THE ISLE OF THE DEAD

PART I — 1926.

The creators of the Victrola VV 1-1, SN: 75674 had not expected it to see the apocalypse.

But then, the apocalypse was far from the minds of the workers of the Camden, NJ Victrola plant. This was the Roaring Twenties, wasn't it? Anything was possible-- including capturing a man's voice and chaining it up inside a flat shellac disk like a genie in a bottle.

Besides the VV 1-1 was an unassuming machine if there ever was one. Squat, built from pine wood stained to resemble mahogany, it had been nicknamed by the workers the "Victrolita"-- the little Victrola. Far from the deep, operatic bellows of the later orthophonic phonographs, the machine hummed along in jangly, vaguely harmonious tones. But still it had a musical quality to it.

A musical quality that had entranced Nunzio Arrigoni, one out of twelve workers who had been set in charge of quality control.

Day in and day out, he walked into work, the notes of a song hovering on his tongue. Some of his fellow workers laughingly called him "Nuvio" because, as they said, he had his head so far in the clouds. Nuvio-- Nunzio --paid them no heed. If his head was in the clouds, theirs were far, far, down on the earth, too far for him to even hear the jabs.

Besides-- as the workers at the Camden plant began to suspect-- Nunzio only had ears for one sound. And that sound was the symphony they played hour after hour, day after day, on each of the newly manufactured Victrolas.

It began with low, solemn notes, like heavy oars thrust again and again beneath the dark waters of an enormous ocean. Then, a slow crescendo-- the distant form of an island coming into view. It was craggy, and appeared barren, but on closer examination a traveler could spot the flat

forms of crabs scampering across the shore. They were not the same as the crabs you found in America or Italy, Nunzio explained to anyone who would listen, but something else entirely. How he knew this, the Camden workers, had no idea. But it was characteristically Nunzio.

He lived in a world of his own and that world was music.

And so, when the Camden workers discovered a defect in Victrola VV 1-1 SN:75674 -- a warped metal spindle that snagged the shellac disk and kept them from replacing it-- they gave the flawed machine to Nunzio. It was their little joke. Who else, after all, would want a phonograph stuck on one song, save the quiet little worker who seemed to love it above all else?

Nunzio accepted it, of course. Far from seeing the mockery in the gesture, he was happy, flattered even, that his fellow workers would be so generous as to give the phonograph to him. Its original value-- a staggering fifteen dollars --was far more than a mere Victrola factory worker could ever hope to afford.

He soon began to play the phonograph each Sunday, after attending Mass-- though anyone who knew him could see that the song was far more moving an experience than any sermon. He played it, too, his last day at the Camden plant, before setting off for Philadelphia. His departure was the cause for great speculation among the Camden workers—the majority assumed that he had left in search of a higher-paying job, but some claimed for months afterward that he simply no longer needed the plant's Victrolas to hear his beloved song. The debate would never be resolved. But years later, when Nunzio was married--to a woman named Loredana whose parents had known his parents back in the old country—he chose to play the phonograph at his wedding. The guests-- her brother and several of his cousins--stared in abject horror as the young couple waltzed to the solemn notes of the phonograph machine. One cousin tried to change the song and found that he could not. All were confused. Why would newlyweds dance to such an apparently gloomy song? But Loredana, charmed by her husband's calm and thoughtful manner, did not

think to be surprised. Neither was the one worker from Nunzio's old workplace who had been able to attend the event.

As the couple left the dance floor, the worker took the new Mrs. Arrigoni aside and mock-whispered that she should keep an eye on her husband. "Another woman?" she asked, wide-eyed. She has heard stories about America, dangerous and enticing. The worker shakes his head, and she finds that, to her surprise, she is almost disappointed. "No. That song." He jabs a finger at the phonograph. "His one true love. You'll be competing with it your entire life."

At that point, Loredana laughed. She had never heard of such a thing before. To her, music was simply what happened during the in-between moments of life. When she was washing clothes. Walking to the market. Caring for her younger siblings. Sure, it could pass the time, and even chase away her darker thoughts. But she had never heard of anyone falling in love with it.

Of course, as she learned about a month into her marriage, her husband was not just anyone.

"Why must we have that song playing so often?" she asked, as Nunzio wound the phonograph and slipped the needle onto the record. "I have heard it a thousand times before. It grows dull."

"Dull?" Her husband stopped the needle in midair, apparently shocked. She couldn't see how he could be. He had played the song-- what? One hundred? Two hundred? times in the past month. How could he not be tired of it?

