

**BURN  
UNDER  
THE SUN**

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## I. THE WORLDLY EXPECTATIONS, THE BOUNDARIES AND THE BURN FROM THE SUN.

‘What's with this obsession with being a good person? We're always thrown up against these weird standards. I'm no different. I also got conscripted for the army of saviours. I like to think about things. But not all things, some things are meant to be done and not thought about. For many things the thought process has already been done for us, we are simply the consumers... users. It doesn't take intelligence to question those things. I don't like things that order me to think. I live life holistic. Thinking comes naturally. There is no challenge in that. Sometimes I feel like thinking is frowned upon, but I would never use the term mind-control. That term is only used by people who do not dare to think for themselves, and act solely from their heart. It's just not that simple. Some things are meant to be thought about. The heart plays an important factor but a lot of life's challenges will hurt if you take them personally...’

David worships the sun. Not in a kind of religious way, he just really loves it. All love stems from the sun, he thinks.

‘The sun is the giver and destroyer of our universe. It's not like any of us really have anything to do with what goes on beyond our own solar system. People like to look at stars and hope they affect us in some way, or give us fortune, but that's not true.’

The sun is pretty much where it ends for David. It's at least as far as he is willing to go in terms of things we can not physically touch.

‘I believe there is something out there, it's just not up to me to invent what it is. Neither is it up to anyone else to continue on that logic. The people who work on space travel would probably be the first to find out. But until then it's all speculation. We all find a

little bit of comfort in thinking about these things. We can assign the inexplicable to it. Infantile fantastical nonsense.'

'Alright, where are you going with this?' Says a voice, coming from aside. It is Hieronymus. Hieronymus is tired. Tired of David, going off on a tangent. At the edge of a grey big hall they sit on little gymnastic benches. A ballet dancer is rehearsing on the pink floor.

'Is that her?' Hieronymus looks at her. 'Why are we here, David?'

David continues reciting his ideas, seemingly ignoring Hieronymus' question.

'Do you believe in love, Hieronymus?'

'What kind of question is that? Are you in love with her now?' Hieronymus replies.

'In my old house I didn't even have sunlight. Now look at these great big windows. I love to sit here and soak up the rays, it's charging me.' David invited Hieronymus to come look at his latest project, but David is easily distracted.

'Who is she?' Hieronymus asks.

'How have you been, friend?' David asks, but Hieronymus senses there is something incoherent about David's speech.

David looks at the tree outside of his window. 'I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing in eternity. The trees never blossom anymore. Do you remember how green the city used to be?'

The sun has become so strong that the natural cycles have slowed down massively. The trees seem to be edging, but it has been like that for months.

'We'll see it happen again.' Hieronymus replies, hoping to nudge David out of the spiral he is in.

'You know, I've been busy lately. I want to see your reaction to it.' David says. He only wears his sunrobes anymore. He now barely

goes out of his house. He also looks like he has not eaten for months.

‘You seem... weak.’ Hieronymus notices.

‘This is because I only consume what is truly universal... And I'm not weak!’ David lifts a big book from the windowsill and flops it down in front of Hieronymus. Snippets of photographs fall out of the book. ‘Look, that's us.’ David points at a photograph. ‘The old days, huh?’ The two of them stare at the picture for a moment, reminiscing the time they used to work together.

‘Listen, we actually don't have a lot of time.’ Hieronymus quietly but sternly interrupts the moment. “I need to ask for a favour.”

‘So I've been chosen.’ David says laughingly.

‘This is a sensitive topic, David. I must speak to you in private.’ David nods, then looks at the dancer. ‘Come here for a second.’ he gestures at her with his arm. She stops and slowly approaches David at the window. She whispers something in his ear before she takes a short look at Hieronymus and leaves. David turns to Hieronymus again and says ‘That's why I like you... you are important, like me.’ It has been a long time since the two last spoke to each other. They parted ways when Hieronymus was selected to be on the team of the first human inhibitors and operators of the establishment on mars.

‘The flight leaves in four days. But we still need something, something of great value. Something that will keep them faithful. I need to ask for your Cherub statue.’

David prides himself with one of the few items that was imbued with what Christians consider the Lord. Hieronymus' mission is to keep faith alive in the new colony. He believes taking this relic will come with a spirit of sanctity for the operators on mars.

‘So what, you work for the church now? A missionary?’

‘No David, it's not about the church. This is an ancient artefact, the people will need a connection with home, you can't imagine what it's like to never come back to earth. Think about it, we could use your help.’ David enters a deep thinking.

‘So is this your project? A photo collage?’ Hieronymus changes the subject, hoping to keep David from thinking too much about the request.

