

*To my father, who passed on the flame.  
To my son, may he keep it burning.*



*"Human teleportation isn't going to happen tomorrow, or next year, or, barring some miraculous breakthrough, in the next twenty years. It may never happen. But this needn't stop us from thinking about the consequences if it ever does become possible. If nothing else, such speculation can shed interesting light on what it means to be a human being" -David Darling*

## PART ONE

# alpha

*“Do what is right, though the world may perish.” —Roman maxim*

The ample stretch of coarse-textured paper lay pristine white before a hand holding a fountain pen, about to soil it with its troubles. A short, stout man occupying a well-oversized mahogany desk appeared deep in thought, almost as if meditating with an open stare over the hitherto blank paper. After a very long pause, it was finally time to write it all down. The hand started slowly, hesitantly. Towards the top left corner of the page, it traced with over-accentuated curves typical of the first few words of a handwritten letter:

My Dear Son,

The man paused a bit more, this time to savor the delicious curves of the header he just drew. The D, the S, and the perfectly oval o. Already, he was lost for words. Writing to a future persona was a daring act, as challenging and audacious as inventing a time machine. And it should be so because it *was* is in effect an attempt to cheat the barriers of time. Landing on a new line, this time a little below and by the left margin, he started again:

You are all that survives me, the embodiment of my hopes, dreams, and of my yearning for a second chance at life. You are the center of my life, the apex, the august personage, and the ...

A few attempts later, he stopped himself, quickly realizing the futility of using words to explain what a son is to a father.

You are at once the fruit and the pillar of my entire existence.

To put it concisely, he thought. It was a truthful statement, but one that didn't carry in itself the valor of the sentiment behind it, more like a confession than an explanation. Perhaps it was a sentiment not conveyable in words, yet one can only hope it would eventually become understood, once the recipient gets to experience it first hand, in due time. Again as always, the culprit was time, our primordial captor.

Yet for all that you are to me, you and I are now, and forever will be out of sync. For as I write this letter you are not your adult self just yet. And by the time you come to being, I will no longer be existent. Even if I were to remain alive, I wouldn't be my current self anymore. Time will have molded me into someone else altogether. And so the story goes, of two soul mates forever kept apart by the merciless hold of nature, and time.

He was interrupted by the pecking sound of a tiny blue bird by the window that extends almost the entire length of the wall to his left. Since it overlooked a garden, birds had grown accustomed to landing by that window from time to time. It was a welcome distraction, albeit a short one. The bird pecked twice, then once, then disappeared almost as suddenly as it had appeared into his view. With the bird gone, he swiftly pulled his attention back to important business.

Son, for one who had lived in darkness for most of their life, darkness will have become the expected norm. Over the decades, the eyes will have adjusted to it. And so when the light of day finally shines on, it would feel incredibly uncomfortable, intense, and unwelcome. It might even feel like torture. One might feel every inclination to recoil back to the comfort of the dark familiar. Yet one must resist the urge. Cower away too soon, and you will have missed your chance to break away from your petty life in darkness. Yet if you were to endure, just for a bit longer, the suffering would subside, and you would finally get to feel what it is like to be immersed in the colorful shades of day.

As he sprinkled bit after bit of distilled wisdom onto paper, the fingers of his right hand traced the contours of an object lying on the desktop in front of him, barely within reach. It was apparently a technological device, large and bulky enough to require two hands to hold. It looked heavy, encased entirely in a matte black metal of some sort. There were no contraptions visible on or around it, except for one little circular red push button in the center of one of its sides. His index finger slowly traced circles around the edges of the trigger,

careful not to touch it forcefully enough to press it. The left hand continued to journey the fountain pen around the surface of the letter, unbothered with any of that as if wholly detached from the man controlling it.

I am writing you this in the hope that you may decide to keep your sleeves rolled, and push uphill with all your strength, even against all odds, and in the face of certain defeat. Always keep in mind, you don't do it to taste the pleasure of success - this you may never get. You do it because it is right. You do it for me. And above all, you do it for your own inner child.

Having written that last part down without much thought, he felt that he had unintentionally stumbled upon the true essence of his message. Not knowing how best to articulate on that, he let out the first thing that came to mind:

Son, don't you ever dare to disappoint your inner child.

That was truly from the heart. A message worthy of being the traveler on the world's first time machine. He fought back tears as he paused for a long time contemplating what comes next. It was time to say goodbye. Hoping for a distraction, maybe a bird by the window, or a ding on his pocket device, nothing materialized.

Your father is immensely proud of you, but his strength is failing him, and having gifted you to the world, he barely has enough energy left for one last act of defiance...

Is that what it was? Defiance? History will have its final word, to be sure. He wondered for a moment what the corrector might write in the final report. But he decided it didn't matter.

With all my love,  
Abas

With a final stroke towards the bottom right corner of the page, he absentmindedly penned one last line:

January 3rd, 154

Having written it down, he couldn't help but contemplate the subtle irony of a date in the context of what he was about to do. January 3rd? For him, there would be no January 4th. Not ever. As far as he was concerned, the rest of January did not and would never exist.

