To A World

Chapter 1

Blood, hair and tofu. These represent the populace, the masses. Why? In all likelihood, no one knew, and those who did were already dust. And yet, here at least, they represented the populace. Would it make her look weird to ask around why? The answer was quite obvious, and she sighed it to herself.

“Has that ever mattered?”

It was then very strange that she still asked herself that question. A long lost habit resurfacing to breathe, a relic of the past I long since drowned. In her thoughts, this was the cause.

It’s cold out here. The night was cold, as was its wind. But that same wind cleared the sky of clouds, so the stars shone bright and many of them twinkled. Tonight too would see their gathering. And when she felt the wind again, it was no longer cold: the breeze flowed coolly past her skin, its whistle echoed melodies of old.

Before her was a long road of a very deep grey colour, almost black. In a straight line it extended far, far away, losing itself into the horizon. It was empty, it was lonely, it was soothing. To its left and right, never-ending fields of golden grains, painted dark bronze by the veil of night. Standing guard over it all was a lone, dimly illuminated wooden house.

She lifted her right hand in front of her, palm up. From it, black dust emerged and began levitating, then swirled onto itself to finally form a small black marble. The marble was cracked, and a piece of it was missing, but it was also excited to be here at last. As it fell in her palm and rolled towards the road, a dim light began shining within it. And just as it was about to fall, her palm closed, and it disappeared. Be patient, little one. There’s something I’d like to do first.

She walked up to the first person she saw, an old man in his rocking chair, rocking back and forth to his own beat in his own terrace. He looked very much like the old men back home. His eyes were lost in the stars, but reluctantly, he turned them earth-wards as she approached.

“…”

She looked very different from anyone he’d ever seen. Too much so. So slightly, he frowned. He waited for the girl to speak. She obliged.

" |-||-||| |--|-||- "

“Hi.”

She waited for a reaction. Judging by his look, the old man was simply stunned. Good, she’d seen worse.

" |-||-||- … "

“I am quite alien to this world. Can you tell me why blood, hair and tofu represent the populace?”

“…”

Silence. He was speechless, and stayed so so long he might have turned into a statue. Then, he laughed. Loudly, heartily, truly, he laughed. This lasted for a good minute or so, and tears came to his eyes as he doubled over and held his stomach.

“Sorry, sorry young lady, but- \*cough\*, \*sniff\*,” here he wiped his tears, “I’ve lived for such a long time, and I never even dared to think that… \*cough\* I mean, how… \*cough\* You’ll excuse this old man, I guess that somewhere in my heart, I’m glad. Very much so. Thank you.”

‘I haven’t done anything,’ is what she would have answered if she were an idiot. She existed. Clearly, that meant something to the old man.

" |-|-||-- |--|---- …”

“So… as to my question?”

“Yes, of course! Sorry, excuse me. Hold on, let me think.”

Could he even think properly, all excited as he was? The answer was yes. It was only a theory of his, but the blood would represent the link between ‘us’ — ‘us’ she took to mean the inhabitants of this planet, though she did wonder whether he was trying to extend this ‘us’ to her. The hair would be for something that all of ‘us’ have, somewhere, and tofu is good food. Food that is good for all. All of ‘us’.

In truth, she did agree that she was part of a general ‘us’, one that encapsulates life. Soul-harbouring life. Regardless, she didn’t inquire on his definition of the word. Oh, and he also said something about shoes. Shoes would be the missing link. So, it should be blood, hair, tofu and shoes. Those represent the populace, the masses. A nice puzzle she could think about in her spare time. God knows she had a lot of that.

Her stay here would still be long, but at least the start was promising. A good omen… Of course not. It meant nothing. But it was a nice start.

“…”

No, it does mean something. Not to us. But it did make his night better. We started off with a smile tonight. And we will make more smiles bloom.

This was a habit she had picked up in her long journey. It was lonely, out in space, so ‘I’ sometimes became ‘we’. However, when she would depart this planet, ‘we’ just might hold its true meaning, and that was the one thing she cautiously looked forward to the most.

The talk they had afterwards was long, but the night would be longer still, for, of the three of them present, it was the youngest. She bid the old man farewell and took the road to who knows where. Apparently, the closest city was a distance away, so she would get to enjoy a little walk under starry skies.

She looked up to see that the stars were sparse. They weren’t few but far between, reflecting the state of the universe. With her gaze turned upwards and her mind turned to bygone nights, she couldn’t help but wonder: how many of these stars are still alive? How many of these lights are just shadows of a dead past?

Night walks were precious to her, however much Time clawed away at their beauty, so she decided to cherish this moment. Her journey was still far from over, and these occasions would grow rarer as the universe grew older, as it withered away. So, she decided to cherish this moment.

Chapter 2

On the road, she met a couple travellers. The interactions weren’t as smooth as with the old man, regardless, they’d left a good impression on her. What a peaceful land.

Lifting her palm, she produced the cracked black marble once more. It was shining more brightly than earlier, but seemed to have mastered its excitement as it softly rolled forward. This exposed its cracks. They were like gigantic faults on a tiny planet, and a full piece was absent, like broken off. She gently closed her palm on it. Would here be the place where it was made complete? She was hoping so. With how life was thriving here, she wanted to allow herself to think it would be so. But she knew just how destructive the weight of expectations could be; so, for now, she simply extinguished that thought, as though it were a candle.

As that candle’s flame vanished, new lights came to replace it. City lights. Riding the blocky buildings that emitted them, myriads of white and yellow dots emerged from the horizon. While she was the one walking towards them, she couldn’t help but think that it looked like a herd of buildings was ever so slowly, ever so shyly coming towards her. Which lead to the following conclusion: *buildings would make for good pets. Like sheep.* She had been influenced by one of the travellers. According to local legends, there was more to certain cities than meets the eye. He hadn’t explained what that meant, yet the idea stayed with her, somehow.

The grain fields had long since given way to vast stretches of grass and trees, and she was pleasantly surprised to find that the city did its best to not disrupt the greenery. Night was finally falling asleep as dawn came to replace it: the morning sun was rising. But even as its rays grew stronger, the city lights didn’t turn off. On the contrary, they seemed to be dead-set on outshining the sun: the street lamps blinked slowly, as though they were breathing in deeply to then light up as much as they could. The houses turned on all the illumination they had, the buildings likewise, and the neon signs on the shops and walls burnt up as much as they could.

That is, until she approached them. Then, they’d act like children who were playing when they should have been asleep, and feigned sleep when someone came around. And as though the entire city became aware of her presence, all the lights turned off one by one, a few lights blinking their surprise beforehand. Another interesting fact was that there was no one on the streets or in the houses. Yet, as she closed her eyes, she could feel life all around her. Curious. She walked up to one of the houses and, knocking at the door, she thought as loudly as she could:

“Is anyone home?”

Though she was desperately hoping that a voice would say “No, no one,” no answer came. She wanted to force a reaction somehow...

For the third time, she lifted her palm, and in it the black marble appeared. It looked around, and its core was shone dimly, yet more brightly than before. Happy with what it saw, it welcomed the warm palm closing on itself. After that, there was a long minute of nothing happening. Then, on the streets behind her, lights began blinking in quick succession, synchronously, starting from the house directly opposite her and continuing along the road signs and other buildings. They were clearly indicating a direction in which to go. They pointed towards the city centre, so deciding to trust them, she headed that way.

While the streets were empty, they were also kept clean and tidy. As strange as this sounded, there was simultaneously no indication that anyone had ever lived here, and signs that everything was always well taken care of. How curious, she thought, with a smile. With a smile, she too emitted light, in a silent symphony with the city.

Chapter 3

‘‘Can we trust you?’’

Those words were unsaid, but the lights, the atmosphere, everything around her screamed them.

‘‘I trust you,’’ she answered in a tongue that this land didn’t know. The lights had led her to a train station, as empty as everything else in this city, and entry was barred only by a small gate she could have easily climbed over. But it was just before the gate that she’d heard the question, so it was just before it that she stopped.

‘‘I trust you, but I don’t want to be the one to decide whether you’ll trust me or not. I want you to do that on your own,’’ she said to the world. These two entities knew nothing of the other, they’d barely met, and yet the girl put blind faith in the lights that guided her. In response the small gate to the station opened. Neither could sense malice in the other, so the city let her walk to the station’s lone train, as it patiently waited for a passenger who had no idea where it would bring her.

It was an old steam locomotive with just one wagon, and as she sat down the whistle blew and the funnel smoked. It went without saying, but there was no one else on the train. Slowly, it departed. She could see parts of the city pass her by from the window while the train accelerated. But the view is pretty limited from here… Too bad. She felt a tiny bit sad for that, she would have liked to see a bit more of this world, whenever she could. Maybe listening to her sighs, a ladder swung down from the ceiling. Looking up, she saw that it led to a hatch. She climbed and pushed it open, and the wind immediately hit her face. It was strong, it was fast, it was fresh.

She found herself on the wagon’s roof. There were guardrails on the sides, the sky was bright blue with just a few stray clouds, to which the locomotive added its own smoke. Not so far in front of them was a fog, a very thick fog that stood like a wall in their way. It looked like a thunderhead that had descended from the heavens, a peaceful giant veiling everything within itself. Around it, the city’s buildings were getting rarer and smaller. They were heading straight for it.

‘‘Do you trust me?’’ whispered the wind, and she nodded.

And the train entered the fog. Now inside, she couldn’t see anything beyond her hands. Everything was hidden behind a cloudy veil, faintly reflecting the white glow of her suit. She could feel that the air had gotten colder, much colder. She brought her own fingers to her face, and their touch was gelid. These lands brought many surprises to her, and she wondered what else they kept in store.