David laughs. ‘You'd think, but no. The sun takes on many forms, it shapes. It doesn't discriminate, however big or small, we are all children of the sun. You see the dancer? That is my partner. She reminds me very much of the sun. I see light in her. You know what? She wants to be a dancer! So I'm helping her by letting her train here.’

‘Actually the sun does discriminate, for some it comes as a blessing but for others it means drought, overheating. You can't ignore the negative impact it has.’ Hieronymus responds, he is a realist to say the least. Sometimes it is hard for them to agree.

‘Life and death, Hieronymus. You are right, but you don't have to remind me.’ In the meanwhile David considers Hieronymus request. He had hidden the statue for a long time, since there have been many requests for it, even times it was attempted to be stolen.

Mist builds up outside the hall. ‘My dreams have come back. I think it's because of the light.’ David says.

‘Not for long. Soon, the smoke will cover the days. Besides, you're not high up enough to be clear of it.’ Hieronymus returns.

‘I can see it, clear as day. This is how society evolved. The higher up, the clearer skies. I see where you're at. You're jumping ship, abandoning earth. Except you believe you're jumping to a

bigger, more powerful ship. I think both are doomed, but I should stay on earth.'

'You are wrong there, neither ship is bigger or more powerful than the other. As humans we must progress, I am joining the direction outward. This can only be done by few. What we learn will progress all of mankind.'

'A particular select few of mankind. What you say defeats your purpose. You're taking resources that could be used to save lives. I don't think I can gift you the Cherub. It was never meant to leave the earth.'

Hieronymus looks at David indignantly. He stands up from the bench, reaches for his coat and looks at David one last time.

'Justly so. I expected no less, but what is it to not try and be defeated. I have to go now, David.'

## II. UNUSUAL DIMENSIONS THAT WORLDS POSSESS.

It is 5:55 o'clock, David checks his watch. The sun has yet to come up, but a mist of blue grey hue surrounds him. Trees intertwine in the everlasting struggle for sunlight. They are old trees, ones that you would find in a natural forest. But these are planted, carefully gridded. A pathway through the middle leads to a shack. David takes off the big lock and walks in. It looks like the shack has not been visited for a while. On the shelves are some supplies, dry food, a gas tank. David twists open the gas and starts running water. From one of the cupboards he grabs a pot that he fills with water and puts on the stove.

‘Tea.’ he mumbles.

He sits down on the run-down sofa in the otherwise empty shack and starts winding up a lamp that was standing beside the sofa. This place was built by David's father. A little hide-out to escape the stimulations of the city. David wonders what it was really built for, to hide from his mother? They separated when David became a young adult. Bubbling water sets David in motion. He pours the water into a glass and dips in a tea-bag.

After setting down the tea, he walks to the corner of the room. He kneels, and feels around with his hands on the floor. A thick layer of dust attaches to his fingertips. Then, he pulls hard on a little edge in the floor boards. A compartment cracks open underneath the floor. David sets the floor board that was covering this hole aside and reaches in. He extracts a small wooden chest from under layers of cloth and straw. The chest is locked. David takes out the keychain that he used for the front door and picks a rather small key. The key is used to open the chest and David takes out its contents. For a second he looks at the thing, wrapped in



more pieces of cloth, and hesitates to remove the protective layers. Holding the thing, he carefully returns to the sofa.

Following another sip from the tea, he is ready to open the wrapped up item. He starts taking off the cloth like peeling off layers of an onion. A shining gold statue, the size of a vase of flowers appears from under the cloth. Wings curved up and wide over a kneeling figure, a direct attendant to God. David is fascinated with this figure. A mythical combination of human, eagle and lion life-forms. A fantastical object, the Cherub. Its bottom is broken, like it was torn from a bigger piece. David does not touch the statue, but holds it delicately in the cloth. He carefully sets it down beside him on the sofa. Now he takes a big gulp from the tea, and shakes himself up while taking a deep breathe.

The Cherub statue had allegedly travelled with the Israelite Exodus from ancient Egypt. To David just a trophy, as he is no religious man. He was unsure about how he came to possess it. Multiple stories float around in his memories, like a soup. Diluted by the many times he conjured a memory by touching the statue. It brings David into a different reality. Recently he found no use for it anymore, as his life had been good. David hesitantly touches the object for a quick second. But the moment he touches it he feels the power it possesses. He lets go quickly, however, his mind starts running. He thinks about Hieronymus, 'What if... he knows.' David curls up on the couch, Hieronymus pops up in Davids head when he is overwhelmed. Him doing the one thing that David had always dreamed of doing: going into space, being at the very edge of discovery.

The sun is coming up. A low, bright light shines through the crack of the door, creating nearly horizontal rays that shine into the room.