The short, balding man put the fountain pen down on the giant mahogany desk. He then lifted the paper, careful not to damage it with his thick hands, and placed it on top of a pile of books on the desk. The books looked like they had no business sharing the same stack. Some seemed old and some new. Some very skinny and some enormous. Some were paperbound, and some were in elaborate fine leather bindings... There were even a couple of magazines and a few single sheets of paper in there. Having leaned forward as he placed the letter since the pile was out of reach sitting down, the man then sat back down and reached into his left pocket for his device. It was standard issue, shiny metallic, as thin as a banana peel yet sturdy like a rock. The front of it was a screen, and on the back there was a red push button, just like the one on the bulky metallic object on the desk. Glancing on the paper one last time as if to say goodbye, he pushed the button on his pocket device, which caused the letter and all the books piled under it to immediately and quietly vanish into thin air. Not the least bit surprised by what just happened, he dismissed the device back into his pocket in a routine gesture and reclined back for a moment.

When the moment was over, he fixed his sight on the bulky object on the desk. It was time for it to fulfill its purpose. He snatched it firmly with both hands the way one would with an expectedly heavy object, and placed it in his lap. Still seated, he ran his fingers on the rough surface of its black metallic encasing. There were no imperfections of any kind, which was quite surprising considering the dubious nature of the shop where he had acquired it. This device, he thought, must be bulky because it stores energy. And this energy was about to launch him onto one last glorious adventure. All he had to do was push the button. He felt his heart racing the way it always did whenever he neared a nonreversible decision in life. It was a welcome feeling. He had grown to embrace it, to enjoy it even. He let it linger for a moment longer while the index of his left hand traced the contours of the red button. Then he took a deep breath, shut his eyes firmly, and squeezed.

Immediately, everything changed. The man felt the object in his lap disappear. The tactile sensation of a seat underneath him also abruptly vanished. Every single sensory of his body felt saturated with contrast. The ambient sound in his ears, the temperature on his skin, the pressure on his eardrums, the lightness of air in his lungs, his hair follicles, even the eyeballs behind his tightly shut eyelids felt a sharp contrast in surroundings from the previous instant to this very next. Amazing how a push of a button can change literally everything about the present moment, not to mention the unfolding of the future. It would have been a fully immersive sensory experience had it not been so short-lived, almost immediately overtaken by the abrupt pull of gravity, working on him instantaneously, sending him from rest into a blistering-fast downward plunge.

He attempted to open his eyes, but the rush of cold air was almost as unbearable as the startling sensation of free fall. The combination must have caused his heart to skip a beat, as he felt a growing sense of panic overtake him. He shut his eyes back quickly, and instinctively clenched his body into a fetal position. For what felt like an eternity he tried to endure. Through countless mental rehearsal sessions in the past few days, he had reminded himself that the scary part should only last about 15 seconds, but his armory of mental mathematics proved futile against the panic of reality settling in: he was now actually falling down from the heart of the sky at the ever-increasing speed of doom. Fifteen seconds might as well be forever.

Just about when he started running out of oxygen the feeling of gravity pulling him down softened, then subsided, replaced by the sensation of being suspended in a powerful wind current. His eyes still closed, he relaxed his muscles a bit and took in a much-needed breath. It was easier to inhale than he had expected. He opened his eyes one more time, only this time he had the mental capacity to look down. Far from petrifying, the view was rather peaceful. This was the very first time he had ever seen the City from high above. The ground far below him was an uninterrupted stretch of green, as far as the eye can see. He felt like he was staring down on one giant green circle surrounded by a uniformly bright blue dome from all directions. To his surprise, it wasn't at all possible to make out the boundaries of the tiles comprising the rectangular grid of the residences. In retrospect, he thought it was silly to have expected the grid to be somehow visible from the sky above. After all, the dissection of much of the City into perfect squares was entirely virtual, with no physical barriers of any kind separating the tiles.

As he watched the giant green circle below grow larger in his viewpoint, first slowly and then not so slowly until it engulfed his entire vision span, he let himself savor the honor of being perhaps the only one in the whole wide City to have ever experienced that vantage point. Generation after generation of Citizens must have been born, lived, and ultimately died without having ever laid eyes on the City from high above like he has. He felt sorry for them, locked down below, not aware of all that beauty they are missing. He reflected on what it must have been like, in an era long past when people took on flight to move around. This sort of viewpoint might have been not so unusual, maybe even routine. It was a lost treasure of the past, this experience, and his audacity had earned him the privilege to resurrect and experience it - perhaps to be the last human being to ever experience it once more, if only for a few brief, final moments.

The green stretch below him was now a sea of colors, with varying shades and tones. There were bright green meadows of different shapes, and patches of dark green trees, some thicker than others. He could make out gently sloping hills and valleys, and several ovals of blue sprinkled all over the landscape. He still couldn't spot any man-made objects, perhaps because they were so tiny compared to the vast eternity of green foliage engulfing them. It occurred to him that since there was no ocean or coast within his sight even at such elevation, then his tile must be situated deep inland. Having never before contemplated where within the City his tile was, he felt sorry for a life spent in its entirety without a moment's thought to where his home was located. To be sure, he wasn't alone to shame. It was likely the case that not one Citizen in the whole wide City had ever wondered where his or her tile was actually located. It simply didn't matter, in an era when people could be wherever they wanted to be with the click of a tiny red button.