She’d began losing her notions of time and direction, and she did nothing to recover them. How much time has passed since entering? Thirty seconds? Thirty minutes? Which way was the train going? She hadn’t kept track of the turns until now, but she could tell that they’d been going upwards. Then, they were out of the fog. Though their exit was sudden, she did not care to notice that. Her full attention was caught somewhere else. Upon inquiring her clock, she found that only about two hours had passed since sunrise, and about ten minutes since entering the fog. And yet, it was undeniable that she was looking at the night sky.

“Thank you, Mr Locomotive. I like this view, wherever we are.”

Far below them was a quiet sea of clouds, its gentle white waves sailing the slow nocturnal winds. They were riding through the sky, and the train tracks extended endlessly into the night. The night was blue, deep blue. It was a deep blue canvas sprinkled with countless stars, covering this world from horizon to horizon. And, captured at its centre, still like a drawing, there stood legions of hundreds of meteors with blazing yellow tails, following the lead of a bright moon made gigantic by its proximity. She could see its many craters, she could see the streaks of light of the meteors, and for a moment she wondered: a dream? All those stars… she was not looking at a dying universe.

The locomotive’s whistle called her back to the now. They were slowing down. In front of them, there was a train station. A very small train station in the sky that could be reached by a long spiralling stairway, its only connection to the ground. There, waiting on the platform, a small child, a little boy who looked maybe ten years old. He was lost in thoughts.

He was dressed rather strangely, in a way he resembled her a lot: he too was wearing a full space suit, except that his was much less technologically advanced. It looked like the type her people had used at the dawn of space travel, whereas hers was a sleek and streamlined suit with an open skirt-like addition attached to it. Just like her, he wasn’t wearing a helmet. In his case though he kept it at his side, and in his short black hair she could see a golden circlet, a strange accessory for an astronaut. The train stopped and on he hopped. He also used the stairs to climb to the wagon’s roof, and it was there that he finally noticed her.

“Whoa!”

Surprised, he took a step back, tripped and would have fallen on his backside, had she not caught him by the arm. Blue. That was the first thing that caught his attention. While her long hair was white and her face was pale, her irises were blue. Almost fluorescent blue, much lighter and brighter than the night. Her suit was as white as her hair and was traversed with sharp lines of the same hue as her eyes, especially on the open skirt, and she emitted a faint glow. And… behind her… were those… tails? Still confused, he wanted to thank her, but she simply gestured a ‘hi’, then pointed to the sky. For now, she wanted to look at it. He nodded, and with only a whistle to break the silence, the locomotive started up again.

How strange. She hadn’t noticed until now, but even the steam engine didn’t make any noise. For a while, for who knows how long, this voyage continued. In the sky, in the night, in silence.

Chapter 4

The night was still the same when they reached the next station, and the boy lightly tugged at one of her suit’s… tails? Ribbons? Whatever they were, it got her attention, and he indicated the station then the ladder: this was the last stop. She understood and they both got off, leaving the locomotive to circle back to where it began.

In the meantime he’d put on his helmet; it had a reflective visor, so when she looked him in the face she saw herself, as well as the stars and the meteors beyond.

" |-||-||| |--|-||- "

“Hi.”

They were now standing on the station’s only platform. Here too, there was a long, spiralling stairway descending into the clouds. The boy had flinched upon hearing her; other than that, he’d made no reaction.

" |-||--|- |----||- … "

“My name is Union, nice to meet you.”

For another second, he was still. Then, he made for his suit’s left leg pocket. After a slight struggle he managed to open it to pull out a pencil and a notepad. The first pages were full of scribbles and drawings. He began to write something. …I can’t read your alphabets yet? She was about to communicate as much when she saw the writing. She could read it, she could read his writing, and it read: “Hello, I’m Osrel.” At that moment, she felt a tingle in her right palm, and knowing exactly what it meant, she thought to herself: be patient, little one. That decision is not just yours to make.

They were taking the long stairway in the sky, and as Union realized just how quickly they could make their way down, she was ever so slightly saddened. Fortunately, they were stopping every other set of stairs for the little astronaut to write something.

“Do you want me to carry you? Tell me if you’re tired.”

However, Osrel shook his head. By now she’d stopped actually talking; it was just a way to make others understand that the thoughts they felt were hers, and it was unnecessary after that was made clear. It was especially useless here. Osrel was only capable of writing and didn’t know how to speak. As she couldn’t read others’ minds, this made for quite the conversation. Union didn’t get to find out much about him, the little boy was too busy bombarding her with questions: “where did you come from”, “what are those ribbon-tail thingies”, “how do you do that thing with your thoughts”, “what else can you do”, and that was just the first wave of the bombardment. He was scribbling so fast she could barely understand what he wrote. *I guess I’d be very excited too if I were him.* She actually was a bit excited herself, this was the first time in her travels she’d found a person who shared a language with her.

“I come from a faraway planet that was much like this one. These ribbons are an extension of my suit, sections of the skirt that act autonomously or at my will. They’re like other pairs of arms, they can do a lot of stuff, just like me. As for my thoughts… It’s a bit hard to explain, but basically, you know when someone’s so angry you can actually feel their anger? It’s kind of like that, but with a very wide array of emotions and intentions and ideas that I put together. With differing intensities.”

She realized that, of the people she’d met, no one could actually physically feel others’ emotions, however intense —excluding hers. In other words, she didn’t really explain anything. And yet, the little astronaut was nodding vigorously, her answer seemed satisfactory to him.

“Ah, don’t bother to try. It only works because I’m more soul than body.”

Of course, he tried anyway.

“Oh, hold on, you might actually be doing it.”

She could feel his eyes shine back a “Really?!” as he suddenly stopped on the stairs.

“No, I’m messing with you.”

Although she did feel a prickle. Possibly. Maybe. Meanwhile Osrel’s shoulders had dropped, a muffled sigh could be heard from his helmet. Once his disappointment over, she knew the second wave of the bombardment would come, so she took the initiative and asked a question herself.

“How old are you?”

He hadn’t expected this, nevertheless he sat down and thought for a moment. For a very long moment. His feet ached a bit. He wrote something and turned the notepad to her:

“I don’t know.”

“…”

She liked this answer. He looked around. The horizon was gaining an orange tint, the sky was turning a lighter shade of blue.

“You’re tired, aren’t you? Earlier you asked what else I could do, so here’s a question: have you ever wanted to fly?”

Though she couldn’t see it, she knew his eyes had lit up as he looked at her. Union raised her arms as if for a hug and beckoned the little astronaut.

With a hesitant, almost reluctant step, he approached her, and Union picked him up and held him tightly. He could even feel the ribbons lacing themselves around him.

They were still far above the clouds, but the energy from taking off would likely damage the stairs. The handrails weren’t that tall, so she took a few steps up and asked:

“Ready?”

The little helmet nodded on her shoulder.

“Here we go.”

She ran and jumped on the handrails, using them as a platform to propel herself forward. And they began falling.

His heart stopped as they jumped. He closed his eyes. They were falling fast. He felt his organs push up as he went down. This was a mistake. Why did he trust her. He clutched at her hard. He couldn’t breathe. Why did he wear a helmet. He shut his eyes tighter. He was going to die. And then, before he realized it, he breathed. His heart was beating again. Faster than ever, it was beating. He gasped for breath. They weren’t falling any more. He opened his eyes. They were still. Mid-air. He looked up at her face, and in exchange her blue eyes pierced through his visor to meet his, as if she saw through all his emotions. Her eyes were genuinely fluorescent now. The Sun was rising, and they glowed in its light.

“Fluorite. My eyes are made of fluorite, in part.”

She’d read him like a book.

“Let’s fly.”

He felt a sudden burst of energy under him, and they rocketed upwards. Once again he held onto her tightly, but this time he kept his eyes open. He wanted to see what it was like. The stairs were a blur as they flew close to them. His heart beat fast. With their acceleration, it was like something pushed them down as they went up. Then she changed direction and headed towards the Sun. She rotated so that she had her back to the clouds below and his was to the skies above. He felt the wind’s resistance against his suit. He felt his blood run hot in his veins. He felt their speed and the Sun in his eyes. He felt adrenaline coursing through his body. He’d never felt like this before. She changed direction once more. This time, they were going downwards, into the clouds, and they were also approaching the stairs. They dove into the clouds and broke out of them in no time. Below them was a city by the sea. They were unexpectedly close to the ground, but that didn’t seem to surprise Union, and they simply decelerated while still getting closer to the stairway, until finally they reached its base, situated on top of the tallest skyscraper around.

At last, they landed. She was the first to loosen her grip, which reminded him just how tightly he’d held her. He let go too and his feet hit the concrete, then his legs gave in and he nearly fell on his knees. For the second time, Union had caught him.

“This… was probably more exhausting to you than walking all the way down. Sorry.”

But he didn’t think so. Or rather, he loved the flight, and he wanted to tell her as much. That’s when he realized that he had forgotten his notepad and pencil on the stairway.

“Looking for these?”

From behind Union, two ribbons appeared holding both items. Then the ribbons began writing something on the notepad. When they were done, they handed them to him.

“I thought it would be a shame to leave them there. You should relax now,” it read.

The little astronaut hadn’t realized just how tense he’d become. Osrel relaxed, and an incredible wave of fatigue hit him at once. Soon after, he fell asleep.

Chapter 5

His left foot was cold. Why was it suddenly cold? Because it had slipped out of the blanket, so he needed to put it back under. A blanket? Ah, that’s right, he was under a blanket, a warm and fuzzy one… Huh? He opened his eyes and saw a white ceiling. He was lying down on a fancy-looking red couch, a warm blanket on top of him. Slowly, he sat up and looked around. This place looked familiar somehow. They were in a very wide apartment whose exterior walls were made of glass and with a flooring of extremely well-polished wood. In front of his couch was a low table with a tray of tea and biscuits on it. Before it, a sofa, where his spacesuit was neatly put. Close to one of the glass walls, there was a long oval table; sitting at one of its chairs, Union was absent-mindedly holding a thick block of metal in front of her. She wasn’t looking his way, and yet,

“Good afternoon, slept well?”