‘Love... is lying... I can't believe it. If he knows, they would use you. For the wrong reasons... they can't use you for their conquest. To colonise. That filthy human habit, conquering. You can never be touched by anyone else.’ David's possessiveness comes to light, as the rays from the cracks of the door reach the sofa. He cringes, knowing that this is what the Cherub does to him the moment he takes his hands off it. The urge to touch it again comes with the hope that the negative cloud he is surrounded by will cease to exist. His eyes are shaking. He does not know who Hieronymus works for but if they seek to utilise the statue on the mission for no good, he does not trust them. David sits up again, takes another deep breath and grabs hold of the statue.

David's anxiety fades away. He is sitting on a porch next to his sister. The air is warm, with a slight breeze and the smell of fir trees. David's sister Ricky is fidgeting with some rocks when David sees a grasshopper moving toward his bedroom. He gets up and runs inside to keep the bug from entering his room. But the bug is too quick, it has already hopped into David's room. It hops into the pile of clothes he has lying next to his bed. David still tries to chase the bug out but it is always two skips ahead of him. From up close the grasshopper is bigger than David thought, this frightens him. He backs off and slides open the door of his room, hoping the grasshopper will leave his room to go out to the backyard.

‘What are you doing, David!’ Ricky screams from outside. She has invented a game with her rocks, and is keen to tell David. ‘Come!’ Ricky invites.

David mutters a giggle and interrupts his staring contest with the grasshopper to run toward the door.

‘I have to tell David.’ He hears a girl's voice say as he leaves his room. A voice that is not his sister's.

‘What is it? What do you need to say?’ Ricky asks, she is protective of her little brother. The girl is in a panic, she holds a small thing in her hands. It moves.

‘Is that a-’

‘It's a baby bird.’ The girl says keenly, ‘She is badly hurt.’

Ricky looks puzzled toward David, but he seems confident, as if he already knew the girl. But he does not.

‘Who are you again? And how do you know my brother's name?’ Ricky asks. She is vigilant around strangers, and feels a responsibility for David.

‘His name is David, and yours is Ricky, but you are known on earth as well as heaven.’ The young girl said.

‘Heaven or earth... Where did you find that?’ Ricky asks.

‘I have to bring it to the blind woman, she will know what to do. How can I do that? What can I do?’ the girl says.

‘Well I don't know any blind woman... David?’ Ricky was baffled by the girl's sudden appearance. David had been quiet during the encounter. Simply observing the girl, as he does. ‘David?’ Ricky grows impatient. David tends to be shy meeting new people.

‘What is your name?’ David asks quietly.

‘Vasa’ the girl replies. The girl had calmed down a bit since David came outside, but Ricky's cautious attitude is keeping her on her toes.

‘And the baby bird?’ David continues to question.

‘I found her in the ditch at home. My mother is not there, the blind woman can help her.’ The little girl says.

‘Who is the blind woman?’

Ricky steps forward and reaches for the bird, but the girl flinches and runs away. Ricky looks at David, once again shocked by the girl's behaviour. ‘David! Let's go after her!’

Ricky and David start the chase, but the girl got a few seconds head start. She passes through gardens of the neighbouring cottages, running quite fast for her age. However, she does not seem to want to lose her pursuers, as she looks back at Ricky and David with a faint smile. Fir cones and branches snap under their feet as they turn around a corner of a big country house. The house had served as a hotel but in recent years had not seen many customers. Now, only the owner lives there anymore.

The girl stops to breathe behind the house, in the big olive tree garden. Ricky and David, who were a few steps behind, now also arrive to catch their breath. 'Do you want to help me? I need your help' The girl says sternly. Ricky looks at David. David strangely feels a responsibility for the bird, and for the girl.

'I know where we can find the blind woman. She looks after the strays. The cats.' David surprises Ricky with the unexpected burst of information. The cats roam around the olive garden. 'But she's not here right now. There lives a man in the house. His name is Costas. We have to ask him. Maybe, he can help us.' Costas, the old man who runs the hotel with the olive garden was also the man who knew most of everyone's business in the small village.

The three of them agree to ask him, and knock on the back door of the mansion. 'Are you sure about this?' Ricky asks David. Something feels not right about the run-down mansion. With Ricky's impeccable fantasy, she thinks of questionable scenarios. After a second knock, the three of them still do not get an answer. 'Maybe...' just as Ricky starts to spill her fantasy, of a ghost inhabiting the house, they hear someone approaching from behind.

'Kaliméra.'

It is Costas. The kids do not understand the old mans language and consequently do not reply. David breaks the silence when he asks Costas about the blind woman. 'No lady here.' Costas does not know her. He does not permit anyone in his garden except guests, and he himself feeds the cats every day before sunrise. 'I feed the cats, every day before sunrise.' And of all the women in the village, none of them are blind. 'There is no blind woman here.'