He stretched out his limbs, now starting to feel almost comfortable in the weightlessness of terminal velocity. He was humbled by the irony that this moment, arguably the most blissful of his whole life, was always one click away, yet he had separated himself from it with mountains of fear. The entire experience felt majestic. And the noble cause that motivated it made it all the more so. He was free of the burden of gravity, and in a moment or two, he would be free at last of the burden of life. Unlike every other time, that realization didn't frighten him now. Having graduated the hypothetical into the realm

of reality, the prospect of death had become a genuinely liberating thought. He closed his eyes one last time, and let it all sink in.

## beta

*"What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. That there's something wrong with the world, you don't know what it is, but it's there. Like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad." — The Matrix, 1999*

The sea was an endless expanse of bright azure. Yet somehow it felt dull, lifeless. Not a single wave perturbed its calm, and not a single sound of any kind. Adonis felt entirely alone. He felt like the sphere of blue engulfing him had been purged of all company, and of all life. Looking down, his feet were planted firmly on top of the calm blue water, yet somehow that wasn't a strange thing at all. His torso fully erect, he took a hesitant step forward. Reassured by the water's inexplicable capacity to hold his weight, he took another, then another. The lifeless mass of blue seemed to follow him around. There was no sun above him, no clouds in the distance, he thought to himself that monotony was the only real horror, that whatever it is we fear in death must be something akin to monotony.

As he paced forward (or backward, there was no good way to tell the difference), he finally spotted something. It was a tiny spec far in the distance. An island, it might have been. It must be, since whatever sea creature might dwell that far out wouldn't have been noticeable. Impossibly out of reach, Adonis still took the effort to pace forward towards the tiny brown spot.

"Adonis," a distant sound finally whispered, if ever so faintly. In an ocean of endless void, a faint sound was a welcome distinction between life and death. Adonis followed the sound, concerned that it might not repeat. It occurred to him that a reality where there was a faint sound in the distance is different from a reality without any sound only in that the former is filled with hope, and fear.

"Wake up, Adonis," the distant sound whispered again.

Adonis let the sound lead him, closer and closer towards the distant island. As he got closer, he was overcome with a wave of empathy. He was suddenly aware that the island wasn't an inviting place, but rather an embodiment of a deliberate act of imprisonment. Home to unimaginable misery so many souls destined to live in captivity.

The bright blue ocean now felt like a giant blessing. An insulator keeping the pain and suffering bottled up far, far away. Still, it wasn't

right to turn one's back the other way. As step gave way to step, confidence built and a decision was effectively rendered: He was going to get to the island, no matter how far it was and no matter how agonizing it would be to set foot on it.

"Time to wake up, Adonis," the voice called, now sounding oddly mechanical in nature.

As he charged towards the island, now moving in impossibly wide hops, it seemed to be moving away from him, somehow keeping a constant distance apart. He wondered whether it would always and forever remain out of reach. He felt at once determined to get there and convinced that he never will. That's when it occurred to him to flap his wings and simply fly up and away. The voice interrupted, now calling in a clear, loud, and entirely context-inappropriate intonation:

"It's nine thirty. Time to wake up, Adonis."

Then a moment later, now accompanied by a buzzing crescendo:

"It's time to get out of bed, Adonis. Your morning hangout is in thirty minutes."

As the buzzing intensified, it kept getting harder to ignore. Adonis was flying high up in the distance by now, and the island, as always, was hopelessly beyond reach. Adonis closed his eyes, then opened them. He was lying in bed, wrapped in multiple layers of jet black bedsheets. Glad to be back on familiar grounds, he turned his attention to the daily routine. The faint yet soothingly familiar sound of water streams running back in the freshroom helped frame his mind into context. He extended his arm as far as he could but still couldn't reach the nightstand. Rolling around in bed the usual way and then stretching a blind arm probing outside the lump of sheets, he rested his hand on the cool slick metallic feel of his pocket device. He then snapped it off the nightstand and gave it a couple of swift touches which set in motion his daily wake-up protocol. The buzzing quickly faded out. The ambient light started a slow transition from dark, midnight blue to sunrise orange and finally to crisp daylight white. This exposed an enormous room with surprisingly little furniture and no windows. The bed, now brushed-silver looking, slowly lowered itself until it was suspended three feet above the ground in the middle of the room.

Meanwhile, the marble floor beneath it all started to heat up silently and invisibly to a delicious barefoot-friendly temperature. It was time to get up. The buzzing was replaced with faintly audible and entirely unremarkable instrumental music that seemed to be coming from everywhere in the room. It was time to get up.