He nodded and looked around some more. Behind him was a corridor. Next to it, a metal door, probably an elevator.

“You should thank it; it was the one that brought you food.”

What? He didn’t really understand, but he bowed to the elevator anyway. Talking about food, he was hungry. He looked at the tray next to him, and then at Union. She smiled at him and nodded.

“Eat as much as you want, it’s all yours. And if you want more, just press the blue button on the remote.”

There was indeed a remote next to the tray. How convenient. He served himself. The tea was warm, and the biscuits were sweet. He loved them. They tasted nostalgic. Outside, the sky was coloured grey by never-ending swathes of slow-moving clouds, spanning as far as the eye could see, letting through the occasional sun ray. As he ate, questions popped up in his mind. He wanted answers, so he turned towards Union and stared at her until she noticed him, which surprisingly wasn’t right away. She’d closed her eyes and was laying back on her chair. Her left palm rested on the block of metal, her right palm was facing up, and hovering above it, a large white orb was glowing.

“Whoa.”

What was that?

She lazily opened one eye, first looking his way, then gazing at the ceiling. She closed it, and opened her mouth.

“ |-||||||- |--||--| … ”

“After you fell asleep, I took you and entered the building we’d landed on. There is a staircase leading to the roof; that’s how I got here.”

Her face turned to the part of the room beyond the corridor.

“When I entered this room, the elevator door opened, and there was that blanket and that tea tray in it. We’re guests, I guess.”

“Ah!”

That’s why this apartment felt familiar. It was the one under the train station in the sky. He’d been here before. For once, Union directed a questioning glance at him. It seemed she couldn’t fully see through him after all.

“ … |-|--||- |--|---- … ”

“… You know this place, don’t you?”

Never mind.

“|-||-||- |---|-|| … ”

“It’s strange how sometimes I just feel like speaking. You can’t hear me anyway, can you? You’re deaf, after all.”

She really did see through him. She straightened herself.

“Enough about that though. I wasn’t quite done showing you what else I could do earlier,” she raised her right palm, and with it the glowing white orb, “so now that you’re up…”

Then, she slowly lifted her palm-down left hand from the metal block. A deep black orb rose with it. It was… utterly, impossibly black. It looked unnatural against the background, like a hole made into reality itself.

“Deconstruction, reconstruction. You can think of this black orb as a miniature black hole. It’s nowhere near as powerful as a real one, but it ‘converts’ matter into energy with a near 100% rate. Not just matter, anything it captures really. That energy gets stored into this guy,” she put forward the white orb, “initially, the black orb is actually formed inside it, but I can decouple them and change their sizes. Most of the time its energy goes to me, but I can also change it back into any matter, into whatever I want.”

Osrel was too amazed to speak.

“This suit is my body. I’m pretty tough, I was designed to handle inter-galactic travel and exploration. There’s more, but those are the main points.”

He needed some time to be impressed by her abilities, and she provided it. Deconstruction, reconstruction. He wanted to see it in action. She didn’t comply.

“I would like to know more about you, but I have a feeling I will soon. There’s someone I’d like you to meet. It, is the reason why I feel so. It, is also why I travel.”

The black orb collapsed onto itself, disappearing without a trace. The white orb decomposed into beams of light, shooting into her hand. But while she relaxed her left hand, she kept her right palm open. She then got up from the chair and invited him to stand before the glass wall with her. He accepted. They had a great view of the city.

“If the sky were clear, I bet we’d see that moon and those meteors, even in daytime.”

In her open palm, black dust started appearing. First slowly, then gaining momentum, it swirled and rose. As it swirled, it formed a tiny black ball, which eventually became a small black marble. A cracked black marble. For a second, it hovered above Union’s hand, then fell into her palm. It was waking up. At its core was a tiny glow, and it spun around to look at its surroundings. Until it saw Osrel. The glow at its core immediately intensified; it became a small marble of light.

“It’s a child, just like you. And I think it shares many more things with you. Do you want to hold it?”

He… didn’t know. Should he? Hesitantly, he held out a hand. Shyly, the marble lifted itself from Union’s palm and floated into Osrel’s. It was warm. Osrel thought the same thing. And both of them remembered. Not their memories, memories that belonged to the other. Memories of voyaging through space, of seeing a star up-close, memories of looking at the sky and dreaming to be an astronaut, and so much more. It lasted for a second, a second that lasted an eternity.

What… just happened? is what Osrel wanted to ask. The marble was still, lightless. He looked at Union.

“It fell asleep; you two just connected… Don’t worry, it doesn’t mean anything yet. Whether it will or not, that will be up to you both.”

She picked up the marble, and closing her fist on it, it disappeared.

New entry: heaven is made up of ‘big’ and ‘one’. In other words, heaven is the ‘big one’. This planet, or at least this land, has a very interesting way to represent ideas, and she quite liked it.

“Let’s rest until tonight. Then, it’ll be about time we moved on.”

We? Also, to where? As he asked himself where his notepad had gone, Union’s ribbons once again presented it to him, with his pencil. Good, he was tired of having her read him like a book.

“Where are we going, and why am I also going?”

“You’re going because you want to come with me,” touché, “and we’re going to the heart of this city.” She pointed at the glass wall adjacent to them. Outside it, he saw three slides going into the city. He’d seen them from the streets before, but he’d never gone down one.

“And… I will also need you to be with me.”

“Huh?”

Union was looking away when she said that.

“What for?”

“You’ll see.”

Chapter 6

The Moon was incredibly close, as were its meteors. Its place in the sky was unchanging, invariable. It shouldn’t be bright, hidden behind the Earth’s shadow, but it didn’t care. It was bright. This apartment truly did offer superb views, it was a shame that they were leaving it.

“Osrel, can you tell me anything of this Moon and those meteors? And all those stars too.”

Osrel shook his head. They had been there for as long as he could remember.

They’d made preparations to go down one of the slides, and they would depart soon. Osrel was sitting at the table, scribbling something on his notepad, while she stood by the glass wall. She’d had plenty of time to think things through, so had little doubts as to where they needed to go, where she might complete the first part of her mission. Mission completion… She almost wanted to resent the universe for being the way it was. Is it really necessary? For things to come to an end.

An attention-seeking little astronaut pulled at her ribbons. He showed her his notepad, there was a question on it.

“What’s your favourite food?”

*“…”*

… She… didn’t know… actually. It had been so long since she last ate. Her favourite food? She looked far into the past. Probably something *Mom* used to cook. Why the question anyway? She flipped through the notepad’s pages.

“Ahh!”

Osrel closed it, but it was too late.

“|-||-||- ||-|||||…”

“I see, so you’ve been drawing.”

And his drawings made her smile. A soft smile.

“Can I see them?”

He was embarrassed and looked away, but gave her the notepad anyway. On a double page, there were childish drawings of the two of them. On one page, the two were soaring through the sky, and she was carrying him. In the background there was the stairway to the station. On the other page, they were sitting at a table, and he had a bowl of something she couldn’t recognize, while she didn’t have anything. Yet.

“Can I borrow your pencil?”

He nodded. She drew something herself, and then handed him the notepad back. Still embarrassed, he took it. He then took a deep breath to calm himself, and opened it again. Now, he was smiling too. He was too small, so all he could hug was her leg.

Things… were fine the way they were now. As her arm made the slightest movement, he let go and ran away to the corridor. That, too, was fine.

The glass wall functioned like a window: she could open it to access the slides. All three slides were large enough to fit multiple adults simultaneously. Each was fairly horizontal to the ground, though their paths diverged right away. She called out to the shy, hiding astronaut.

“Osrel, we’re going.”

A helmet popped up from behind the couch.

“…Hmm…”

From behind his visor, he glared at the slides. Were they really going to use them? And which one anyway? He hoped she would answer his unasked questions, as usual. However, her attention was to her right palm, where the black marble had appeared. With an enthusiastic light at its core, it looked at each of the slides, then rolled towards the leftmost one. So it was decided, they would take that one.

“Osrel, are you staying here?”

Of course he wasn’t! He got up from behind the couch and walked in her direction. Cautiously.

“Are you… afraid of going down the slides?”

Of course not! He courageously shook his head in response. And stayed still. She sighed, took a knee and opened her arms wide.

“I’ll carry you, let’s go?”

“…”

A few moments later, they were on the slide. Union counted to three, and down they started.

Their ride was mostly uneventful, the only notable thing was that at some point they went into an underground tunnel, something Union seemed to expect. Thus, they were currently deep under the city, inside what was essentially a gigantic earthen dome, something Union hadn’t expected. It was extremely spacious, walking from one end to another might take ten minutes, and the moment they entered it was illuminated by spotlights hanging high on the ceiling. At their opposite extremity there were three doors, as well as a gigantic dark hole in the wall above. Another striking feature: it was completely empty. Osrel thought this place looked familiar, so he began searching his memory for clues.

Union didn’t feel any presence here, so they resumed their way forward. Until she suddenly stopped at the dome’s centre. She took Osrel’s hand and pulled him behind her. Something was coming. After a few seconds, she felt the place rumble, shaking as though in an earthquake. Her open skirt fully decomposed into ribbons, some laced themselves around Osrel, others formed a spear-wall around him. She began thinking up plans to get out of here. Then, a great rectangular block shot out of the dark hole opposite them. Bringing an end to the rumbling, it landed in a great \*boom\* on the ground. It was a building. After it came a giant top hat, only slightly smaller than the building.

“…Huh?”

“Ah!”

Osrel took off his helmet. His eyes were twinkling, and they begged Union to let him go to the intruder.

“*Wha*- are you sure?”

“Hm!”

He nodded excitedly.