This confuses David, as he is the one who had seen the lady tend to the kittens.

'Come on David, let's go.' Ricky is still creeped out by the location, and now that Costas confirmed that David has indeed seen a ghost, she wants to leave.

'We should wait. Maybe she will show up again. The bird is dying, we have to save it.' David tries to persuade Ricky, but she does not want to stay.

'You guys can stay, but I won't. I'll be back at home if you want to find me.' Ricky leaves to a condition of fear and impatience.

'I'll stay with you, Vasa. I will help you.'

And so, Vasa and David wait in the olive garden. Together they have been waiting for hours. The sun is low, but the woman has not showed up. The bird is barely moving anymore, as they try to give it water. David dangles a worm he found under an olive tree in front of the bird, but it does not take a bite.

'I'm worried she won't make it.' Vasa says.

'Did you give her a name?' David tries to console her.

'No, I shouldn't. That will only make it harder.'

David has not seen death before, but cares for the small animal. The bird looks awfully close to passing on. 'Maybe it just needs to sleep.' David says, 'I'm sure it won't be long, the blind woman will come here, you'll see!'

The girl starts crying.

‘Don't cry, it will be alright. Don't worry, close your eyes.’ David takes the bird from Vasa's hands. She tears up as she closes her eyes. David slowly lifts the bird up towards the sky. The orange glow of the setting sun suddenly gets brighter, making David squint. Long shadows are cast from the olive trees. David looks directly at the light, his vision gets blurry from having to squint. When all of a sudden the light gets obscured, David opens his eyes again. he hears footsteps as his eyes start to focus. He knows, it's her. He looks directly into her eyes, which are white like pearls. Eyes that look right through him, and through the bird.

‘Are you... we need your help.’ David says with a quivering voice.

Vasa's eyes are still closed, oblivious to the appearance. The blind woman leans forward and grunts. She looks old, like she is on the verge of dying herself, with stringy white hair and a crooked nose. ‘I can help you, dear.’ She says with her scraping voice. ‘Hand me the bird.’ she puts out her hands, partially next to David. He is surprised, but her scary demeanour does not seem to frighten him. His hands have already been lifted, all he needs to do is to lower the bird into the hands of the lady.

‘Look away now, David.’ The woman says. Her voice comforts David. He does not remember telling her his name, but it does not matter. With the bird in her hands, she quietly vanishes into the light. David looks back at Vasa. She is still sitting with her eyes closed. A tear rolls down her cheek. David puts his hand on her shoulder, ‘We saved her, Vasa.’

Slowly she opens her eyes. The bird is gone. ‘What happened, David? What did you do?’

‘She came to help, she took the bird. She saved her.’ David says excitedly, amazed by what had happened. ‘Didn't you see? She was blind, I gave her the bird.’

Vasa has no recollection of what happened, only feeling like she closed her eyes for a couple seconds. ‘So she is... gone?’ David looks phased for a moment. His eyes are on Vasa, but his mind is obviously somewhere else. ‘David!’ No reply, but then Vasa can shake him awake.

‘What did you say?’ He asks.

‘So is she gone?’

‘Yes, the woman is gone.’

‘The bird, silly.’

‘The bird, she took it. It’s better now.’

### III. GOOD MOURNING.

David calmly opens his eyes. His hands are still on the Cherub, he feels as though he just woke up from a dream. But he is drained, like the statue had taken his energy away as fuel, and in return gave him a recollection. Something that he wanted to remember. The shack had warmed up, as the fog cleared and the bright rays of sunlight broke through. Most of the days, the sun has free rein now. Never before was the ozone layer as thin. David has to go home, before the sun gets too high. As much as he loves the sun, it becomes unbearable during the noon hours. This is why he wears a protective layer of clothing over his robes. It is pulled over his body, with a hood to protect the head. Most people wear it, others simply stay inside. David wraps the statue in the layers of cloth before he puts it back in the chest, locks the chest and hides it away in the hole underneath the floorboard. The rest of his tea he throws into the sink and looks a last time into the room, checking if everything looks neat, untouched and not drawing attention to the corner of the room.

With Hieronymus on his mind, David drives home in his electric car. That he might never see him again. He mourns, except this is different than death. The technology is available to stay in touch, but it might be easier to cut the person out completely, to not have to hurt each time with the knowledge that it is impossible to ever see the person again in the flesh, in real life. Can you feel someones presence without touching the same ground, breathing the same air, without smelling the other person? Smell is an important sense that is lost over the endless connections that we make each day. Smell activates our brains and can trigger strong reactions. The feeling of presence too, a certain type of energy. David does not know if he will truly miss Hieronymus, but the



feeling of mournfulness reminds him of his sister, who has moved on. A type of loss that one can never truly recover from, a hole that can never be filled. Something he is truly sad about.