Adonis rose from beneath his bedsheets, which were no longer jet black but silky grey under the light of day. Placing his feet firmly on warm marble, he stood up in one swoop and marched away without delay. The bedroom was literally that, a bed room. It stretched at least thirty feet across, with a bed and an attached nightstand in the center and almost nothing else of practical value. One of the walls was entirely made of uninterrupted frosted glass, with a man-sized opening in the middle. Crossing the frosted glass barrier, Adonis was now in the freshroom, another, equally sized room featuring the same stretch of bluish-grey marble. His device still in his hand, he stepped into the center of that room right under the main stream. The jet of hot water raining on his body from above had no apparent source or drain. It merely materialized from a point in mid-air right above his head, already soapy somehow, it streamed over his body and channeled down a slightly sloped floor beneath his feet, then ultimately vanished into thin air once it trickled off his body onto the warm marble below, as mysteriously as it had appeared.

Not phased by any of it, Adonis casually slid down his boxers and let them drop on the floor. Now fully naked, he stretched his body under the full heat of the shower and enjoyed the first inklings of alertness that come about when a sleepy body meets hot water. He ran a hand through his long blond hair, then with another tap on his device the sourceless jet of water was no longer soapy. Following the morning routine, the jet slowly cooled down over the next ten minutes all the way from steamy hot to invigorating cold. Adonis stepped out of the stream and paced away until he reached a jet of lukewarm air where he stayed until the youthful, muscular body was dry again.

A morning shave, a number-one, and a quick hairdo later, it was time to get dressed. Adonis stepped away from the water streams and towards a circular marble podium by the center of the opposing wall. The podium was about ten feet across, and the entire wall it faced was one giant mirror. On the podium was a single black leather sofa, and a matte metal rod that extended from floor to ceiling, with short handles protruding out of it here and there. Fully awake now but not in the mood to try something new, Adonis picked the usual ensemble on his device, and with a decisive tap, a brand new pair of dark-blue

jeans and an equally fresh white dress shirt materialized onto the handles of the rod, which was clearly designed solely for that purpose. Adonis got dressed swiftly and absentmindedly, the way one gets into clothes he'd put on many times before. First the shirt then the pants, then as he sat down on the sofa he put on the socks and shoes. As he stepped off the podium, he stopped for a second, realizing that he almost forgot to put on a hat again. He pulled his device out of his pocket again, and with another tap, a fresh instance of his favorite sun hat materialized on the hanging rod, which he quickly grabbed and carefully slid onto his well-kept hair for a perfect degree of shading.

All ready to go, he tapped the screen a few more times, then he traced the backside of the device with his thumb until it rested on a small push button. He turned around and gave himself a look in the giant wall mirror, almost out of guilt for not having glanced at it while dressing up. Satisfied with his looks, he clicked the button, and the world immediately changed. He was no longer at home, but rather on the patio of some upscale restaurant overlooking the ocean. It was bright and cheerful, with loud laughs punctuating ambient chatter from all directions. The patio was impossibly oversized, with dozens of tables each spaced several yards away from others in all directions. No sooner than he squinted in response to the sudden surge of sunlight, his friends were already calling for him.

"Look who's finally here!"

"Rise and shine princess!"

He put on a smirky face and walked towards the source of cynicism, a table with five seats and four smiley faces. The gang was for the most part already done with their breakfast, except for Katina who was still deep in her omelet. As he got closer and finally sat down the cynical shouting turned into table-voice cynicism.

"Wow, you made it! It's almost ten o'clock. I thought the plan was to have breakfast together," said Ponos.

"It is! It's just that the sun rises late in Adonis-land. Trust me guys you'll get used to it eventually," said Atlas.

To that, Adonis nodded in approval as he came up with his best comeback. "Sorry, everybody. You must be starving waiting for me this whole time, I feel terrible!"

"Well I didn't get my coffee yet, so technically I did wait for you. You're welcome!" Atlas replied with a sly smile while Adonis was

running fingers on his device's screen looking for his usual breakfast order.

"Oh no sir, you don't!" Katina said as she snatched the device out of his hand. "Today, you are having the triple cheese omelet! And I don't even care if you're into omelets or not!"

"Come on Katina, let the man have his usual," said Solon.

"Yeah, you should know better than to stand between a man and his breakfast," said Ponos.

"No way. You know who's working the kitchen here this week?" Katina exercised her habit of punctuating the question with a pause too brief to elicit an answer. "It's Agape! And let me tell you, she is the undisputed queen of omelets. Trust me Adonis you don't want to miss on this rare opportunity," she added with a smirk. Adonis nodded as he wandered his sight the over the uninterrupted pristine blue of the ocean in full view, remembering for a short moment the eeriness of his dream.

"Omelet it is," he finally said.

There was not one distraction in view. Not one ship or boat, no litter, no pollution of any kind. Just blue waves with foamy white crests that form and dissolve in a complex yet elegant procession. Adonis had always found the ocean deliciously hypnotic. Had he come here alone, he could easily spend much of the day in one relaxed daze. His entourage, of course, wouldn't allow it.

"Oh, and speaking of kitchen work. *Also* guess who's working the kitchen next week?" Katina announced, "Yours truly!"

"No way girl, you're going on work again?" exclaimed Atlas.

"Yes sir, for five full days! I have a mean new menu idea that I'm going to try out. Better get it while you can!"