And yet, he was not. She could see it in his face as he spread his hands in an empathetic gesture, and said "Loredana, this is the most beautiful music in the world."

The new Mrs. Arrigoni, unfamiliar with the day-to-day disagreements of marriage, paused to think. She could remember her mother warning her not to challenge her new husband. And

though Loredana couldn't fathom why-- Nunzio was far from the swaggering Don Juans of her local village--her mother was a smart woman and Loredana trusted her. So, she nodded.

"Well, if you say so."

But by now Nunzio's attention was already back on the phonograph. Loredana watched as he eased the needle back onto the record, a beatific smile crossing his face. Like one of the saints, she thought. Francis. Peter. Anthony. The faces she had seen a thousand times in oil and granite and glass as they gazed adoringly up toward heaven.

That's it, she realized with a start, that's how Nunzio looked at that record. As though it was his heaven.

She felt a stab of jealousy tear at her heart and thought, for the first time, that the man from Camden had been right. That this low, mournful symphony, so out of place in their small kitchen, was her husband's one true love.

And she--

She was just background noise.

PART II — 2026.

The voice was faintly audible in the back of his mind, like the notes of a long-forgotten song.

"Frank? Frank Arrigoni?"

"What?" snapped Frank Arrigoni, turning his head over his shoulder so forcefully that he almost lost his balance. He was standing on a narrow wooden ladder leading up to an attic that probably hadn't seen the light of day in decades.

Below him was a teenager, arms wrapped around a battered cardboard box. He looked scared out of his mind.

Frank Arrigoni cringed. He could only imagine how he must appear to this poor kid. Dark circles. Wrinkled plaid shirt. A haggard beard, clearly not shaven for days. He probably looked like an aging, badly groomed hipster.

The teenager, mustering up the bravery to plaster on a disaffected stare, glanced at the cardboard box cradled in his hands. “This’s the last one. Do you want me to leave it down here or put it up there?”

Frank glanced at the square of darkness hovering just above his head. Then at the kid. He just wanted this to be over.

“Leave it down there. I’ll bring it up myself. Later.”

“You sure?” the teenager said.

No, he wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure of anything anymore, not with Grandpa Gio dead. Frank nodded.

“Kay then,” the teenager lowered the box down until it was about a foot from the floor then let it drop. There was a thump and a sound like metal parts clanging together. Frank’s eyes widened and he scrambled back down the ladder. “Careful!”

As he crouched down beside the cardboard box, the teenager took a step back. “Is there anything I can…?”

“No.” Frank glared up at him. “You’ve done enough.”

He handed the teenager a wad of dollar bills. Moments later, he heard the floorboards creak and the front door slam shut. He frowned, stroking his ragged beard. He really shouldn’t have been that harsh on the kid. He could remember back when he was a young kid, hoping to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood making a few bucks. But there hardly seemed a point to the extra courtesy.

There hardly seemed a point in anything at all.

The world will go on, he could hear a familiar voice whisper to him. A voice in his head. Was he going mad? He heard that sort of thing could happen under stress-- and he certainly was stressed recently. Losing his job, then his grandfather, and moving across the country. Philadelphia. He puffed out his cheeks then let out a long breath. He had been a West Coast type of guy for so long-- who would have thought he'd end up here?

Grandpa Gio, he supposed. He was always getting on about how Frank should join him on the eastern seaboard-- visit New York City, Philadelphia, Canada. But it was always too cold, too far away, too costly to visit. And now there were no opportunities left. Only a little old house, with drafty windows and floorboards that creaked, the last gift from the man who'd raised him.

Frank sighed and eased open the flaps of the cardboard box in front of him. The last of his grandfather's things, stored in a basement that had decided to flood within a month of him moving in. He didn't know what was inside any of them, hadn't bothered to check. He didn't have the time, he told himself. In reality, it was too painful.

But now, it looked like fate had forced his hand. As he slipped open the cardboard flaps, a faint cloud of dust kicked up in his face. He coughed, then looked down at…another box. Squat. Mechanical, apparently, judging on the knobs and buttons. And…a record!

Frank's eyes went wide. During his brief stint as a failed Seattle hipster, he had tried to get into vinyl. Then, finding the habit to be too expensive, he quit a week after he began. But this-- this was a vintage phonograph. A Victrola, according to the label on the base. It was old-- possibly valuable. And it could be the solution to his financial problems…

No--

Frank shook his head. It was his grandfather's. He wasn't going to sell it, not unless he got a lot more desperate to make ends meet.