“Fine, but I’m going with you.”

Osrel ran, she followed close behind, and then she heard a booming cough. It resounded in the entire dome. Followed by another. It came… from…

It was an apartment building, three stories tall, with sets of large windows on each floor. Except for two long, sturdy-looking emergency ladders on its sides, its exterior was barren. Lights were flickering inside the windows. Another booming cough. All lights turned on. Osrel was undaunted by it all and stood before it with a wide, impatient smile. Union was next to him. An old, powerful voice spoke at last. Of course, it came from the building.

“Who dares enter- oh, Osrel, didn’t see you there, it has been a while!”

Osrel waved at it with both arms.

“Why, aren’t you terribly energetic! I’m glad to see you’re doing fine!”

He nodded and pointed at Union, as if to say it was thanks to her.

“You can hear it?”

“Ohoh? And what have we here? Who are you little missy?”

Osrel shook his head. He didn’t know why, but he could understand what it was saying. I’ll worry about that later. She could vaguely feel a gaze on herself.

" |-||-||| |--|-||- … "

“Hi, I’m Union, nice to meet you.”

Like many before it, the building was stunned. A strange thing to say.

“V-very interesting indeed. And where do you come from and what brings you here, Miss Union?”

" |-||-||- … "

“I’m from a distant planet. I’m here because of this.”

Raising her hand, she produced the black marble, which was very excited to be here. The building fell silent. For an instant, she sensed sadness from it, a solemn sadness.

“I see, then I presume you must advance past these doors. But where are my manners! Let me introduce myself, I am Foo, the guardian of this passage! None go past me who are undeserving!”

Osrel applauded, Union waited to see what was next.

“If you wish to pass, young lady, you will need to best me!”

“|-||--| |--|---- …”

“No I don’t. Let us pass.”

Plus, it seemed to recognize the marble, so why…

“Tut tut! That won’t do! Let us have a duel, show me your worth!”

Using the ladders on its sides like arms, it slowly picked up the top hat, revealing two sabres underneath. And their uncovering took a long time. As it happened, the blades were about the same length as the top hat, which was about the same length as the building. Union saw what was coming from a mile away.

“|-||-||-”

“I refuse.”

To take up the sabres, Foo somehow managed to fit their handles in the last steps of each ladder, and presented one to Union.

“…”

She’d… never had a duel with a building before. When does one come across such opportunities? Not often, that’s for sure. Still, she should focus on her mission.

“I must say, you have very strange clothings, little one.”

Did a building just criticize my sense of fashion?

Yes, a building just criticized her sense of fashion. But cheap provocations won’t change her mind. Then, out of nowhere Foo swung his sabre, slicing the air in front of her.

“Have at it, you albino octopus!”

“…

“|-|||— -|-|-||- …”

“Give me the other sabre. Now.”

Foo was delighted to oblige, meanwhile Osrel went to sit next to the doors.

“Good luck!” his smile beamed.

Chapter 7

Union believed it was disrespectful to hold back against an opponent, but at the same time it wouldn’t be much of a fight if she went all out. In other words, she would do her best within the limits of the match: a sword fight was expected, a sword fight it would be. It would be as fair as she could make it. Still, she had no combat experience with swords, let alone against a building.

“Do you mind if I dash? That should be all I need.”

“You might be underestimating me, missy. A leftie like me! I don’t fight southpaws often!”

A brief pause,

“I’m glad you accepted the challenge of your own volition. Now, let us begin!”

With no other warning, Foo opened with a wide swing to her right. She easily ducked under. Feeling her sabre, she knew right away. Top-heavy. Too long for precise handling. Too cumbersome. Foo swung again. Another easy dodge. She kept her distance. To her disadvantage, but she needed to think. The dome was huge, plenty of space to retreat. She tried staying out of its range, her blade dragging on the ground, but the building was quick. It made small jumps, and now kept its blade forward. It stabbed away as it advanced, she dodged by a hair as she retreated.

Not wanting to be too passive, she raised her sabre and tried to strike Foo’s away. Bad execution. Not enough force from the base, her strike was too weak, ineffective. She nearly earned herself a stab for her troubles. Dammit. Ducking under its blade, she suddenly moved forward, attempting a stab of her own. But Foo was reactive, jumping back immediately. She aborted her next stab when Foo swung at her sabre as it moved back, nearly knocking it out of her hands. Yet, this gave her what she wanted: space. At the tip of her ribbons, small white orbs had been forming. Some had become blazingly white: highly accelerated ionized gas shot out of them; with their thrust, Union dashed backwards. She was now well beyond its reach.

“Oh? Are we running away?”

She firmly planted her sabre’s handle in the ground in front of her, then raised her left fist above her right shoulder and swung at the blade with a powerful back-fist. It shattered at the point of impact, which left Foo completely distraught and Union with a much shorter sabre, albeit a damaged one.

“How dare you…”

“I’ll repair it after I beat you.”

Union picked up the broken-off half, walked close to her opponent’s range then threw it at Foo like a spear. Foo easily deflected it, but she’d broken into a sprint. She had to get close, they both knew that. Foo stabbed, but this time she parried with her own sabre while running forward, her blade sliding against Foo’s.

“Shoot.”

Foo jumped back. She’d expected it. A burst of plasma to dash forward. One more: she thrust herself forward and upwards as Foo landed. Within striking range. Mid-air, she sliced. With how much energy she’d used she landed behind the building, as did a cut-up top hat. Foo had ducked.

“My, how close. I must say, this is getting fun. Let’s take it up a notch!”

It had turned towards her, and all its windows opened. Then, soap bars shot out of them.

“…Huh?”

It fired them at a high rate, she was forced to stay on the move. She tried approaching it by running in an erratic pattern, but Foo simply jumped back. *Tch*, and now it expects my dashes too. Wasn’t this supposed to be a sword fight?

“Hohoho, having trouble, aren’t we?”

How annoying. Pressing its advantage, Foo then moved forward and swung too. Its swings were wide and easy to dodge, but coupled with the soap bars, her trajectory became easy to predict: she became an easier target by the second. Just how many soap bars does it have anyway? The building had her on the ropes. With her options limited, she swung hard at Foo’s sabre as it came to her, intending to create an exit path. However, Foo had counted on exactly such an attempt. Just before his sabre was struck away and Union prepared to dash, it shot a projectile on the ground between them. Because it wasn’t aimed directly at her, Union barely gave it any mind. This cost her. Unlike soap bars, this projectile rebounded on the dirt and hit her straight in the face. It was a hot pepper ball. It exploded on impact. Her instincts kicked in, Union immediately dashed away with immense power, leaving a small crater where she’d been.

“Hah! How did you like that one?”

She wiped the sauce off. That burst had used more energy than the limit she’d set herself per move, denying Foo any chance at a follow-up.

“There are very few things I can’t stand, but hot pepper is one of them. Let’s end this.”

Since she considered her last dash a foul, she kept her eyes closed, and ignoring all her other sensors except for her hearing meant she was fighting based-off sound alone. And touch.

“Very well! Bring it on!”

She ran towards the sound of its voice, as fast as she could. As she heard the soap bars shooting out, she modified her path. They fired at a high, but consistent rate. An irregularity meant a swing of the sabre. Foo was a leftie who opened with its strong side, so based on its previous swings she timed her own to parry to her right side. The strength of the blades’ clash indicated the distance between them. The ground shook: it had jumped back. Now was the time. She made a powerful dash forward while shooting a weaker plasma burst in front to repel projectiles. Then a leftwards dash, and then another to her right towards where she knew it had landed. One more dash upward. She swung. She knew it had ducked. One final powerful dash downwards. She shot straight into Foo’s back, knocking it to the ground in the process. She opened her eyes. She was now sitting cross-legged on the back of the building. As expected, there were no windows on its back. It did slide all the way down that dark hole, and no broken glass or framing came down. Although the front windows did survive an incredible amount of jumps and falls just now. Most of them. Probably… Putting that aside. She lightly smacked Foo with the back of her sabre.

“My win.”

“WOOW!!!”

Osrel had stood up near the door and was applauding so hard her own hands hurt.

“Damn, that was some serious ass-kicking she gave you, old Foo. And to think I came to rescue a damsel in distress.”

A man was sitting on the slide they’d originally come down from. A swordsman.

“Ah!”

Osrel waved at him, he waved back.

Meanwhile, Union jumped down, and Foo raised himself up with its ladders then went to pick up his top hat.

“\*cough\* Ugh, I must say, you’re a bit late in saving this one damsel though. \*cough\* Very well fought, missy.”

“I wouldn’t save you if they paid me for it, old block. That was an impressive show, miss-”

He waited for her to speak.

“|-|-|-|- |--|---| …”

“Union, nice to meet you.”

He raised his eyebrows in surprise, but quickly resumed:

“Miss Union. I’m Ken, likewise. I’m sure we’ll get along just fine, hopefully without having you kick my ass too. There’s lots of people who’re interested in you, you know?”

No, she didn’t. Her expression said so.

“Ah, don’t worry about it, I’m sure you’ve got important things to do down here, I won’t be getting in your way. Just make sure to ask for a place called the Zenith once you’re done, we’ll all have time to talk.”

In the literal blink of an eye, he was standing next to Foo. Interesting.

“Come on, old block, everyone’s dying to hear about the fight. Let’s hurry back up and stop bothering these honest people, right Osrel?”

Osrel tilted his head. He wanted to spend more time with everyone here.

“I’ll repair the sabre, as promised. I’ll bring it once I’m done.”

Ken raised an eyebrow at her; he sure didn’t see any forge nearby, so he turned to Osrel, who simply smiled smugly and made a peace sign, his way of saying “you’ll see”.

“Well, whatever. To the Zenith!”