"Weren't you on work just a couple of months ago?" asked Solon.

"Right? I guess I'm turning into a workaholic. Ponos must be rubbing off on me."

"Not even close! My good man Ponos here has been on work for like a year nonstop now! Right?"

"Six months, actually, but I think I'm going to keep on it for a while longer even."

"I don't know how you do it man - or why," laughed Atlas, "Do you guys know when was the last time I went on work? Five and a half years ago!"

"How do you manage though? What's your secret?" Katina said curiously.

"No secret. Just that back when I turned 20 I decided to go on work for two full months non-stop, and ever since I haven't spent much on

anything - work less, spend less, relax a whole lot more. that's my motto!"

"Guys hold on, so the other day I ran into a word that best describes our good friend Adonis here," declared Solon. "Are you ready for this? Tidsoptimist! It's an old word apparently, but perfect for you Adonis. Do you wanna know what it means?" and then apparently without much of a pause to hear an answer to the question, "Go ahead, ask it."

Adonis turned his pocket device and spoke at it in an intuitive yet wholly unnecessary gesture.

"What is the meaning of the word tidsoptimist?"

A mechanical but friendly voice immediately replied.

"A tidsoptimist is a person who is habitually late because they think they have more time than they actually do."

All four of them burst out laughing, including Katina whose mouth was stuffed with a fresh bite of omelet. Adonis gave the response a wide social smile and a nod or two.

"Don't hate him just because he's right," said Ponos.

"I think we found your new nickname!" exclaimed Atlas.

"I always thought 'terse' was the best Adonis nickname, but I think we have a new winner!" chuckled Katina.

"I mean it with all the love in the City, man," said Solon earnestly.

"Hey, so how *is* your project going anyway, Ponos?" Adonis said in a subtle attempt to steer the conversation away from him.

"Really well actually, we're about to port a demo tile next week. It's not going to be open for visitors yet, but we're getting there."

"Wait I keep forgetting, what were you working on again?" Katina asked.

"They're making a whole other city, all the way up in Mars" Atlas volunteered, based on entirely unreliable fragments of half-followed conversations.

"Not a whole city, just one tile," Ponos quickly corrected him, for the millionth time. "And not necessarily on Mars. We're just trying it out on Mars first because we have come to know much about its topography, geology, and climate. But once we figure it out, we're going to be porting tiles onto many distant planets. In fact, with TP it doesn't really matter where the destination is. So any planet no matter how far is going to be just as reachable. All that matters is for the planet to have a gravity well similar to ours, otherwise the delta in potential ene..."

"Dude, stop it now, or I swear I'll kick you off the deck all the way down to the ocean. You're ruining my coffee with all this nerdy talk," joked Atlas, who by now was sipping coffee out of a sleek black mug.

Ponos completely ignored the comment, eager to seize the chance to talk some more about his obsession.

"Guys, this is happening sooner than you think. We already have a satellite out there in deep space searching the galaxy for suitable candidate planets. Every week or so we TP the satellite to a different grid to scan the star systems there for good candidates. We're hoping to stumble upon an exotic, Earth-sized planet with a friendly atmosphere. On Mars, we set up the tile deep underground, but on other planets, we might get lucky and pull off tiles right up on the surface."

As he said that, a dish materialized at the center table along with a set of utensils and a black cloth napkin. It was a triple cheese omelet, so fresh it was still steaming.

"Oh, there's your breakfast!" Katina smiled as she pulled the dish nearest Adonis, eager to demonstrate her friend's superior omelet-making skills. "You can thank me later."

She placed her now-empty dish and utensils at the center of the table and watched them disappear.

"But why bother with tiles on distant planets to begin with? It's not like we're running out of space here in the City," hammered Adonis, fully aware of the answer which he had heard explained before, but determined to keep the conversation focused on the subject.

A long explanation followed, with Atlas pretending to yawn in boredom and Katina giggling now and then while Ponos plowed on with a serious face. Extraterrestrial tiles make for awesome date destinations. Who wouldn't want to spend an afternoon sipping a cold drink on a vista overlooking a lava waterfall, or watching two different suns rise over a binary system planet, or racing in impossibly high leaps in a rocky desert on a low gravity planet, or swimming around with a cute blondie in fluorescent purple goo? As fabulous as the City was, there were things you just couldn't do here on Earth. Sports could use a change too. Just imagine what fun it would be to golf around a tile in low gravity, where one can learn to perfect a hole-in-one over a quarter-mile distance, or surfing over never-breaking monster waves a hundred feet high or more.

Solon was sold. Ready to buy his extraterrestrial vacation package that very instant had it been available. Adonis was halfway through his omelet at this point, happy with the long distraction away from his business.