He was…going to play it.

He couldn't say why, but something about the musty old Victrola stirred up a faint memory in him. Music…and Grandpa Gio's croaky old voice. He was surprised at this revelation-- he had thought in the past three months since his grandfather's stroke, he had relived every memory he had of the man. But he was relieved-- though perhaps a little frightened --to find there were more.

He carefully lifted the old phonograph out of the box and set it down on the hardwood floor. The record it was currently playing appeared stuck on the needle, but then there weren't any other records inside the box either. He might as well go with this one.

Then, realizing he hadn't pursued his vinyl habit long enough to know how to play a phonograph, he looked up an online how-to guide. Only to find that most of the steps involved parts that this phonograph didn't possess. It was old, he realized, though how old he had no idea. Still, he floundered through the process, finding cursory similarities between the machine in the guide and the one right in front of him. In a matter of minutes, he was ready to play its music.

For a moment, as he eased the needle onto the record, he felt an odd sensation, as though he was falling. But then it faded into something warm. Familiar. Wherever he had ended up, he was home.

Or rather, in the memory of a late summer night.

Frank and his grandfather were seated in a pair of plastic lawn chairs, tilted at odd angles on the scraggly grass. Both were cradling streaming mugs of hot tea and staring up at the stars. Meanwhile, dark, tinny notes of phonograph music harmonized with the cricket song.

"What's playing?" Frank had asked. He was young enough that the only music he had ever listened to was a mishmash of learn-your-multiplication-tables songs and his grandfather's

favorite crooners. Sinatra. Crosby. Never not something like this-- dark and wild, with leaping notes and crescendos that bared their teeth in the darkness.

His grandfather took a long sip of his tea. His eyes were closed, and he looked for a moment as though he couldn't hear his young grandson above the music. Then, at last, he murmured a reply. "Sergei Rachmaninoff's Isle of the Dead."

He let out a long exhale, and it seemed to the young boy as if he was sagging under the weight of the words. Then, he added, "You'd be surprised, actually, at how long it took me to figure that out."

"What? Why?"

His grandfather laughed, a dry raspy sound that sounded like the rustle of leaves on the trees above them. "You have a lot of questions, don't you Francesco? For someone who hasn't even started the fourth grade."

"Sixth grade." Frank corrected automatically. It was an inside joke between them-- Grandpa Gio would pretend to forget his age, and he would pretend to be annoyed by it. "Anyways, you can't just say something like that and expect me to let it go."

"Fair point." Sergio Arrigoni admitted, then paused as though realizing he had just been out-argued by his twelve-year-old grandson. The beginning of the end. He raised a gnarled finger at the phonograph, humming its tune into the night. "Do you know who this machine belonged to?"

"Your father." The boy replied in a sing-song voice. The word father didn't have much meaning to him-- his parents had died in a car crash with a drunk driver just months after his birth.

"Good memory." His grandfather replied. Frank straightened at the praise. The word 'grandfather', now that was just full of meaning.

"Now, my father-- his name was Nunzio Arrigoni. He worked in phonograph and radio plants most of his life. Had a good ear for music because of it."

"In fact, the earliest memory I have of him is not his face, not his touch. Only his voice." Sergio Arrigoni tipped his head back, his eyes glinting in the darkness as he remembered some ephemeral sound. "He was a soft-spoken man. He rarely sang but, when he did…it was like the world passed away, and some new thing took its place. Everything was softer. Warmer. Like how you would picture heaven."

Frank stared at the worn face of his grandfather, trying to picture heaven. The image he came up with was fairly muddled, but there were a lot of clouds. And ice cream. Frank actually hadn't thought much about the afterlife, nor had he been raised on a steady theological diet of Sunday Mass.

His grandfather had, as he later learned. And he had rejected it. The man was a staunch agnostic, and humanist.

But if there was something that the man believed in, it was music.

"I know you're not going to appreciate this until you're older," he said, at which point Frank leaned in excitedly. That phrase was a sure sign that his grandfather was going to say something interesting. And he understood more, he thought, than his grandfather appreciated.

As though sensing his grandson's eagerness, the older man took another long draught of his tea and waited until the boy was just about bouncing up and down on his seat.

"I know," he began again, "That you may not appreciate this until you're older. But have you been taught yet about evolution?"