As he shouted that, a bright circle appeared on the earthen ceiling of the dome, then as its shape became more defined, it descended: it was a glass elevator. A very wide one. Both Ken and Foo hopped on and waved a ‘later’ to Union and Osrel.

Chapter 8

A simultaneously cheerful and sleepy black marble had indicated the leftmost door as the way, and they now found themselves in an endless but well-illuminated tunnel. The walls themselves seemed to emit a faint light, there were no other sources. Osrel had bombarded her with questions about the fight, but once those exhausted, silence reigned. This made him think about subjects he’d let be until this moment, and he let Union know of them through his notebook:

“Why are we here? And what do you need me for?”

But her answer…

“‘Rain’ above a ‘rice paddy’ makes ‘thunder’. An interesting combination, don’t you think?”

What was she talking about? She was showing a side of herself he hadn’t seen yet. At some point she’d decided that she’d had enough of walking, so she was now gliding through the air at his pace. Her back was to the ground, while her eyes absent-mindlessly scanned the passing ceiling. It was as though she were floating on an invisible river, and he sometimes joined in, courtesy of her ribbons.

“Do you remember this place?”

“…”

While the dome looked familiar, this scene felt totally new. So, no.

“I… have been to tunnels like this. And, if this is the same as the others, we’re going to your birthplace. Or rather, you aren’t born yet. We’re going to where you’re being created.”

…What. That… didn’t make any sense at all.

He stopped, as did she. What did she mean. He didn’t understand.

“There’s nothing to understand. You just have to remember.”

But the little astronaut looked at her with tears in his eyes. Oh no. He was still just a small child; she had been too tactless. She’d never really dealt with children before, so she had no idea what to do here. To stop him from crying, she started making weird faces, then made all kinds of manoeuvres in the air, then showed him the deconstruction orb in action, but when he still looked at her incredulously, teary-eyed, all she could think of was to give him a hug and say sorry, and she did just that. And as she embraced him, the little astronaut gave a little laugh. He was crying, but also laughing. It seemed… he was glad. He took up his notepad.

“The faces you made were really funny (^-^)”

Complete with a smiley. As it happened, he was remembering, and somehow it made him realize that it wasn’t a big deal, how he was created, or whether he was being created or whatever. He was, that’s all that mattered. So, he was glad it wasn’t a big deal. In turn, Union too was glad it wasn’t a big deal. She sighed a big sigh and gave him a big hug for good measure. It had been a while since she’d last panicked.

“You gave me a scare there… Don’t let your guard down just yet, there is still a lot to discover, at the end of this tunnel…

“No, on second thought, you should let your guard down. I think it will be more fun that way. Wanna fly?”

And so, they flew for the rest of the tunnel.

The deeper they went, the dimmer the light got. Slowly, they transitioned to complete darkness, one Union’s own light couldn’t penetrate. But this bothered neither. Osrel’s memories came to him like broken pieces of past dreams shyly manifesting themselves. Union was lost in thoughts. Some, she decided to share.

“I’m always nervous in these situations. I never know if my travels were all in vain or not, and it makes me nervous. **They** don’t make it any easier.”

Osrel listened.

“Have you remembered them yet? The ones making you?”

He shook his head. He wanted to hear about them.

“They’re… I call them creators. Did you know? In this universe, nothing is created, nothing is lost, things simply transform. Even on an infinitely small scale, particles aren’t created out of nowhere, sleeping cores are just waiting for other particles with enough energy to hit them awake. So, everything comes from something else that has changed. Everything, except for you. You, are created with nothing. The same goes for the black marble I carry. And ‘they’ are responsible for it… We’ll meet them soon.”

Once again, silence reigned, ushering in time for both to think.

The darkness was growing lighter, the air cooler. A wind began blowing against them. It was strong, and it was growing stronger. It bent her straightforward path. It became a gale. It was strong, and it was growing stronger. It was harder for Union to fly; she was forced to spend more energy. Then, the gale became a windstorm. It was strong, and it was growing stronger, and it blew away the darkness. After that, abruptly, it stopped.

Union slowed to a glide, then she and Osrel put their feet down. First, they took in the scenery. Union knew how creators liked to work: within their own world. They would make their own, it would be disconnected from the outside world, and it would be to their liking, to their imagination. Thus, each of their worlds was different, unique. And also, it was alive.

Here, the sky was vast and pale blue, a gentle kind of blue. It was also close to them, as were its white clouds. Most importantly, it was reflected on the ground. The ground was flat as far as the eye could see, and on it was a thin layer of water. Like water on a salt plain, it mirrored everything above it, especially the pale blue sky. The surface was also mostly empty. There were just two rows of cherry trees in blossom right in front of them, serving as a sort of corridor, leading to a raised wide square. On top of the square: an anvil with a hammer, a table and a bookshelf. To greet them, clouds gathered. A colourful rain fell. The water here was special: it didn’t wet them, and it was warm. They liked this place.

Osrel walked to the first cherry tree to his left. On its bark, a message, written in the same alphabet he wrote to Union:

“Welcome!”

And slightly lower, at his height,

“…Back!”

And Osrel remembered. This was his cradle. He ran to the square, then to the bookshelf. These books had taught him to read and write. This world had. And there used to be someone else here, someone constantly beating the anvil with the hammer. The sound was loud, maddening, he’d hated it. And now that he was here, he wanted to hear it. He reached for the golden circlet in his hair.

“Where… is he?” his eyes asked.

But in response, the rain lost its colour.

This meant… His father was gone. He didn’t get to say goodbye. Union went to him. She indicated the anvil, there were specks of black dust on it.

“It’s his last gift to you, I think.”

He approached it. He put his hand above the anvil, above the dust. And the dust rose. It was only a few specks, but it rose. They floated to his open palm, and in it, they disappeared.

Then, something strange happened. He couldn’t explain it, but he looked at the ground. He saw the drops of rain fall, hit the water. But that wasn’t all. There was something else to it. As they splashed, something strange happened in his head. Sound. He could hear.

“Oh…”

His own voice. Tears came to his eyes. He smiled. Union was by his side. So much happened today. There was so much to take in. It was all so tiring. Very tiring. She smiled,

“|-||-||- |---|-|| …”

“It’s okay, you can sleep.”

Her voice was soothing. With the rain as a lullaby, he fell asleep, dreaming peaceful dreams.

The warm water was his blanket, a soft cloud his pillow. The rain had stopped. He was under a cherry tree; Union was leaning against it, watching over him. A breeze blew pink leaves to the water, and continuously they formed words on its surface.

“Back then, father judged him too young to witness his death. He sent him to the surface, clouded his memories for until someone like you would come and help him unlock them… I’m sure you have a lot of questions.”

“I do. Do you mind my asking them?”

Ripples changed the leaves’ positions.

“No, go ahead.”

She looked around. This place was pretty, but with time, wouldn’t it become monotonous?

“Are you lonely, down here?”

She didn’t know why she asked that. Or rather, she did: she felt like it. A stronger wind blew, taking more petals with it. The petals swirled right in front of her, and some water rose with it. They were drawing a silhouette, and when the water formed pale blue eyes as well as pale blue lines, she recognized whose.

“Is that… me?”

The silhouette answered.

“Technically, I am Osrel’s older sibling, so I wanted to look the part.”

So you… But…

“I’ve only known him for about two days.”

With a smile, the silhouette simply ignored her remark.

“You asked if I was lonely down here. I think you misunderstand the situation.”

It looked to the horizon, for no reason in particular.

“Do you want to hear my story?” it asked. Union nodded.

Another breeze, and the petals flew away. They didn’t go far, falling in waters fairly close by, in a space well clear of any obstacle. There, they sank. In their place, water swirled into a sizeable sphere, to tell its story. The sphere was as tall as a cherry tree, hovering barely above the surface; its water was steadily rotating, and a single petal landed on it. A voice like hers echoed from nowhere in particular.

“When our parents arrived, life on this planet was still incredibly young. You could say this solar system is an extremely late bloomer. But it was promising, very much so. As such, they settled here and made me, deep underground as is the custom.”

The petal went underwater and dissolved into a small pink mist.

“For the first few million years, everything was going fine: creation had begun. Only our father stayed, the others left in search of other planets. Time was pressing, I think. Life was growing, and a couple grains of dust had been created.”

The surface of the sphere had morphed into shapes like continents, with mountain ranges, valleys, and the surrounding oceans. All slowly changed with time.

“But after about ten million years, constant probing of the surrounding space revealed that something was coming. It was huge, it was fast. It was a small rogue moon going at around twenty times the speed of sound, and it would get caught in our orbit. Or rather, this planet’s gravity would deviate its path, straight into itself.”

From far away, a separate sphere of water formed. Union guessed it was about as wide as the tree trunk she leaned on. It shot towards the bigger sphere, but by going straight, it would miss it by a small margin.

“Father estimated its point of impact, and he thought of plans to lessen the damage. But he was alone, he had next to nothing. However, he did have me. Do you know what I am, Union?”

It knew her name too. Union only had vague ideas of what ‘it’ was, so she shook her head. ‘It’ stayed silent, maybe pondering its next words.

“I am… a piece of the world of dreams brought into reality, a physical manifestation of the imagination… More importantly, I am an eggshell.”

“…What does that mean…?”

“It means I’m a world within a world, equally close to dream and reality. A world where a lot of things can happen, things that wouldn’t usually happen. For example, this place we’re in.”

She took a step forward, and again she looked around, this time with slightly different eyes.

“Then what about the moon?”

“Worlds like me are small and made deep underground because we’re extremely disruptive: we supplant the reality we’re born on. And while we live and thrive, what we supplant is paused in time for as long as we’re here. To be precise, the inanimate is paused; we adopt the existing life. Do you see where I’m going with this?

“Father’s idea was simple: I would have to be reborn, but this time, I would be much bigger. And, my birth would have to be timed perfectly: I would have to capture the moon, ideally before it entered our mesosphere.”