Ponos, of course, was talking about Planetes, the City's space exploration initiative. Several months in, he was probably an old timer over there, as the initiative is typically staffed with people joining for a week or two at a time, before going back to their lives of commitment-free leisure. At any point in time, the project housed no

more than a few dozen active participants who spent their time charting exoplanets and picking promising targets for exploration. The rotating door arrangement guaranteed never-ending enthusiasm and a continuous stream of fresh ideas for exploration. This was adequate of course, at an age when constructing a space-faring machine involved nothing more than diagramming the arrangement of pre-designed sensors and then clicking a button, and when sending a probe deep into extrasolar space was no more demanding than sending a gift over to a friend's tile. With no construction logistics to worry about, no launchpads, no fuel or propulsion systems, and no sophisticated machinery of any kind, deep-space exploration had been reduced to an everyday task handled by everyday people. Even power engineering had been abandoned since a click of a button was all that was needed to bring a probe back from interstellar space for a quick battery swap.

"I'm seriously thinking to extend for one whole extra month on this project. If not more!" Ponos concluded with a tone suitable for declaring such an unusual plan.

"Well, that would definitely earn you the workaholic badge among *this* group of lazy asses, myself included," Atlas smirked. Adonis cringed, knowing full well what was coming.

"Take that mindless soul, for example. I don't think he had gone on work a single time since I met him. How long was it Adonis? Two years now?"

A year and a half, it had been. And he didn't feel like he wanted to go back on work of any kind anytime soon.

"Two years! And when he finally goes on work, he'll probably pick the simplest thing for a couple of weeks and then he'll be good for *another* two years. Right, Adonis?"

"Who cares man? As long as he can manage that way, and enjoy life, I say great," said Solon.

"Besides, it sounds funny when you talk about other people being lazy when you're the one who confessedly clicks his way from bed to water stream every morning!" Katina added in defense of Adonis who was visibly nervous by the mention of his work record.

They all burst out laughing at that last comment, including Atlas who had a refreshing habit of laughing at his own peculiarities just as much as his critics. Between chuckles, he was sure to voice a theatrical response:

"Yes, I *do* click from bed to water stream, and I'm proud of it! Why move about the primitive way, wasting precious time and energy when you can leverage technology in support of your own laziness. You guys should be commanding me for putting modern technology

to good use! I mean we're *Citizens* here. It's not like we're Farmers or anything?!"

"Good to be reminded that there exists people even lazier than I am," Adonis smirked, taking in another bite of his omelet which really was as good as advertised. The ocean was calm, he thought. Exceptionally calm, to the point where you could hear the calls of silver gulls carried with the wind, and even some snakebirds splashing into the water far out in the distance. The sun was getting a little too bright in his face, and he was about to pull out his device and buy a pair of shades but decided instead to close his eyes and enjoy the warmth for a moment still.

"Hello? Are you still there? I mean I know the cheese omelet is to die for but please don't get yourself into a coma because of me!"

Katina's sudden high pitch modulation brought him back. Solon had been talking about his new girlfriend again, and Katina was quick to mention that Adonis was still seeing her friend, proud to have made the match herself. "I was telling them that you and Nyx are hitting it off. How long has it been now? Four, five months?"

Five and a half months, he thought. So far he had avoided bringing her to breakfast with the gang, but he knew he couldn't keep that up for long. They did run into Atlas one time while on a date, but Solon and Ponos hadn't met her yet.

"Yes, about that long."

At that point, Katina declared the sun was getting too harsh for her pasty-white skin.

"Time to buy some sunscreen!"

With a few quick swipes on her device, she caused a little tube of sunscreen to materialize on the table. Having applied some to her sun-reddened cheeks, her big forehead, and her surprisingly freckle-free neck and shoulders, she politely offered some to her uninterested friends, then chucked the tube towards the center of the table and left it there to disappear into oblivion.

"Guys, you have to see this Nyx," Atlas took over. "I mean, we should all have Katina hook us up from now on. I only met her once, and I still can't get over those big round..."

"Excuse me! Hello there! Lady on the table," Katina teased, "And you sir can rest assured I'm never subjecting any of my friends to the pain and horror of dating you."

"What? I was gonna say those big round eyes! But hey, five months, I think that's a new record for Adonis. Isn't it buddy?"

"I believe it is!" Solon said, "Sounds like you two are getting serious, and if so I think we need to meet the lucky lady."

"Yes, so we can be sure to mess it up for you before you get yourself married!" Atlas said breaking into a laugh.

"Oh, he will, trust me. I can pretty much hear the wedding bells chime already." Katina affirmed, with both hands swiping over the table in support. "And I won't let you mess it up this time. Nyx and this fine gentleman here are a perfect match. You're just being jealous and immature as usual."

"I am, what can I say, you know me well," Atlas mused, then quickly added with an endearing voice that he sometimes struck right after a joke and before venturing a serious proposition: "So how about it Adonis? Shall we start drafting wedding speeches sometime soon?"

"Oh, Adonis the family man!" Ponos smiled, raising his coffee mug in salute.

Out of nowhere, a big bird suddenly leaped on the table, snatched a scrap of leftover food and flew back up in what couldn't have been more than a couple of seconds.

"Woah!" Shouted Katina, "What was that!"

"A sign," Atlas declared musingly, "The powers that be are telling us that our good friend Adonis here is about to be plucked away from our roundtable by none other than sexy miss blondie!"

They burst out laughing again. It was an incredibly joyous group, which made Adonis all the more aware of not fitting.