Upon parking his car underneath the tower he lives in, he notices a car speeding away. The windows are tinted, and it is unlike any car he has seen before. Its wheels are hidden, as if it is floating above the ground. He looks on with suspicion, but then leaves his car and takes the elevator up to his apartment.

The cherub has given him something he had putten away for a while. Memories of a time before life took a turn for the worse. Touching the cherub left him with a depressed aftermath, but he was glad to see his sister, and the first time he met the love of his life, Vasa.

When he exits the elevator and walks toward his front door, he notices the door is unlocked and left slightly open. His heartbeat raises. Slowly he pushes the door, holding his breath. He sees is glass shattered around on the pink floor. He walks quietly through the curved ceiling hallway, into the wide open living room. It is dark, as the great big windows are covered by curtains. There are documents torn and thrown around on the floor, cabinets opened and cleared out onto the ground. Violence has come through here. Davids sight becomes hazy. Panicked, he screams.

‘VASA!’

A rumble and a faint voice respond from another room. He rushes through the house, towards the noise to find her. David falls to the ground when he sees her in the bathroom. She looks fragile, as if she had awoken from a deep sleep. ‘David, what's going on?’ Vasa asks. She cries.

‘They came, and took all of it, all of our jewellery. They tied me up, they scared me. What's this all about?’ Vasas arms and face are bruised, her hands tied to the radiator. David quickly grabs

scissors from the vanity and cuts her loose. He already knows, Hieronymus probably sent in his goons to do the dirty work. Although, he would have never thought they would go to such extremes to get hold of the Cherub statue. Leaving Vasa like that, they left a message.

‘Did they touch you?’

David's vision goes black, adrenaline has been shot to the top of his head, he stops thinking but only seeks revenge, but the thought of violence makes him sick. He becomes nauseous as he returns to reality.

‘They threw me to the ground... then tied me up.’

‘And they took all the gold?’

‘They took all the gold.’ Vasa weeps, she does not care much for the gold, but wants to be comforted by David.

‘Be quiet now, it will all be okay.’ David says, possibly underestimating the impact of the trauma Vasa has endured. He hugs her tight, but she recoils.

‘Please, don’t’

As David exhausts, he saddens, he feels powerless. Both of them left speechless, they drag themselves back towards the living room to assess the damages. David calls the police. But he feels as though he failed to protect her, while he was concentrated on the statue. If he could have been there while it happened, the result might have been different. She would not have been alone in that situation, or he could have protected her, had he not been so weak from only consuming water and bread.

#### IV. WHO TOOK MORE THAN THEY GAVE.

David sits right in the middle of an empty cinema room. The screen is dark and the lights are off. The air stands still, it is quiet. He feels observed. An entity, which looks nothing like a human person, looks at him from the stairs on the side of the cinema. David squints, as he can only see a blob-shaped silhouette floating over the ground, blocked out by the light coming from the door of the cinema. It has a metallic shine to it. The entity stares at David for what feels like minutes.

‘Is someone there?’ David looks over his shoulder, but he can not pin point the object, what it is. A tingling in his neck goes down like a wave, into his lower back. He feels warm and starts sweating. David squints, as the light shining from behind the entity grows more intense. The two continue to scan each other, but David has trouble not to look away. At peak exposure, he looks away. He blinks, and starts tearing up. Then, when he looks back up, the entity is gone. Confused, David turns back to the screen. It still shows no picture, but he feels it move closer with every glance he takes.

Suddenly an elderly woman sits down next to him. A mean-looking old woman with stringy white hairs, and her eyes white like pearls. She is the blind woman. David recognises her, but he does not react to her. After turning to him, she takes his hands and closes them, holding them just in front of his chest. Then she simply fades away, like she was never there. David holds his hands where she left them.

The ground starts shaking with an unbearable noise, a drone coming from the depths of the earth. He looks up at the fly system and sees the roof is tearing down. The theater starts slowly collapsing onto David, but he is unable to move from his seat. Glass

shatters over his head. A drowning sensation overcomes him. Paralysed by the dreams power, David can only watch as waves and waves of rubble crash down on him. The theater buries him deep.

‘I’m dizzy, David.’ Vasa scares David awake. He gasps for air. She tells him ‘I’m sick, my head hurts.’ She can not get up.

‘Are you hurt? You might have a concussion.’ David responds, half awake, but with tension in his chest.

‘When the men came, I fell. I think I hurt my head, they pushed me.’ Vasa gets up, ‘I need to... throw up.’ She gets out of bed but does not get far, and faints on the floor.