Frank nodded. They had covered it briefly in fifth grade life science, with the addendum that they would learn more later. But his teacher had kept a table full of trilobite fossils in the back of his classroom, along with a printout showing their relation to today's horseshoe crabs.

Frank had run his fingers along the rough edges of the indentation, where had once been the trilobite's fragile body, and suddenly felt very small. All these small, flat crab-like creatures had once roamed the earth in droves. Maybe, they had families, societies, civilizations. And now they were gone.

Was that all humans were then? Frank had wondered. Fossils, just waiting to be made part of the Earth's geologic record?

He hugged his arms tight to his chest in a vain attempt to keep from shivering as his grandfather continued.

"There are evolutionary theorists that claim that religion itself came into existence as a tool for survival. Groups brought together by the thought of something greater than themselves lasted longer than those that only worked together out of self-interest." He leaned back in his seat, taking another draught of his now-lukewarm tea. By now, Frank had heard enough of these sorts of talks to know that there would be more coming if he just stayed silent. But he couldn't help himself.

"And what do you think, Grandpa Gio?"

Usually, that was when the older man would laugh, and gently scold the boy before answering his question. But not that night. Instead, he stared into the looming darkness of an early autumn night, as the notes of Rachmaninoff's Isle of the Dead rose and fell.

"I think there's more to it than that. We're creatures built to seek meaning, thrown into a world that often seems meaningless. We need something, if not theology then another kind of tool… philosophy, perhaps. Or music."

He leaned over and took his grandson's small hand into his gnarled one. For a moment, Frank remembered the coarse feel of the trilobite's grave against his skin.

"Though eventually, every note of music fades."

Frank felt a sudden chill as the night pressed in around him. And the silence. All this time he had been so busy listening to his grandfather's words, he hadn't noticed as the last few notes of Rachmaninoff's symphony faded to a close. He didn't know why but he couldn't shake the feeling that he had missed something glorious, something he would never be able to get back.

All of a sudden, Frank felt the weight of a stiff, arthritic hand on his back. He looked up at his grandfather. The man was smiling, and his eyes were bright, glittering like the stars. There was something impossibly sad about them.

"But these are just the ramblings of an old man. You're still young. You have plenty of time to figure out just how wrong I am about all of this. But now, my old bones are starting to feel the cold, and I'm about ready to go inside." He took a last draught of tea and looked at his grandson. "How does that sound?"

The young Frank Arrigoni nodded. He had the sense that his grandfather needed something, but it was something he could not give. All he could do was grasp the man's gnarled old hand tightly and follow him into the warmth of the house.

The older Frank Arrigoni, though-- he knew.

As the last notes of a song by Sergei Rachmaninoff-- for whom his grandfather had been named --began to fade, he knew. What his grandfather had called an old man's ramblings, were the thoughts of a lonely man whose only son had crossed over to the Isle of the Dead. Who was drawing closer and closer to joining him each day. And Frank understood it now because he had the same thoughts himself.

He carefully set the now-silent phonograph back in its box and rose to his feet. The movement was harder than it was when he was a twelve-year-old boy. But then, he was not as young. For a moment, he imagined Nunzio Arrigoni and Grandpa Sergei thinking the same thing. And of thousands and thousands of trilobites, with their own biological signs of age.

Each was a note in a song that would not end with them.

“You were right, Grandpa.” Frank Arrigoni whispered, the words like notes of a song croaking away into the night.

PART III — ERA UNKNOWN.

The sun seared the earth. Its embrace far too warm, far too smothering for anything but patches of coarse grass to last longer than a few seasons. It tickled the woman’s ankles as she ran across the parched earth.

She was lean, her bony arms and legs pared down by the harsh climate. Even her hair had been shaven close to her skull. Though she had worn it long since she was a little girl, the farther south that she journeyed, the more she realized she would have to chop it all off. It trapped far too much heat, and a hat or a cloth wrapped around her head would offer a similar protection from the scorching rays of the sun.

Yet, even with these precautions, travel was challenging.

The woman’s footsteps faltered as the flat ground beneath her began to slant upwards, then turned to asphalt. Such surfaces were dangerously hot-- like stepping onto a frying pan, her father had once told her. Those who used them to travel usually did not last for long.

Instead of crossing the scorching road with her cloth-wrapped feet (a mistake you only made once), she made a sharp right and started to walk alongside it toward a faint, gray mass on the horizon. That was her destination, the Fallen City. The grave of a world long abandoned by all save the implacable sun overhead. And scavengers like her.