On the bigger sphere, the small pink mist returned to its petal form and moved to the surface. For some time, it seemed to be searching for somewhere, below where the moon would enter the mesosphere, she guessed. Then, satisfied with a spot, it stopped and rose high. Now, it waited. The smaller sphere that had been far away was now close. As it approached the planet, its trajectory changed. It was veering towards the planet’s surface, myriads of droplets breaking off. Then, it flew above the petal. In that instant, the petal exploded into a great pink mist, covering part of the water below it, and the entirety of the moon. It had been captured.

After that, the covered water and the moon simply stopped moving relative to the mist. The latter rotated with the planet, as though it always had. Union thought back to what she’d seen the previous night. A moon stopped in time, immobile in the sky. This was why.

“I allowed you to enter my boundaries, Union. You trusted me, so I trusted you. So, you asked whether I was lonely, down here. There’s one last thing I should tell you, then you’ll be able to answer your own question: if it were just me and Osrel, it would be pretty boring. But as I said, we adopt life. Wandering souls who have nowhere to go, I welcome them, we need them. I am just the eggshell, the experiences their presence brings is what allows Osrel to grow up. And hopefully, one day he will have grown enough, and someone comes along with the last element, the element that allows him to be finally born.”

And in her right hand, she felt a tingle. She opened her palm, and black dust appeared on it. It looked very much like the dust that was on the anvil, and soon it became a cracked marble. It shone brightly, but stood quietly.

Meanwhile, the spheres had collapsed. Their water took on a familiar shape: that of a small astronaut. The pink mist had grown very big, enveloping him. Separate drops of water formed a cracked marble, and that imitation went and flew into the astronaut’s hand. As the two touched, their movements froze. The pink mist around them had crystallized. Then, like glass, it cracked and broke. It… died.

“He cannot be born without breaking out of the egg,” this world said.

“Put in a less poetic manner, he is trapped in me, out of necessity. All of this, he will remember in time.”

After a moment, Union spoke.

“… It will be his choice.”

“…?”

“Whether he’ll be born or not. The marble is all for it; it will be his choice.”

The voice stayed silent, perhaps reconsidering a future it didn’t dare to wish for, one where eggs aren’t broken.

“You’re… right. It will be his choice…”, a short pause, “what would you do if he refused?”

“Time doesn’t wait. I would search for another planet.”

“… For how long have you been searching?”

She had to inquire her clock.

“From the last successful search, from my perspective: around twenty-one thousand of this planet’s years. From an external observer’s: an estimated three billion.”

“… I see.”

She went back to the tree where Osrel slept. Both she and this world wanted to take some time to think.

Chapter 9

When he woke up, Osrel felt empty, like all his emotions had been drained from him. His dreams had shown him mainly sweet memories of the past. So why did he wake up feeling empty? He didn’t get up, he had no reason to.

No. He did have a reason to. In fact, he existed for a reason. He didn’t know himself what that reason was, but he did know it existed. And right now, he didn’t care about it. It didn’t matter. He felt empty.

A pink petal fell on his nose. On top of it, another fell. Then another. And another. More were falling, they were becoming a little pink tower. When they started getting a bit tall, he softly blew at them, sending the tower crumbling gently on his face.

“Slept well?”

Union was near the bookshelf, browsing its contents. He sat up, but he couldn’t find the will to get up. She seemed to sense that something was off, because she closed a book she was holding and came to sit next to him.

“What’s wrong?”

He wanted to make an effort to at least tell her, so he looked for his notepad, which he found against the tree.

“I...”

He wasn’t sure what to write. He hesitated, and as though waiting for this chance, the emptiness pounced on him. But he fought back.

“Let’s play.”

Why? At what? He didn’t know. For now, this was the best he could do. Union got up, then helped him up. He doubted she had an idea either, but she was going along with him. He walked around for a bit, his chin in his hand, until another pink petal appeared in front of him. A constant breeze kept it airborne, and under it a small water ball formed. Without a warning, the ball shot at him, hitting him and bursting in his face. It caused him to fall backwards, but Union caught him before he hit the ground.

“Are you okay?”

He was still processing what just happened, but he nodded by reflex. She let out a sigh of relief.

“Good.”

She had made a ball of water herself, as though making a snowball, and with it she proceeded to hit Osrel in the face.

“Huh?!”

With a chuckle, she then ran away. Osrel was outraged at the betrayal. He scooped up some water and found he could roll it into a ball, something he was too angry to be surprised at. He threw it at Union but barely missed, and just as he was making another one, a waterball flew over his head. Behind him, the petals had formed a vague silhouette, and it too was chucking waterballs.

A waterball fight broke out, and after the first few throws Osrel and the silhouette made a coalition to fight Union. However, at some point the silhouette transformed into a titanic dragon of leaves, shooting huge waterballs from its mouth. This led to Union and Osrel working together against it. The battle even became airborne as Union carried Osrel, and the dragon flew to pursue them. In the end they got hit before they could whittle it down, but he didn’t mind it. It was fun. All the while, before he realized it, he was enjoying his newfound sense of hearing.

This would become a bittersweet memory to Osrel. The battle had erased the emptiness, but something much heavier took its place. Deep down, he knew that Union was not meant to stay here, that she would eventually leave. And he knew that he would have to choose between staying here and going with her. His heart, that unknown reason for which he was created, they screamed it to him.

He was now walking in the tunnel with Union, back the way they came. They’d had a long talk before leaving. At best, only allusions had been made to it, but it was clear to him: he would have to choose whether to be born or not, whether to go or stay. Above all, he remembered that this world was an eggshell. And eggshells can break.

When he asked her, Union said that she would leave as soon as he made his decision, either with or without him, but she also told him to take his time thinking, that that decision was far more important than a little more or a little less time on her clock.

This all weighted too much on his mind, so he changed subjects.

“What do you mean you’ll teach me our language?” he wrote.

Union had talked about that back there. She had revealed a tiny bit about herself: like this world, she too had been reborn, “creators made me into what I am now”, basically granting her life in exchange for her mission. That was why she could speak, write and read their language, and now that Osrel could hear, she promised the world to teach him how to speak. Still, he was disappointed to learn that he wouldn’t be able to make his thoughts felt like she did, apparently that had nothing to do with their language.

“If feelings are universal, then this is a way to communicate universally. Our language is limited to us. I’ll also teach you what I can of this land’s tongue.”

Thus, Union taught him pronunciation all the way to the earthen dome. Once there, she stopped to repair Foo’s sabre with a reconstruction orb, then they called the glass elevator the same way Ken did. Their destination: the Zenith.

Osrel had only been to the Zenith a few times in the past. It was mainly a place for grown-ups, so he had no particular interest in it. Union asked him what kind of place it was,

“It’s a huge noisy restaurant,”

was the best he could do. For a time, the elevator travelled through the boring underground, and boredom ushered in angst and doubts on his future. Should he forever stay a child trapped in his bubble? Should he go into the unknown with Union without even knowing why? Actually, doesn’t she know why? If she’s been searching for him, doesn’t she know what his purpose is?

He pulled at a ribbon.

“Hey… What’s my purpose in life…?”

She smiled a sad smile, one that told him that it wasn’t her place to say it.

“If I go with you, will you tell me? Do you know it?”

Then, the monotony of the rocks was broken. To take its place was the sea. They must have been close to the shore. The water was illuminated dark blue by moon rays, and the waves above shone white like tiny auroras, too excited to move as slowly and majestically as their heavenly counterparts. Even dimly lit, the uneven seafloor was luxuriant. It was covered by forests of colourful corals, whose every member was clearly dead-set on being different from its neighbours, as were the fishes swimming in them. Those above the forest weren’t quite as individualistic, they were content being with the huge monochrome clouds that were the schools of fish.

The elevator rose slowly, and as she looked out into the sea, Union spoke.

“|-|--||- |--||-|- …”

“Yes, I do. No, I never will. If you do come with me… What is proposed to you is a fixed purpose in life. A curse, and a blessing. If you do come with me, then you’ll have to discover it for yourself. When you do discover it, you will have to choose again, whether you truly accept it or not.

“In my eyes, it is worth journeying millions of years into empty space for. And I think you would feel the same. So… will you come with me?”

Osrel simply looked at her. She’d invited him to come. He didn’t know what to write. A sweet smile from her.

“Take your time. It’s an important decision.”

The rest of their ride, he spent in silence, in contemplations.

Chapter 10

The elevator surfaced next to a long pier, and as they got off it immediately submerged, probably to its next ride. The sky was clear, and tonight, it was home to two moons. One of them was full and unmoving, a giant slumbering in the sky. The other, travelling the heavens, was crescent, farther, and therefore looked smaller. It had just passed its sister. Under them, at the other end of the pier, there was no beach. Instead, there was a small town. Though it was attached to the city, it seemed to be a city of its own. In the night, it was bright red. With its lights and its torches, its neon signs and its fires, it was bright red. The colour came from the houses and buildings, of all kinds of sizes and shapes, and every last one of them hosted some business: there was a fish market, street food stalls and shops, tea houses and more. At the centre of it all was a great restaurant; about twice as big as the other buildings and crowned with a megalithic clock tower, its signboard read “The Zenith”. Its massive clock shone so bright, it could very well also be a lighthouse.

“Shall we go?”

Osrel didn’t reply, he seemed lost in thoughts. Her ribbons had been carrying his helmet for him, which meant nothing protected his head from a quick chop to call him back to reality.

“Ow.”

“Let’s go?”

“Mm.”