David's eyes drift out of focus. He has a hard time to stay awake. He feels as though he had travelled a great distance. ‘I had the dream again.’ David tells Vasa. They are driving toward the hospital, surrounded by grey run-down buildings that transition into overcast and forgotten attempts of made-nature that add some hints of forest green. Vasa is barely awake.

‘Do you think it's the afterlife?’ she mutters, having had time to analyse the dream multiple times before. ‘To tell you the truth, I don't know about such things...’ He never remembers the entire dream, but his recollection and understanding of it had evolved. ‘She visited me again.’ David puts his hand on Vasa's knee. Some details of the dream may change on repetition, but it always takes place in the abandoned, collapsing theater. The woman is always there, but the entity has never appeared before.

‘You need to stay awake.’ David says, nudging her knee with his hand. ‘Please, stay awake.’

Vasa nods off, but still manages to stay awake. ‘Tell me... talk to me.’ She says.

‘Okay, I’ll talk to you. I’ll tell you about my dream. There was somebody else this time. Something. A light... something watching

me.' David explains. 'I felt like it was analysing me. I've never felt so observed. As if it saw all my... my lack of...' David pauses for a moment as he stops for a red light. He chokes up. 'My inability to take care of you.' Vasa turns to David, she can see he feels defeated, but this saddens her. She would never judge David's capabilities as a partner, and right now she just wants to get to the hospital. Besides, she does not have to be taken care of by anyone else. 'Dreams can be... a reflection of our subconscious.' Vasa says, 'This feeling you're having, it might just be a deep fear of yours. You're capable of loving me, that's enough, I don't need you to take care of me. You're doing what you can, driving me to the hospital.' They look each other in the eyes, as the light springs to green. 'It's green.' says Vasa, pointing to the light with her eyes.

'Just remember, I don't judge you.' The conversation awakened Vasa, she feels heavy and David's topic triggered an emotional reaction. David focuses back on the road.

The two are silent for a minute.

'And then the blind woman showed up. She just grabbed my hands and closed them. As if she gave me something, but it was nothing.' David continues, 'And then I just remembered the bird. You know, the bird that you saved, and then I made it disappear. But I think it didn't disappear. I think the blind woman took it.'

Vasa sighs, 'I remember. But I never saw the old woman. Do you think she gave it back now? You never told me what really happened to the bird.'

'I told you, it's true. I saw her. She took the bird and left. She told me the bird was safe. But all that she gave back today was two empty hands.'

'Maybe it's just a weird dream, it doesn't always mean something, David. Anyway, it doesn't sound like she is a real person. She only appears in your dreams.'

To which David replies, 'I know her, she's real, she shows up at important moments.'

'Do you still feel scared, when the theatre comes crashing down?' Vasa asks.

'Yes. It takes the air out of my lungs.' David replies. 'It always feels real. It's a slow suffering under the rubble. As if I'm drowning.'

The car comes to a stop. They have arrived at the hospital. 'We're here. Can you walk?' David asks.

## V. FOR THE BEST FRIENDS THAT DO NOT GET ALONG.

'You know that feeling, you spend so much time with somebody but then they just... you just don't want to be around them anymore. And you just think that all that time was spent for nothing. Like the loss overshadows the good times, that just makes it so hard to let them go. You feel like they changed. Or that you've changed. As if change is something that should cause disliking. Of course it all depends, but it also shows how dependent a relationship is, on assumptions or expectations. When truly every day should be a new day, as if you've met the person for the first time every day. Then you will get what you give. Impossible, it seems. What if you try, though. You meet every person with as little expectation as possible, even the persons you have known for a long time. Or with as much expectation, it depends on your frame of mind. Because people are changing before you know it. But knowing someone for a long time, it is hard to let go of that. And sometimes you have to let them go, because it turns into a situation where neither of you are understood. Like you're committed to misunderstanding, and they are too. And being aware of it doesn't make it go away. That's hard work. That's why letting go is the easier choice. However it hurts. And the pain will just be back with every interaction you have. But compare that to the amount of work you'd have to go through, and it may seem like the best option. Nothing is permanent, even breaks. You can easily take people for granted, except when they are gone. When they are gone, that's forever. And they can never be replaced.'

Vasa is laying on a hospital bed with David beside her. Sounds of people and machinery surround them. She is covered with a blanket. She can not move her head, as she was put in a brace. They speak.

'You haven't seen Hieronymus in years, it's no wonder you are feeling these things right now.' says Vasa to David. "And he came out of the blue, what did he come for anyway?"

'He's going to mars. He asked me for a favour. But I couldn't, I just couldn't.' David says.

'To mars?' She asks confounded.