As she walked along the asphalt road, she kept one eye on the gray mass in the distance. It seemed to bloat and roil, like the head of an approaching storm. Something icy inched down her spine. Not a drop of sweat. She did not enjoy being here. No one did. It was as though the place

itself was swarming with the ghosts of those that had left, decades ago, when it had at last become too dangerous to remain. And of those who never had the opportunity.

Her father, an old scavenger who had been born just before the Fall, had once made a half-hearted attempt to tell her of those days. It had been only months before his death, and it pained him almost unbearably to walk more than a couple of feet. But still he had asked her to help him out outside, and to share a jug of lukewarm water.

"Compared to now? That time was a paradise," he whispered. His voice was raw and cracked, despite the long draught of water he had taken. "Your generation does not-- cannot -- know what that was like. Most of you are barely even aware that it existed."

"Why?" She had asked, as he passed the jug to her. He shrugged.

"You see anyone else talking about it? No one likes to admit their screw-ups. Even now, I'm almost *glad* you'll never know much about the world we had, because I know you'd never forgive us for losing it. But, even if your age knows nothing, I still see in you traces of that half-forgotten longing, that understanding of what we had and lost. That's why everyone calls me 'Vico' instead of 'Victor.' There are no 'victors' in this brave new world, not when all of humanity is on the losing side. And that's why no one wants to be a scavenger." He licked his lips, drawing the last of the moisture from them. "Well, that and the fact that it's a dangerous job."

It was. It was what caused his death, she later learned. He had entered an old medical facility, searching for bandages and surgical tools-- both of high value to any trader-- and had breathed in some kind of lethal mineral that had seeped in from the walls. And that was hardly the only hazard. Most of the buildings trapped heat, if only because of the materials they were constructed from. Others were structurally unsound. Even the tallest of the skyscrapers would fall to the earth with only seconds' warning.

Her father had called that a “metaphor,” but hadn’t bothered to tell her what that was supposed to mean.

Still, despite the many dangers of the abandoned area, the woman found herself drawn back every time. There was beauty there, if you looked for it-- the sharp gleam of the rain as it clung to the glass surface of a skyscraper, the flaking colors of a sticker plastered to a lamppost, the occasional oddity like the mirrored bean she had seen in a city to the west. On rare occasions, it felt to her as though she was not on earth, but some far-off world. Perhaps, that paradise her father had spoken of.

But today was not one of those days.

It was unusually hot, and there was a hint of moisture in the air that suggested there was, in fact, a storm approaching on the horizon. She knew that she had been down south too long already. She needed to get what she had come for and escape before she, too, joined the ghosts in their empty city.

And so, she forged onward toward a row of buildings-- too small, too far out to be part of the city proper. Most had already been ransacked by other scavengers. But the woman knew that the majority of these scavengers were impatient and would not stay in the city for any longer than they had to. Because of that they would pass over the most valuable goods. The ones that were tucked away, out of sight. Even-- or perhaps especially-- during a fall from paradise, it was human instinct to guard one’s most valued possessions.

Her father had taught her that as well. It had been a couple months after they shared that jug of water, and in that time his condition had had deteriorated so rapidly that he had lost his ability to walk. Propped back against a weathered bedframe, he had motioned for her to lean in close and rasped. “Listen carefully. I am about to die.”

She hadn't argued. There seemed no point to denying what was seconds away from becoming reality.

"Still, before I eat my share of dirt, there's something I have to tell you." he let out a — hacking cough. "My father—you won't remember him; you were too young—he was a good man. Though you could tell this wasn't his world, he always tried to do his best by us. The day after you were born, he sat me down and said to me, 'Victor, I know I'm not long for this earth. But before I go, there's something I'd like to pass along to you, your wife, and your girl. You can't eat it and I can't say how much it's worth to any trader. But it was once my most valued possession. You and your family ever get the chance to travel down south, you can find it in the house painted with these numbers" At this, her father grasped her hand then ran his swollen fingers across it in the shape of characters. This was followed by more directions, first to the Fallen City, then to a particular ward and street. The woman tried her hardest to retain them, yet she was distracted by the her father's ragged breaths, which seemed to grow more and more labored the longer he spoke.