He nodded, then promptly spent the entire walk in his own world. He was inattentive even to sounds that should be new to him. At some point, he clinched his fists, a frown appeared on his face. Was it good for him to think things over so much? She didn’t know, but the idea that tunnel-visioning might be counter-productive here entered her head. As she debated it with herself, she noticed that the streets weren’t quite as empty as she’d come to expect. Quite a few people were around, and not all of them were people. For example, while it didn’t have any customers yet, a ginger cat was patiently manning one of the stalls of the fish market. Neighbouring it were bronze statues of a man and his horse who, bored of waiting, were playing cards with each other. A little way away, a stall was trying to sell its cooking pots to an uninterested wandering lamp, while neon signs on a wall had fun mirroring the passers-by, and entire buildings were moving about. She didn’t particularly stand out here, but she still attracted glances, and Foo’s ridiculously long sabre didn’t help.

They were reaching the Zenith’s doorstep. And then the little astronaut pulled at her ribbons. She looked at him, and as usual he pulled his notepad from his pocket. He wrote something and showed it to her:

“I want to go with you.”

To her, this instant, as he held up the notepad, it lasted an eternity.

“…”

He flipped it back to write some more. He’d begun writing, and then paused. His pencil was above the page, and it didn’t move. Seconds began to pass. It still didn’t move. His hand started trembling. It still didn’t write. Union went to stand next to him, to see what was wrong. She saw that on his page there was one word, and in his heart there was hesitation:

“But”

Alone, it sat in the upper left corner. And still the pencil hovered, not knowing what to write. In moments like these, she’d come to expect his gaze. She expected his eyes to seek her help. But they didn’t. They stayed right on the page. And slowly, the hand moved forward. First, uncertainly. Then, becoming firmer with every stroke.

“But I don’t want to say goodbye. I don’t want this world to end.”

There was bitterness in his expression. His pencil once again hovered above the page. He was trying so hard. It made her smile.

“Then… We can learn to say goodbye.”

Acceptance. That word wasn’t in her database yet. She wondered what characters combined into it, if it existed. Osrel looked up at her, a questioning glance.

“Do you wish to learn it?”

He averted his gaze, he hesitated. He hesitated, but shyly, he nodded. It made her happy.

Union knocked at the massive wooden doors of the restaurant. A short pause, then wearily, they opened themselves. Union’s immediate impression could be summed up in one word: spacious. The inside was an extremely wide dining hall, it could have easily fitted a few houses. The ceiling was also very high, adding to that impression, while the floor was lined with rows and rows of long tables, each reaching from one end of the hall to the other. Osrel’s impression was different: to him, the word ‘empty’ was more appropriate. The few times he’d been here, every last table was chock-full of people. But tonight, there was just a lone swordsman drinking at a nearby table, with his back to them. There was also a counter at the entrance, and it was staffed by a venerable centaur dressed as a bartender, currently busy polishing glasses. He looked at them as they entered, especially at Union, and upon seeing the sabre she was carrying he grinned. He turned towards his only other patron and whistled.

“Sir, the guests of honour have arrived!”

“About damn time.”

The swordsman put his drink down, got up and turned around. It was Ken.

“You sure took your sweet time, I almost thought you’d forgotten.”

A bit unsteady, he walked up to them.

“No, sorry, what am I saying. I don’t know what happened down there. Sorry, I had a drink too many.”

“Please forgive our swordsmaster, he’s been waiting here for… a rather long time,” explained the centaur.

“|-||---| |--|---- …”

“No offence taken. Hi, I’m Union.”

The centaur was nonplussed.

“Wow, it’s just as you said Ken, I can feel her thoughts. \*Ahem\* I am Oroshi, the owner of this place, my pleasure to meet you. And long-time no see, Osrel!”

Osrel smiled and waved at him.

“H-hi!”

He was yet again stunned.

“Osrel, d-did you just… speak?”

“Yes!”

Tears came to his old eyes.

“Does… does that mean… you can hear?”

“Yes!”

Osrel raised his hands in victory. The old centaur couldn’t hold back cries of joy, and as he leapt over the counter he picked up Osrel and raised him as high as he could, and together they spun in circles. An incredulous but also tired Ken was scratching his head at the scene.

“Well I’ll be damned, that’s some wonderful news. Just what happened down there? No, please forget that, it’s none of my business.”

Union smiled proudly throughout all of this, which earned her a “big sister” from Ken. For a short while, the celebrations continued as Oroshi eagerly asked Osrel questions on his newfound sense, and when things died down Ken turned to Union.

“You actually repaired Foo’s sabre, you really must be a magician. Can I see it?”

She handed it to him, and he inspected it with curiosity.

“It’s as though it had never been broken. Yup, you’re definitely a magician.”

“Thanks,” but something else was bothering her, “is this place usually this empty?”

Silence fell. Though they were still looking at the blade, the swordsman’s eyes lost their curiosity. In exchange, they gained solemnity.

“Right… I suppose I should get to that.”

“… Did something happen?”

Whereas Osrel became worried, Oroshi was stern.

“No. Not yet, at least. But we did have a discussion among all ourselves. About our future, and about you.”

He was looking at Union.

“We?”

“We, the inhabitants of this world. Let me answer your next question: we have decided that we want to test you, that we want to see your worth. We challenge you.”

“…”

This only brought about more questions, and he seemed to realize this.

“We… do not know the specifics, but we do know that this world could end at any time, that it will exist only for as long as it takes for Osrel to grow. Every last one of us was told so, before we entered. Foo is a special case. He was chosen to be the guardian of that underground cave, and apparently he was told to guard it until a traveller comes along, with the means of breaking Osrel out of this egg. What those means were remained a mystery. Until you arrived. He told us that you showed him a marble that somehow felt very similar to Osrel, and that he knew right away.”

A pause. A breath.

“Union, you carry with you the fate of our home. I could feel it when I met you, that there was something special about you. In my heart of hearts, I know. I know that your coming marks the end of this place, that you will take Osrel with you. But still, I don’t want to just stand down and watch. If my world is going to end, I want it to be a good ending. I… We have no consolation, we have no solace, so we want to make one. If our home is going to end, we want it to be ended by someone strong, someone special. We have no right to ask this of you, but we challenge you. Please, accept our challenge.”

He got down on his hands and knees. So too, did old Oroshi bow.

“…”

Union kneeled in front of Ken, and brought her hand to his shoulder.

“Please, raise your head. I accept your challenge, of course I do…”

It was nearly noon the next day, Union and Osrel were sitting at the pier. The challenge was simple. At noon, the Zenith’s clock-tower would chime. She had until noon, next day, to escort Osrel to the tallest building in the city; the building under the sky station, the one with three slides. She was remembering yesterday’s scenes. How Ken was grateful to her, how he told her that everyone was preparing, how in the blink of an eye, he disappeared. How Oroshi allowed them to stay in the Zenith, which doubled as a hotel. Also, how Foo’s sabre was forgotten.

“…”

This time, other than the obvious flight, she put no restrictions on herself. In fact, she’d constructed her favourite tool —an alloy staff, and connected her main neural system to her secondary one, which had the side-effect of flooding her mind with a sea of words and characters.

From here, the building was due west. Soon, the clock would chime.

Chapter 11

Osrel raised his eyes to the sky, before looking down at the map again. It was a map of the city and its surroundings. No zone was off-limits. His helmet was sitting next to him. Today, it would stay right here, on the pier. Union got up first. A few moments later, he followed. The streets were empty. It was time.

“Are you ready?”

He nodded. A bell rang throughout the coast. It was noon.

“Let’s go.”

They began running along the shore. The direct way to the building was straight through the city, exactly why they didn’t take it. Their goal: a tall coastal mountain north of the city. From it they would descend to the building. From a street behind them, a single ginger cat emerged. It ran after them.

“A scout. Let’s lose it.”

They dove into a narrow street. Bad move. It led to a big main street; its other exits had been barricaded. This street wasn’t empty. There were makeshift blockades in all directions, every few blocks. They were manned by townsfolk with chains, lassos, grapple guns, slingshots and more. The cat appeared behind them. It hissed. Loudly. Everyone turned their way.

“Dammit.”

Union had underestimated their preparations.

“They’re here!”

Osrel thought of going back, then Union tugged at his hand. The people tried closing in on them, but the barricades hindered them too. She looked at him, and then at the barricade to their right. He nodded. They broke into a run, straight towards it. She led the way, and with a swing of her staff she smashed it open, knocking back the people behind it. They’d create their path.

“They’re getting away!”

Streetlamps in front of them bent forward, barring their path. Same behind them. Their electrified wires covered them. Trees moved to surround them. From the roofs of the houses, men with nets appeared.

“Hold on tight.”

Union grabbed him. He felt a powerful push from under him. For a second, they were airborne. Then, they landed on a rooftop. The two men there were caught off-guard, Union knocked them out. Most rooftops were flat, close to each other. They’d use them. Keeping to the coastline, they jumped from rooftop to rooftop. The few who stood in their way were no match for her. The mountain was still far. At current pace maybe fifteen minutes away. The roofs’ heights were uneven. The jumps were hard on Osrel, despite the ribbons’ support. They became slower as they advanced. They were being tracked from below. And from above. Osrel noticed a bird following them, as he jumped. He didn’t notice the lasso catching his foot mid-air, until he was pulled.

“AH-”

He fell straight into the arms of a young centaur.

“I got him!”

But only for a second. Union thundered down like a meteor. Her gaze was enough to make the centaur release him. He was petrified, and Osrel broke free. They dashed past him. This time they kept to the streets. There were much fewer barricades, patrols were scattered.

“U-Union!”

He pointed at the bird. She nodded. They avoided trees and shade, opting for very narrow streets. She ran as though she knew this city. They were using obscure paths, but still had pursuers. Voices rang behind them. The bird kept track of them. And just before they exited into a wider street, chains shot in the walls in front of them, as did grapples. Their exit was blocked. Voices from behind. They’d been trapped.

“Osrel, again.”

She grabbed him and they were airborne. But they didn’t land on a rooftop. As they were high in the air, someone yelled:

“Now!”

