as if she’s the one narrating.

Commented [7]:
What is she late for? This is entirely too long to keep talking about her punctuality preferences without giving us more detail.

Commented [CS8]: This is an awesome description, but I’m not sure how it connects to what is happening because we’re not actually grounded in a setting or situation yet. Where is she? What happened to make her late (was she daydreaming? Did she lose track of the time doing something, something she never ever does, which could be blamed on painful memories?)

Commented [9]:
Flexible?

Commented [10]:
Wait, what time period is this? Are we in the future?

Technically, she wasn't late yet. She was behind schedule by two minutes and fifty-six seconds, which only increased the probability that she would be late.

Commented [11]:

Wait, no. You have to pick one. She's either Late or she's not. If it's a character trait that she's always on time, which is a perfectly acceptable trait, then you can't have this both ways here.

Eleanor hurried along the coastal path, skirting the limestone cliffs inside the coastal Marine Biodome, one of a cluster of six glass biodomes belonging to District WC-019. Built during the Great Dying, each biodome contained a diverse and balanced habitat: marine, parkland, forest, wetlands, the township, and a state-of-the-art Farm Lab. All six were built around the site of a defunct old fishing village called Whale Cove.

Commented [CS12]: Nitpicky, but this technically means that being behind increased the probability that she'll be late rather than "increased only the probability" which would mean that it's only a chance that she'll be late?

Eleanor's wrist chimed with a notification. "Rainfall scheduled for the Avesbury Park Biodome at 8:20 a.m.," a woman's voice advised.

Commented [CS13]: cool

"Now I have to beat the rain, too," Eleanor grumbled as she entered the spacious tunnel that connected the coastal dome to the lush parkland dome. And she'd forgotten to wear her extra-resilient hydrophobic jacket.

Commented [CS14]: cool world building

Up ahead, the bare limbs of trees waved in an artificial autumn wind. Each biodome was programmed to mimic the seasons and their related weather patterns. This included collecting enough rainwater to produce rain, snow, or fog at designated times through out the day. Eleanor knew more about how the biodomes functioned than most people. Her father was the engineer in charge of maintaining the biodiversity of each biodome in District WC-019.

Commented [CS15]: This is reading like MG to me right now!! I don't think we have this tagged with an age group, but that's my guess 😊

Trying to make up for lost time, Eleanor didn't notice a root that snaked across the path until she tripped over it.

"Ooof!" she grunted and sprawled out flat. Eye-level with the foot of the enormous granite stone that marked the entrance to Avesbury Park, Eleanor's gaze snagged on a pock-marked crevice.

Nestled deep inside, a glint of silver winked out at her.

Intrigued, Eleanor climbed to her feet. She ignored the twinge of pain in her left knee, which had taken the brunt of her fall, along with her chafed and dirty palms. Eleanor dusted them off, hooked two fingers behind the embedded object, and pulled.

A silver pendant with a milky white stone slid easily into her hand. It was an inch and a half wide; about the size of the old-fashioned silver dollar her mother once gave her. The pendant hung on a tarnished silver chain.

Eleanor wiped away the dried mud and clay. Etched into the back was a raven with a hooked beak and a tiny blue gemstone for an eye. Underneath it was a sequence of unfamiliar lines and scratches. She ran her fingers over the cryptic markings and a small shock vibrated throughout her body. Putting this down a shiver from the chill air, Eleanor pressed the small button on top of the pendant. It appeared to open like an old timepiece, but no matter how hard she pushed and pried, she couldn't get it to open.

Caw! Caw! Caw!

The grating cry of a crow startled Eleanor back to reality.

"I'm going to miss Leah if I don't hurry." Eleanor reproached herself for losing track of time.

The trees that buttressed the park's entrance came alive with crows. With loud shrieks, they settled into nearby branches, shrouding the trees in a thick curtain of black.

There was a far-off rumble of thunder. Eleanor squinted up thousands of feet to the biodome's roof, past the interlocking hexagons of the structure's steel frame. Up to where layers of reinforced glass, plastic, and insulating gases protected the interior from the extreme elements of the exterior. Grey-black storm clouds churned in the outer sky. An oppressive darkness pressed down on the treetops.

Commented [CS16]: So this is cool, and this is 100% subjecting and according to MY taste, but I'm not quite ready for things to start happening yet!!