"All joking aside, I think if any of us has any hope of being a good husband, it would be you," Solon joined in a moment later.

It was getting harder for Adonis to avoid the discussion, and still way too early to excuse himself. "Not sure guys, still too early to tell really" was all that he could muster.

"Not to mention you'd make a great father. And we all know how important that is!" Katina added with pride, utterly oblivious to the weight of that comment on Adonis, who was again trying to escape into the warmth of the sun on his face. As unsettling as those breakfast meetings have been getting lately, this morning was especially hard to bear, he thought. Could it be that the calmness of the ocean was carrying him in thought closer and closer into the island of misery it separated the City from? He felt like an alien being, forever incapable of joining a group of earthlings in their immersive peculiar ritual of devouring omelets and sipping coffee, completely unbothered by the hardship of unfathomable magnitude taking place on the other end of a mere body of water.

"Hello, City to Adonis!"

He felt like he had checked out already, mentally and emotionally, and now even conversationally. It wasn't worth it to bother to catch up to the conversation.

"Man you should click yourself a pair of shades, the sun is pretty much directly in your face," Solon said.

"Here I'll even grab a pair for you," Atlas said, reaching out to his device.

Adonis took his device into his hand and was about to order his usual pair of sunglasses, but then he found himself not doing that. A few swipes and a click later, he was gone.

"What's his deal today, why'd he click away so suddenly?" Ponos wondered.

"Who knows," Atlas said, "probably had to go back to his tile for a freshroom break."

Back in his bedroom, Adonis found himself cowering in a corner on the warm marble floor. No longer burdened to keep up appearances, he finally burst into tears, sobbing loudly and violently for the first time in as long as he could remember.

## gamma

*"The art of those who govern consists above all in the science of employing words." —Gustave Le Bon*

As the sun rose up on the East end of the City, the West end was still engulfed in darkness and would be for two more hours. Such was the vast span of the City from one end to the other. Viewed from above, the City was one giant uninterrupted expanse of green, contained within an outer ring of white sand tracing the coastal borders. In reality, of course, it was comprised of hundreds of millions of tiles, arranged into a virtual grid. Most of the tiles were residential, and came in a uniform shape of a five-acre square, although some tiles were larger and came in a variety of shapes and sizes. Towards the center of each residential tile was a residence of some sort, usually occupying a quarter of the area of its tile. Whereas the tiles were mostly uniform, the residences were not. Every residence was a testament to its owners' own style and taste, and thus they varied in arrangement, shape, size, color, and materials. And while every residence contained the same essential amenities, like bedrooms, freshrooms, guestrooms, kitchens, gyms, bars, memory rooms, and entertainment studios, each residence also housed a dozen or so custom amenities according to the interests of the residents. Libraries, art studios, indoor pools, race tracks, and gardening conservatories were among the popular choices.

Aside from the residences, the tiles also contained outdoor pools, tennis and basketball courts, hiking trails, outdoor gyms, patios and gardens, and countless other summer amenities. The larger tiles contained ponds, golf courses, some even zoos, and natural reservations.

In a world free of the burdens of transportation, the entire City grid was invested in living space. Naturally, there were no roads, streets, pavements or walkways of any kind. In fact, there were no physical boundaries of any sort between the tiles, because physical boundaries were simply obsolete in a post teleportation age. There were no walls, no fences, no gates, no barriers at all, just acres of uninterrupted natural landscape with meadows, trees, hills, and creeks separating one residence from the next. Since the Citizens relied solely on teleportation (or TP for short) to get into and out of residences, there was no longer any need even for doors. Management of access permissions into residences was orchestrated by the department of teleportation, commonly known as Hermes, which serviced requests

by Citizens to virtually “open” or “shut” their residences to particular visitors at any point in time. You could even program your residence to allow or deny particular people into particular rooms at particular times of the day, simply by using your pocket device to register the rules with Hermes. Absent explicit permission, a trespasser would have no way to arrive at your residence except to walk. But since there were no walkable paths between tiles, a trespasser would have to hike across many tiles in order to get there, perhaps tens or even hundreds. Besides, the Citizens were generally not aware where each tile was in relation to the others. There was simply no need to keep track of such details since it made no difference when all tiles were virtually a click of a button away. So a hypothetical trespasser would not only have to journey for many miles but would also have to somehow compile a map of tile locations in order to chart a route to your tile in the first place. It was therefore accepted that virtually “shutting” your tile to TP made it effectively inaccessible.

Adonis wondered why he had bothered to shut his tile that morning before he left to the corrector’s office. It wasn’t like anybody was interested or even cared to click into his tile unannounced. Even Nyx would probably have zero interest in exploring his tile if given a chance, perhaps because she already knew how bare and unremarkable she would find it. It contained only and precisely the bare necessities. You couldn’t find a single chandelier to save your life in his entire residence. He didn’t have a single piece of art in there. Not one mural or sculpture, or even a painting.