A building below them moved. It swung its ladders. In them were a net, with it, it caught them. Not giving Union time, it threw the net with force into a nearby lake. It counted on her to protect him. And it was right. Union didn’t allow herself and Osrel to fall into the lake. With a plasma burst she redirected them to land hard in the adjacent park. He was a bit stunned but they broke free. They were below the mountain; it was a few streets away.

“Can you continue?”

He nodded. Then small projectiles grazed them. People pursued them from behind. They had to go.

“Catch him!”

Ropes and chains shot from their sides. They were trying to separate them.

“Osrel!”

From nowhere, Ken appeared before him. Just as he moved to grab him, he stopped to parry Union’s staff. Her blow was heavy, knocking him back. Then it was her turn parrying an extremely long sabre.

“Wait at the top!”

On that, Union grabbed Osrel and threw him hard. For a second, he saw her fight Foo as Ken re-appeared behind her, tree roots closed in and buildings and men charged at her. They were becoming smaller. He’d been sent flying. Then his entire back hit something hard, and he was knocked out.

Cold. Everything was cold. He could hear voices, far away. He opened his eyes. He was covered in snow. The voices were far, but they were getting closer. His head hurt. And it was cold.

“…around here!…”

He’d never heard these words, yet he could understand them. Why…? Because… they were inhabitants of this world? Inhabitants. He remembered. Union told him to go to the top. He forced himself up. He was on the mountain. As best he could, he walked.

“Over there! I see him!”

A long way below him were men riding moose. They moved fast. He was close to the top, but the snow was deep.

“Ha! Ha!”

Step by step, he struggled his way forward. His boots sank, the snow was hard, but he moved forward.

“Osrel! Stop!”

They called out to him. He turned. They were close.

“Osrel! Think this through! You aren’t ready yet!”

… But… I did think things through.

“That’s right! Don’t be foolish,” echoed another man, “you’re still too young!”

Too young…?

“Come with us, Osrel! You will have another chance in the future!”

“…”

He knew the truth. No, I won’t. They caught up to him. It was over. He stopped. It was… over? Tears came to his eyes. They were right. He was too young. Too immature. All along he had been completely useless. He hadn’t grown up enough. Even now, as they complimented him for his maturity, he knew. Above all, he wanted someone to save him. He wanted Union to save him. And he hated himself for it. All along, he’d just been dead-weight. And now, he’d failed Union.

“Come on Osrel, let’s go.”

“…”

He didn’t know the words for them, but his feelings were crystal clear. Everyone felt them.

“… I am a failure. And I’ll do my best.”

He was done feeling sorry for himself. Forever. He bent down and picked up snow. Then, he rolled it into a ball and said a single word:

“Sorry.”

As hard as he could, he threw the ball at a moose’s face. It roared and reared, its rider nearly fell off. He took up more snow and did the same thing to the next moose. And again. The men dismounted and ran to him. He made another ball and threw it at them. He wasn’t going without a fight. Another ball. And another. He cried. He shouted. His emotions stormed.

“My future. Come and take it.”

He made one more snowball, and with all his might he threw it. And a giant snowball knocked the men down. It had come from behind him. It had heard its cries. It had seen him fight. With the nearby trees as sources, a titanic dragon of leaves had formed. It shot giant snowballs from its mouth.

He let out a mighty cry, as mighty as he could, and the dragon let out a mighty roar, as mighty as it could.

“!—!!———— !—!—!!——”

“OSREL!!”

From the foot of the mountain, Union appeared. She was furiously dashing her way up. Then, as she passed him, she picked him up and let out a powerful burst from an orb. It created an avalanche, rendering all pursuit impossible. This time, she kept him close to herself. She held him tight.

“It’s not over yet, let’s go!”

She was about to descend from the other side of the mountain, but a teary-eyed Osrel shook his head and pointed at the very top. He didn’t know why, but he wanted to go there. She didn’t question him and did as he wanted.

There, they found something they hadn’t expected to find: there were spiralling staircases going all the way into the clouds. It wasn’t on the map. Synchronous lights on the guardrails told them to make their way up it. Both knew, this effectively marked the end of the challenge. There, Osrel broke down and cried, and Union was by his side to console him.

Chapter 12

They didn’t actually take the train all the way to the station above the target building. At Union’s request, they stopped before it. They alighted and continued on foot. The streets were empty until they got to their destination. It was heavily guarded. Union guessed that everyone who could still fight was there, and it was simply a last-ditch effort to stop them. The building was heavily guarded, but it seemed that the strongest fighters had been those she had wiped out at the park.

Osrel offered himself as bait, and as in their desperation they scrambled to a disorganized chase, these last guardians made for easy pickings for Union. Thus, in a little under two hours since noon, the two of them calmly walked through the main entrance of the building.

Despite her best efforts, Union had caused a boom in the healthcare sector. This was apparent when everyone gathered at the Zenith, as the total volume of bandages, crutches, casts and the likes present in the dining hall was probably industrial. And yet, no one cared one bit for her apologies. As it happened, they were too busy showing off their injuries to one another, telling tales of how they’d crossed blades with a goddess.

Tonight, the Zenith was overwhelmingly full. Tonight, the Zenith was boisterously loud. It was pandemonium. Every last seat was occupied, many had to stand, and all had stories to tell. It was a hubbub of chatters, a chaos of shouts, a tournament of speaking over each other’s voices. Union and Osrel were guests of honour, they sat with Ken, Foo and Oroshi. A horse, a stool and an insect nearby were particularly loud. Then, Osrel was dragged away by the men he’d faced on the mountain, and was promptly showed off to any who would listen about “how much our boy has grown-up!”. Ken himself got caught into a completely drunken conversation with a group of buildings on how they should have fought, while Union participated in a hot pepper eating competition that she kept losing and re-entering.

Another time, while Osrel got into an argument with a chair who didn’t want to be sat on, she’d had discussion with a drunken monk about how, “if hypothetically, one were to land on a completely alien planet, and then completely hypothetically break into a library and memorize the books, then with enough computational power and time one could figure out the languages,” which wasn’t the monk’s favourite topic. He preferred snails. Meanwhile Oroshi was bragging to Foo about how this was where gold coins were minted. Granted, nobody used them, but this was where they were minted.

For a while, the nights at the Zenith were like that. At some point, the kitchen couldn’t keep up with the amount of dishes to wash, so people brought theirs from home. For a while, the nights at the Zenith were like that, until, around two fortnights after the fateful challenge, the Zenith was empty. Everyone was gathered outside it.

The sea breeze was cool. A large bonfire had been made in front of the restaurant. Nobody had bothered to wash the dishes, there was no need to, anymore. On the pier, there were three figures. One emitted a faint white light, the next reflected it with his white suit, and the last was hardly distinguishable from the sea. As it happened, it was a vague silhouette, made out of water. The three were a short distance away from the crowd, but the tranquillity meant that they could be heard, although they spoke an unknown language. It was strange, for everyone to be so relaxed. Such a large gathering usually ended in some sort of riot.

Then, they saw the girl put a marble in the silhouette’s hand. She got up, and walked up to the crowd. There, she bowed deeply.

“Thank you,” she said, “until we meet again.”

On that, she flew up into the sky. The astronaut and the silhouette both got up too. He had his helmet at his side, and went to the crowd, alone. His accent still wasn’t perfect, but that didn’t matter.

“Thank you for everything… Goodbye…”

It was a tearless goodbye, but a sad one. A sad goodbye meant the experiences were precious, and maybe there was love, and maybe there was fun. A sad goodbye is a good goodbye. Everyone smiled at him, and nodded. They were all proud of him. So, the astronaut went back to the silhouette. They talked for a while, and the silhouette kissed him on his forehead. After that, he put on his helmet. After all, he was going to explore new worlds.

The sky was clear tonight, the world had made sure of that. As such, they could see the giant moon, its hundreds of comets, and the millions of stars, all unmoving. Under this sky, the silhouette put the marble into the astronaut’s hand. And then, it was as though time had stopped. The wind fell silent, the waves froze still, the leaves stopped rustling. Above, the clouds stopped moving, and stars ceased twinkling. Cracks appeared on the heavens. As though this entire world had been made of glass, cracks appeared everywhere. They were most ominous on the still moon. Like glass, the moon shattered. It revealed behind it an identical moon, a moving one. It began shooting forward, its surface started glowing fiery red, until in its path, an enormous black sphere of even greater size appeared. The giant orb devoured the rogue moon. Behind it, held by a lone white figure, a blazing white sun shone in the night. The moon’s meteors advanced, and the figure shot laser-like plasma, destroying the biggest ones. The rest flew past, and so it was that this world’s last spectacle was a meteor shower.

Finally, as the cracks grew greater, the crowds’ eyes turned to themselves: their own bodies had a yellow glow.

Union retracted her orbs, taking in unfathomable amounts of energy. The meteors behind her burnt up in the atmosphere, but the lights below her were brighter. Souls were shining, and one by one, as this world collapsed, they shot into the sky, scattering in all directions.

“To a world, goodbye.”

The falling pieces dissolved in the air, erasing all traces of their own existence. The breaking night gave way to a new dawn. It was over. The eggshell had fully disappeared.

She descended onto where they’d been. Needless to say, there was no pier, and no city. But there was no sea either. Instead, there was a grassland. Sleeping peacefully on it, there was one little astronaut. Gently, she woke him up.

“Hello, slept well?”

Her gaze was reflected in the helmet’s visor, but she could sense the curious eyes behind it.

“…Union…” he said.

He looked around himself, and then at her.

“‘Death’ and ‘heart’ combine to form the word ‘forget’,” she helped him get up, “let’s not let this world die in our hearts.”

He nodded. Where would they go now? He looked up.

“Not yet. We have a full planet to explore…”

That’s right… To a new world, hello.