I love the biodome and castle rock and the friend who is waiting for Eleanor and I want to know more about them!! I want to meet Dad and see how he's holding up/find out what their family looks like after *that day*.

I'm totally game for her to find something then tuck it away and have it not be important yet, but this looks like it's developing into an inciting incident.

Once again, that's me. I like slower starts, but not everyone does. I'll bring it up with the podcasters and see what they think?

Lightning sparked across the outer sky. A high-pitched scream rifled through the still air, sending the crows into flight.

Eleanor's heart jumped into her throat.

Was Leah in trouble?

The ear-splitting cry sounded again, making all the hairs on Eleanor's arm stand on end. It was a cry of pure terror that pierced through to her very core. A cold, heavy feeling settled around Eleanor's heart.

The cries came from the direction of the river. As Eleanor hobbled to the riverbank, the air became charged, there was a surge and a slight wobble. Time slowed its persistent beat to match the steady flap of a white bird's wing as it skimmed the surface of the water.

Eleanor watched in shock as a primitive wooden boat barrelled past, right on the bird's tail. Seated inside was a wisp of girl, dressed in a dirt-streaked linen shift, clutching at the boat's sides as it pitched and rolled in the current.

The little girl, who appeared to be seven or eight years old, turned and looked right at Eleanor, her eyes big and round with fear.

Eleanor opened her mouth to call to her, but no sound came out.

"Why was the river moving so swiftly?" She wondered in a panic. Typically, it ambled along on its unhurried journey to the sea. The currents only picked up in the spring, with run-off from the mountains. Even then, the water levels were never this high.

"Hang on!" Eleanor found her voice and scrambled after the boat. She loped over the tufts of grass that lined the banks, gritting her teeth against pain in her knee as the boat raced by.

Commented [CS17]: How does she know this? Does she look at her watch? Time is a THING with her, so I'd think the idea of time slowing or being anything other than consistent would be Absolutely Unacceptable to this character.

Commented [CS18]: Ok, so...

They're in a biodome.
How big is this biodome?
How many people are in it?
Is the river contained inside it?
Is it self-contained—no people in and no people out? Or is it not that kind of an environment?
If she doesn't know this girl (who is wearing a shift—that sounds very different from "extra-resilient hydrophobic jacket"). Does that freak her out?

Commented [CS19]: I can't say that this was a question *I* had. Eleanor is taking note of all these details which makes me think they aren't normal things to happen...and she wants to know why the river is fast?

Commented [CS20]: Oooh okay, so she goes straight to the river is fast because she feels like she needs to save the girl.

But she doesn't wonder why the girl is in the boat in the first place?

But the river was moving too fast. Helpless, Eleanor watched as the boat wobbled precariously under a footbridge, leaving behind a strange trail of orange and yellow flower petals. There was a second flash of lightning, and both the girl and her boat disappeared.

Eleanor rushed past the bridge, her breath coming in short bursts. The rough currents of the river had calmed into a meandering flow. There was no sign of the girl or her boat or even the flowers.

“No!” Eleanor groaned, worried that boat had capsized, and the girl had gone under. Gritting her teeth, Eleanor clamored down the bank to look under the bridge. The little girl’s fear had been so palpable that she could still feel it.

Eleanor stooped down close to the water and scanned its placid, opaque surface. From its reedy depths, a ghostly face with black orbs for eyes peered out at her.

Spooked, Eleanor scurried back from the water’s edge.

She sat alone on the riverbank, her mind racing.

Who was the little girl? District WC-019 was so small that Eleanor knew everyone who lived there.

And where did she go?

The girl and the boat had vanished. All was quiet, except for the sound of Eleanor’s heart pounding in her ears. Even the boisterous crows had deserted her.

Eleanor returned to the bridge to inspect it. The water there was not even a foot deep and the only sign of life in it was a couple of water beetles. Up ahead, the river ambled through its bends, flat and empty.

There has to be a logical explanation for this,” she reasoned.

Commented [CS21]: Eeek!

Commented [CS22]: Ok, so these were the questions I was having earlier.