"Now you can imagine just how little I gave a damn about what he was telling me. My father was about to pass away. I had a young daughter to raise. But you know how the older generation could get about their pre-Fall possessions. He was very earnest about the whole thing. In fact, he even told me it was my inheritance."

At this, he coughed out a laugh. "I suppose he meant besides all this." He raised his hand in a trembling motion toward the dust-stained sky, which was just barely visible through their house's cracked windowpane. Then he closed his eyes as if he couldn't bear to see it a moment longer. He did not open them again.

But that was months ago. The woman has had time to mourn and bury her dead. Now she was going to find the object that her father passed on to *her* with his dying breaths. She raked her

eyes over the row of abandoned houses, searching each for the row of characters her father had traced along her palm. Many of them had been weathered to near-featureless shells by decades of wind and rain, and, for one frightening moment, she feared she would not find what she was looking for.

But no—there it was.

It was small. The paint was peeling, and the shingles were falling off in droves. That, she knew, would keep away the more inexperienced excavators who often assumed the outward decay of a house meant it was riskier to enter. It did not. Only the long, slow degradation of a house's internal structure had the ability send it crashing down.

Of course, her father had assured her that this would not happen. Because of a flood that threatened the house decades ago, its owner had bolstered the foundation with a mass pour of concrete. It would hold.

All the same, the woman knew it paid to be careful. And so, she was on her guard as she stepped through a narrow doorframe into what might have once been the house's main hallway. The walls and floor were bare-- clearly someone had got to them before her. If the object had been here, the woman realized, it was now long gone.

She crept down the hallway, then up a flight of stairs, keeping one eye on the worn ceiling above her for any signs of breakage. Perhaps, that's why she saw it. A fraying cord dangling from the faint outline of a trapdoor. It led, she knew from experience, to another room where the old ghosts of this place kept their important things. Their most valued possessions.

She wrapped her fingers around the cord, tugged it, then stepped back as a fragile looking ladder wobbled down from the trapdoor. How…interesting. Climbing it was an obvious risk, but then, it wasn't often that the woman got such a blatant invitation. She tested her weight on the bottom rung. It held. Then, heart in her throat, she scrambled up the ladder into what, so far as

she could tell, was an impossibly small crawl space. The woman could feel her breathing start to quicken. She was not particularly fond of cramped places, even after spending most of the past seven years traversing the Fallen Cities. Although her eyes were not yet accustomed to the darkness, she made a frantic attempt to rearrange her body into a more comfortable position. There was a muffled clang as her elbow slammed against something-- a box? Yes, a box, and with something heavy inside, if the pain in her arm was any indication.

Having little desire to repeat her previous mistake, the woman refrained from touching it until her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She waited, silent, perfectly still, for twenty, maybe thirty excruciating seconds. Then, she, carefully, she raised her head to look around. The room, as she was rapidly coming to realize, was maybe four feet at its longest point, and held no other large containers, save the one she had managed to knock against. Which meant that *that* container had to be it. The 'inheritance' that her father had spoken of. With hands that had begun to shake-- with heat exhaustion? No, the attic was far cooler than the parched world outside-- she opened the flaps of the box. Then resisted the urge to break out into half-panicked laughter.

She had absolutely no idea what she was looking at.

This was not exactly an uncommon experience-- so many of the artifacts of this long-gone age were an enigma to her. Most had ports or insulated cords, like the ones she'd seen attached to tablets carried by wealthier traders. This machine, however, did not-- which in her mind, only heightened the enigma.

It was squat and well-worn-- rather like the house she had found it in. Its base was constructed from some kind of soft wood-- pine, maybe? --stained to look darker. A flat disk sat atop it, pressed haphazardly onto a bent metal needle. And, as she carefully lifted the machine out of its box, she noticed a small label that displayed something that she could not make out, nor would probably understand even if she could. But though the woman could not read, there were

other ways she could learn about this machine. With a moment of observation, she realized that the man who had owned it last had packed it into the box with great care. Layer upon layer of wadded-up newspaper, now faded beyond legibility, filled the inside of the box beneath where the machine had sat.

And so, as a courtesy to the long-dead, she made sure to take equal care in examining it. With the experienced touch of someone who had spent a great deal of her waking life fixing broken or run-down machinery, the woman tested each of the handles and knobs. Most were still in working order, despite the wear and tear of decades. After a couple more minutes of exploration, she decided she was reasonably confident that she knew how the machine worked.

She turned a knob, that sent the flat plastic disk spinning, then carefully placed the thin metal spindle upon a groove in the plastic. There. That should work.