'Yes, mars. He's leaving forever.'

'Mars... Well, what could he possibly want. The man should have everything he needs.' She does not seem impressed by the fact that he will go to mars.

'It's nothing, he wanted... I should talk to him.' David looks down as he speaks.

'You can tell me. It's okay.'

David sighs 'He just wanted to say goodbye.' David has kept the statue hidden from anyone he ever interacted with, but he could not bare to get rid of it. The only one he ever told about it is Hieronymus, and now he wants it. The statue has been his safety and his escape. He never shared that with anyone, and would not start sharing it now. Even with his partner, he feels it too dangerous to share, he would rather things stay like they are.

In disbelief, Vasa asks, 'Where were you, David? Where were you when it happened?'

David stares at her. He suddenly gets the urge to stand up and leave. He does not want to lie to her, but is left with no choice. Afraid that she might also lust for the statue. He says 'I went to check our old cabin. Planning to do work on it.'

David's alibi surprises her. 'You don't have to tell me now, but I'd like to know. How can it be that this happens just a day after you've been visited?'

'A coincidence.' David replies.





## VI. SUSPICION.

‘A coincidence... I don’t believe it. What does he want with the Cherub?’ David mumbles as he rummages through his cabinet. ‘The book, the book. Where did I put it.’ The scrapbook he showed Hieronymus is gone. There were pictures of them together.

‘The window.’ He realises the book was left on the windowsill after showing it to Hieronymus. He opens the book and starts scanning the photos. At first he does not find much, except the feeling of nostalgia. He browses furiously. The book contains memorabilia from their shared past, together with ones with Vasa. He stops for a moment when he realises he spotted something. A photograph which he remembers taking, of them celebrating Hieronymus’ new job. The job that would have led to him leading the expedition to mars. David remembers the company. ‘T... S... A. Tabernacle.’ David thinks. ‘Tabernacle Space Agency. That’s it.’

His phone rings, it is Vasa. David looks at his phone, but does not answer. He left her in the hospital as she had to spend the night there. He told her he would pick up his things to sleep over in the hospital. He waits for the call to go to voicemail and puts his phone back down. For a moment he realises he is at a turning point. If he truly suspects Hieronymus, he must find prove that he did it. Although the cherub is still in Davids possession, hurting his partner is a line that should not be crossed. He grabs his phone again and types *Tabernacle Space Agency* into the search bar. An address pops up, not far out of the city. He scrolls down and sees more. Recent news articles about the company describing their efforts to evict local tenants to build a new headquarter campus. Thousands of people lost their home to the multi-billion dollar company.

‘The greater good.’ David thinks. With some bitterness he looks closer at the picture with Hieronymus. ‘How could he have done this?’ David thinks to himself. Davids assumption that his old friend Hieronymus now resorted to violence confuses David. But he is convinced it was Hieronymus. David thinks of a plan. The Cherub must first be secured and in Davids possession. ‘Suppose they followed me.’ Davids thought process continues. ‘They know where it is.’ This realisation makes him stand up in an instant. Frantically he gathers his keys and runs toward the door.

‘Having friends come so close to you that they... they know everything about you. Just so they can reflect all of your insecurities onto you. Aware of the fact I need the Cherub to live. I need to remember.’ Once again, David is on his way to his shack. As the sun goes down, he drives his car through the empty streets surrounded by a vast complex of buildings. His shack is in a unique spot. A hidden oasis that can only be reached if you know the exact location. Not far out of the city, beside a parking lot in a residence area, David turns onto a winding dirt road. David checks for signs of intrusion. There would have to be four car tracks if anyone had intruded on these grounds, including two of his own. To Davids content, he does not spot any extra tracks. Still, he continues down the road. “No way in hell, will he get his hands on you. He’d like to.” David scowls, and speeds along the dirt road through a forest of mostly dead trees. The sky turns into a gradient of pink, orange and dark blue. On the dark side of the sky, a light pollution yellow signals the whereabouts of the city. David wandered these woods regularly back in the day. Slowly, Davids head tilts forward and his eyes upward. Entranced, he accelerates when he spots the trees he himself had planted around the shack.

When he finally arrives, he can feel it. The Cherub is still there. David experiences a big wave of relief. He rushes out of his

car and into the shack. After having opened the lock of the door he jumps in. But his robe gets caught on the corner of the door, and he trips. David falls on his hands and knees into the room. He is extraordinarily fragile. With heavy grunts he is able to crawl to the corner where the Cherub is hidden. In a single motion, he opens the hatch and grabs the statue. He presses the wrapped up Cherub tightly against his chest, almost crying from relief. 'My love.' He says. 'I thought you were...' David's love for the object mirrors that of a harmful relationship. A one-sided affection, an addiction. What would be better for David to let go, he can not. A future without the Cherub is an unimaginable future. Gently he undresses the Cherub and lays it on the ground. He hovers with his hands over the golden wings, careful to not touch it.