I don’t know what the right answers are for how to write this—there are lots of ways to right, but playing catch up as a reader does make it a little bit harder to read something. Whatever you choose to do, I’d love to know what is so special/scary/interesting about this girl (is it just that she’s young and in a boat? Is it that Eleanor doesn’t know her and HOW COULD SHE HAVE GOTTEN INTO THE BIODOME?? Is it the river and the way it is supposed to look?) without having to absorb a bunch of new details in the exact moment (or AFTER) they are relevant, if that makes sense? If we’re firmly grounded in this Biodome and what the normal rules are, we’ll be freaked out along with the MC when something breaks those rules without her having to explain it (which detracts from the tension).

Commented [CS23]: Also...what about I SAW A GHOST IN THE WATER??

Since she could find no evidence of anyone in the water or on it in a boat, Eleanor did what many of us would do in the same situation; she assumed that the little girl had docked her boat and disembarked somewhere downriver. And she dismissed the ghastly face under the bridge as a mere trick of her mind. A stone with strange markings or fuzzy moss, distorted under the water.

Just to be safe, though, Eleanor texted the patrol-bots in the Township Biodome so that they could check up on the little girl.

A fat drop of rain plopped onto her cheek.

Right on schedule: 8:20 a.m.

To Eleanor's surprise, the entire incident had lasted only minutes, yet it seemed to drag on forever. She could still make it to school, though she had likely missed Leah.

Eleanor picked her way down a hill that was being excavated to make way for a new roadway. It was being built for the heavy trucks and machinery needed to repair the saltwater desalination plant in the Marine Biodome.

She surveyed the construction site. Tree trunks as wide as the road itself had been downed and cut into segments for transport. Monolithic boulders had been unearthed, dwarfing the yellow bulldozer that stood in contrast to the mossy parklands.

The rain poured down harder now, pummeling the site in a steady hiss.

Eleanor followed the zigzag of tire tracks worn into the mud by heavy machinery.

"Ugh." She said out loud, lifting a once pristine white shoe, now caked in a layer of mud. "So much for my new shoes." Her mum would have been furious, but her dad wouldn't even notice.

A lump formed in Eleanor's throat and tears pricked at the corners of her eyes.

Commented [CS24]: I didn't get the feeling there was a narrator in this story until this moment. Before I thought it was 3rd limited.

Commented [CS25]: I didn't realize she was on her way to school...

Her concentration loosened and the memories of *that day* came rushing back: The overbearing silence that settled over the house. Her father's helpless expression, he wore it for days, which ended up irritating Eleanor. And that hollowness she felt in her chest when she read her mother's pathetically brief message:

I've gone to stay with Aunt Emily for a while. I'll call once I've settled in. Love you both. ~ Mum. Box #242, Hellas Basin, Mars Outpost 109.

Her mother's departure had seemed so abrupt, but Eleanor knew why she had to go.

And it was all her fault.

She limped to the foot of Castle Rock, a fist of rocks that towered in the clearing. In the grey reflection of the morning rain, the park felt curiously unfamiliar to Eleanor. She slipped the pendant into her pocket and bustled down the path to her school in the valley below.

Chapter 2: Branwen

Branwen was late.

Which was typical of her and inconvenient on the best of days, though rarely fatal. This, however, was turning out to be one of those rare days. You see, Branwen was perilously close to missing the castle lockdown which happened every night at sunset.

If you were to argue that she should know better, you would be right.

"Though knowing does little to help me now," Branwen thought with a sigh.

Commented [CS26]: I'm definitely looking forward to find out about this, but it doesn't feel like its connected to what just happened with the girl and the bridge. It almost feels like a separate time and scene.

Commented [27]:
Wait, are they on MARS?

Commented [CS28]: Oooh fun

Commented [CS29]: intriguing

Commented [CS30]: for someone so very concerned about time, she's going pretty slow. Also, I'd forgotten about the pendant until now...

Commented [CS31]: nice parallel

Commented [CS32]: nice contrast to Eleanor, nice surprise almost funny ending

Commented [33]:
Careful about addressing the reader directly, which is very hard in a narrative style.

Commented [CS34]: oh now we're in full on narrator.

Commented [CS35]: What is this in response to? Can she hear the narration?

A legion of crows surged above her in a wave of black. Cawing and shrieking, they descended into the low-hanging branches of nearby hemlock trees. They were so loud that Branwen could hardly think straight.

“Stop your incessant squawking! Go away!” She shooed them off with a wave of her hands, not giving a toss that they were harbingers of fate.