Then she almost fell backward through the trapdoor to the floor ten feet below as a loud croak poured from the machine. Tamping down on the instinctual reaction, the woman forced herself to be still. There was no danger. She had heard of devices like this before—music-making machines—though she had never seen one before in person. They were considered one of the rarer products of the prior age, the exclusive property of water barons and the wealthiest traders. And now her. Thanks to a man that she had never met.

Adrenaline giving way to a feeling of consummate awe, the woman closed her eyes and let herself be drawn in by the music.

Low notes first. She found herself imagining that she was no longer in the attic. No, instead, she was walking along a black asphalt road, flecked with shards of moonlight. The song had taken her to a place in the farthest corners of her own mind. A place that she had never gone, that hinted at horrible things. She should not be here, she thought to herself. And yet she was. For some reason—the same, she suspected, that she had once chosen to become a scavenger—

she had let the song lead her to this barren place where the air was thick with desolation and the sky itself looked as though it could swallow the whole world.

She continued along the asphalt road as it wound across a row of empty plains, then crested a hill. And all of a sudden, she could glimpse the towers of a distant city as they rose up from the earth. It was this city, the Fallen city. She knew it in her bones, as surely as she knew the song in the air and the road beneath her feet.

With each second, the city stretched its metal fingers higher. She watched. She waited.

And finally, she felt something break inside herself as she saw the last glass tower reach out to touch the clouds. How beautiful it was. How horrifying. Who were these people, the Fallen, that they had dared to walk thousands of feet above the earth, so close to the moon and the stars?

She didn't know at that moment whether she hated them—as so many of their children did these days—or if she loved them.

Either way—she realized as the notes of the song roared like a tempest in her ears—she was *one of them*.

The thought caught her off guard. She had to halt her forward march for a moment to regain her clarity of mind. But, before she could take another step, she watched as the towers began to fall. It happened abruptly, the work of decades accomplished within seconds. First, the concrete carapace of each tower began to fracture, then its steel frame collapsed rapidly under its own weight. She could feel the asphalt, too, begin to shatter beneath her feet, but she did not dare move her eyes away from the horizon. She knew, as sure as her own breath, that if she looked away for even a moment, the buildings would be gone completely.

The thought scared her—it scared her more than anything had ever scared her before.

In her short twenty-three years, she had many occasions to contemplate her own death--that was simply part of being a scavenger in a place as rife with danger as the Fallen Cities. But she had not ever thought about the moment in time when even the knowledge of her existence would be scoured from the world. Like the ashes of a long-dead city.

She wrapped her arms around her chest, and decided she was ready to leave this imagined place, to return to the cramped, but utterly mundane attic. Then, all of a sudden, she heard the steady beat of footsteps, like an emergent refrain. She managed, with strength furnished by desperation, to wrest her eyes away from the city in the distance, and back to the pavement that stretched ahead of her in a broken line.

Then, all at once, she could see them.

Human beings-- more than she had ever seen in one place --filling this winding road as far as she could see. Some were old. Some were young. For a moment, she thought she could see her father somewhere in the crowd, walking alongside a man with a grey jumpsuit, and a dreamy smile on his face.

But none of them could see her. Their eyes were trained on the collapsing city in the distance.

The place that all people must eventually go.

No—not just people.

Beneath her feet appeared a flood of creatures—most she had never seen before. There were rodent-like mammals, smaller than the length of her hand, darting between the haunches of two-legged lizards. There were tortoises, each with a spiked tail that lashed back and forth like a mace. And beneath them, a sea of flat, platelike creatures—almost, but not *quite* like crabs—that hastened onward, oblivious, toward their final destination.

She stepped backward. Her heart pounded

in time

with the beat

of the song.

And, in the distance, the last wall of the city crumbled. The air was still. Bare of sky-scraping crescendos. Of notes that sounded like footsteps. Of even the sound of her own breath.

But—carried by some far-off breeze—she could hear the opening notes of another song. Not the one that had led her here. That one had passed into an eternal silence. But another one altogether. And with it came the sight of something new starting to break away from the horizon. She could feel her heart swell to the point of breaking. She longed to hear this bold new song but knew she could not. It was not hers, but belonged to some other age, long after the ashes of her memory were scattered to the wind.

Still, how lovely was it to know that there was a world she would never see—

A world that would exist long after the last notes of her phonograph had faded into the long silence of night.