'I just need to know...' David starts crying. 'Why would he try to steal you from me. He knows how much you mean to me.' David speaks to the object, 'I don't trust him. I need to stand there. I need to look him in the eye. And I need to know that it's him.'

## VII. LAST DAY ON EARTH.

‘What the hell, David? I thought you were coming back to the hospital. But you just... you didn’t pick up the phone, are you ignoring me? Whatever you’re doing, you shouldn’t leave me here. I hope you’re coming to pick me up.’

David listens to Vasas voice-memo. His back is stiff from sleeping on the floor of the shack. The Cherub lies beside him. His eyes are dim and heavy as if under a warm weighted blanket, desperate for the Cherubs touch. His body is weak, and his mind inactive. He crawls up onto his buttocks. The shack has heated up, as he slept long past sunrise. He checks the angle of the sun, it must be past noon. Too hot to go outside unprotected, but he must make it to his car. He takes the Cherub and makes his way outside to his car. The sun glares down on him with pain. He shelters by holding his robe up above him. Although the sun penetrates his protective layers, he is able to reach his car. With the Cherub on the passenger seat, he drives off. The tinted windows of the car make it the safest way of traveling.

When David arrives back in the city, a thick mist has set in. Because of it, he slows down. ‘Just four more days, until they leave.’ David thinks. ‘I have to find Hieronymus.’ He types the coordinates to the TSA Campus he found on the navigator. He is not far away, and decides to continue his quest. ‘You’ll have to sit tight. I might have to put you in the trunk.’ David says. Secretly following Hieronymus around, by all means he must not make Hieronymus aware of the Cherub in the car. ‘I’m going to find out, my dear.’ Davids eyes are red from exhaustion, but alert. He drives slow through the thick mist. The indicator on Davids navigation steadily advances. ‘Tomorrow, Hieronymus will leave. I have to find him. In fact, did he say...’ David suddenly realises that Hieronymus said the

mission would start on the fourth day after his visit. Which is today. Wanting to get to Hieronymus would have been impossible anyway, as the astronauts are under strict supervision the days before the launch. But David is stubborn, and desperate. He puts his foot to the gas and starts accelerating. His hands clench around the steering wheel. Even though he can see no further than twenty meters, he starts to speed excessively. He looks to his side, the Cherub has come loose from its wrap, and threatens to slide out of the seatbelt. David hastily tries to save it from falling down. He grabs the cloth that the Cherub escaped from to stop it from falling further, but inadvertently touches the skin of the Cherub. For a second, he loses his concentration on the road. He swerves but keeps the car on the road. Once again he fumbles the Cherub back into the carseat. Although now, the protective cloth has completely come off. He fails to steer clear of touching the golden skin. He is even tempted by it. Wanting to touch the enticing object. The object that makes his dreams a reality. Although for a short duration, the dreams feel like another life lived. He looks back at the road, still misty, but somehow he managed to stay on the course toward Hieronymus.

At this moment, David turns to the Cherub one last time. It glows. 'Are you...' David mutters. He is now completely entranced by the Cherub. A musical hum plays, even though David prefers to ride with no music. A musical hum, like the one in his dream, but a delightful one. Not so much a sinister one. David touches it.

A bird appears next to the car. It flies along as David still speeds down the streets. As if guided by a God, David lets go of the steering wheel. He realises that he will not make it to Hieronymus. In stead, he now places the Cherub in his lap, and hugs it. He closes his eyes. When he opens his eyes and looks down, he discovers his body to be vanished. He sees the bird, fully grown. It

flies away into the thick mist. The car too, has vanished. In the distance, where the bird had disappeared, a figure draws near. It is not moving, as if David is still moving towards it. The identity of the figure becomes clear as David sees her stringy white hairs. She is sitting on a barrel, and holds a staff and a broom in both her hands. It is the blind woman, but David does not feel comforted by the appearance. Unlike before, her eyes are pitch black. She turns toward David.

‘You shouldn’t have come, David.’ She says. ‘It’s too late.’ David floats around the woman. ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay.’ She continues. ‘Eye for an eye, burn for a burn. In your anger, you lost touch with the one you love. For she lies waiting, while you are on your mission. An unfortunate and foolish mission. You have already what you seek. You have a choice, David.’ The Cherub appears next to the woman. ‘Or the girl.’ The woman says.

‘Choose now.’

The mist clears, and is replaced by darkness. ‘So you’ve already made your choice. Go ahead now, David. You too, shall burn.’