“*More like harbingers of a headache!*” She rubbed her forehead to loosen the ache behind her eyes.

Branwen winced as she climbed down from the flat top of *craig y castell*, an outcrop of rock in the *coed y brenin forest*.

“Why does my knee hurt?” She wondered out loud. *Oh yes, that’s right.* Branwen remembered waking up on top of *craig y castell*, which was worrisome because she hadn’t fallen asleep on top of the rock. Someone had put her there. Or (perish the thought), something. One never knew in Prydein, where ghastly beasts of inhuman proportions roamed the land. Branwen shuddered at the thought of it.

The point was this: she had been walking through the forest when someone (or something) had knocked her out. She had then been tossed up a short distance (about two men high, if you stacked them vertically, toe to shoulder) on top of *craig y castell*. And now, crows were squawking, the sun was setting, and Branwen was about to miss lockdown.

If she were late, she would be locked out of the castle for the night.

“*You sow the wind, you reap the whirlwind,*” her mother would have said if she had been alive.

Commented [CS36]: ?? when? And... WHAT? She is being so casual about it and is more concerned about lockdown than the fact she was knocked out in the forest?

Branwen stooped to check her knee. No bruising. No blood. No obvious injury. She tried to remember what happened, but her head felt fuzzy like it was filled with puffy knots of cotton grass.

The crows lit from tree to tree ahead of Branwen, as though they were marshalling her home. *Nervy birds!* She broke out of the thicket as twilight was unfolding, the shadows of the trees lengthening on the tall grasses in front of her.

The familiar, gray vaulting stone wall of the castle keep rose into view. Castle Aberffraw, the battle-hard stronghold of the Cantref Gwynedd, sat with a tired, crumbling sort of dignity on a rocky promontory that stretched down to the sea.

Branwen squinted across the meadow, beads of sweat forming on her high brow.

Aberffraw was an average enough castle, she supposed, though she would have preferred something a little less sombre (and drafty).

Commented [CS37]: Does she have context for other places being different, or is this the narrator interjecting?

But surely this was the least of anyone's worries—Branwen chastised herself for being frivolous—with Balor's riders roving across the countryside like a band of irate mountain trolls.

Riders.

She had heard the heavy hoofbeats, the threatening rattle of armor as she awakened. And smelled the stench of rotting flesh that edged into the air. Even the memory of it made Branwen's stomach turn.

Riders in the heart of coed y brenin, the King's Forest.

She knew it was them. The setting sun glanced off their distinctive horned helmets as they disappeared into the trees.

"How bold they are to ride so close to the castle," she thought. Branwen might have been more indignant if she hadn't been so anxious.

She had to warn the king.

Commented [CS38]: Is this what the chapter should start with?

Shouts rang out in the distance as Branwen scrambled across the field toward the castle.

A deep horn gave its slow, solemn warning. The castle was closing for the night.

Heavy chains creaked to life and the portcullis lowered across the entrance to the gatehouse. A banner bearing the crest of the House of Llŷr hung above it—two black ravens perched on the mast of a golden boat in a roiling blue sea. Caught in a sudden updraft, the banner flapped, making the boat appear to pitch and roll on the waves.

“Wait!” Branwen bit down on the pain in her knee and loped across the field at a hop-run. “Stop!”

A short sentry squinted at her and held up his arm. “Stand off,” he shouted, and the iron gate groaned to a halt.

“‘Allo, princess,” he grumbled. “Move on through, then.”

Branwen gave him an apologetic smile and ducked under the gate. Inside the castle walls, she was almost run-down by a horse drawing a cart of hay. Branwen jumped out of its path only to upset a gaggle of geese. They stretched their necks out and scampered across the mud with angry squawks, corralled by a scullery maid. A second horse cut her off, this one pulling a farm cart piled high with manure. Branwen wrinkled her nose at the foul smell that wafted after it.

A slim young man glowered at Branwen as she crossed the courtyard.

Efnisien was dressed in full warrior gear, his chest puffed out under a studded leather cuirass emblazoned with crest of Llŷr. A heavy sword hung across his back, fixed in place with a cross belt. Coiling up under his left cheek was the indigo mark of a two-headed serpent, its forked tail hidden from view beneath the collar of his tunic. He wore the same bitter expression when he arrived at the castle, six spans ago, just after his mother died.