Having avoided staring for the last five minutes, Adonis found himself staring again at the painting in front of him. It was a giant painting with a very thick gold frame that stood about six feet high and extended at least twenty feet across, thus occupying about half the area of the wall in front of him in the waiting room. Occupying nearly the entire surface of the painting was a ferocious tiger sinking its teeth deep into the neck of a startled zebra. It was the kind of art that provoked an unsettling reaction together with a captivating curiosity that kept you fighting the urge to glance again from time to time against your best effort. Apart from that painting, the waiting room at the corrector’s office was entirely unremarkable. It was an oblong room, painted with dull colors, perhaps on purpose. The couches scattered around the room could seat some twenty people, which was pretty unnecessary since there was never more than one or two visitors waiting at a time.

Having been to the corrector's office too many times before, Adonis had developed a habit of wondering why there was a waiting room over there in the first place. Undoubtedly, they could instead simply give him a ping when it was time for him to click directly into the corrector's room. Perhaps the waiting room setup was intentional, Adonis always concluded. A deliberate attempt to put the visitor in the mental frame of mind needed for the correction session, almost like a hypnotic pre-step required for the magic to work. In an age when everything was immediately within reach, and every desire instantaneously fulfilled, the Citizens were not accustomed to waiting. They had perhaps, as a culture, forgotten the art of waiting gracefully, and lost along with it the mental and emotional prowess needed to keep calm and collected in anticipation of a delayed event. But not here, not in the corrector's waiting room. Here, people still honored the long-lost tradition of patience. Here, everybody had to... Adonis's train of thought was interrupted as a warm, but clearly-synthetic voice announced:

"Nine little-n big-L little-n big-R, please come in."

On cue, Adonis stood up and marched towards an oversized dark wooden door at the opposite end of the waiting room. The entire protocol was utterly superfluous, he thought to himself. The announcement, the needlessly long walk towards the door, the door itself, always shut with a swivel handle you had to twist and pull, all part of the parlor trick. All just to get the visitor as hyped up as possible to meet the corrector.

Compared to the waiting room, or to any other room in modern standards, the corrector's room was tiny, no bigger than twenty feet by twenty feet. One of its four walls housed the oversized door that let you in, and the three other walls were consumed by ceiling-to-floor bookshelves, making for one uninterrupted library in a dark mahogany finish. That setup, combined with the absence of windows and dimmed ambient lighting, made the room feel even tinier than it actually was. Adonis wasn't claustrophobic, yet the first time he had entered the corrector's office he was overwhelmed with a distinct feeling of being trapped. But having been there many times since, he had grown accustomed to that feeling. Aside from the bookshelves, the room had nothing more than a luxurious antique carpet on the floor, a set of tufted black leather sofas, oversized and diamond-laden for added grandeur, and a majestic mahogany desk towering at an exaggerated height in the center of the room. Serene music was playing faintly, as if from a distance, and a little waterfall contraption

sitting on one of the high shelves added to the ambiance a hypnotic sound of constant water splashing.

"Sit down Adonis, welcome," an old man perched on a leather seat behind the desk announced in a friendly voice. His face was lit only by the light reflected on the desktop from a dim desk lamp to his left. Adonis sat down on the single possible choice: one of the black leather seats that was set away from the rest of the set so that it directly faced the desk but from a comfortable distance.

The corrector was old enough to be a father to Adonis, and he had a thick head of white hair to show for it. His eyebrows and untrimmed goatee were also mostly white except for a few patches of light grey here and there. The combination of wrinkled skin and asymmetric lip contour gave him an earnest, disarming feel, yet the grayish-blue eyes and narrow oval spectacles suggested an exacting man, unyielding and uncompromising, almost intimidating. Adonis thought to himself that even the face of that man was in itself a contradiction, which was perhaps well fitting to his role.

"My name is Hypnos. You must be surprised to see me," the corrector finally opened. "you were expecting Alec."

"Not really," Adonis replied, "It had been almost a year and a half since I've been here and ..."

"Nineteen months," the corrector swiftly corrected.

Sitting at either side of the desk, Adonis and the corrector were diametric opposites. You couldn't find a more contrasting pair if you wanted to. Adonis looked youthful and strong, his body tall and his torso wide, his hair long, blond and well groomed, his skin tight and complexion an evenly tanned shade of olive. In contrast, the antipode sitting behind the desk was old and frail, his upper body small and hunched, and his facial complexion pasty and wrinkled. The one thing they had in common was perhaps a mustache, but even then, Adonis' mustache was short, blond and perfectly trimmed while the corrector's was an unruly growth of white and grey here and there, left unchecked perhaps for months. Together with his free-form sideburns extending in dabs on and off all the way down to his goatee, it gave him the look of a person immersed in ideas and unbothered by how people might perceive his appearance.

"Right, nineteen months, and I didn't expect even a corrector to be on work for that long."

To that the corrector smiled, asymmetric lips showing pitted yellowish teeth below.

"I'm not sure how much you know about us, Adonis. We correctors are a different breed of Citizens."

He leaned back on his swiveling leather seat, looking up towards nothing as if about to reveal something known to be unknown to most people. "Unlike you, we don't live a life of leisure punctuated by brief commitments to work."

Then after a brief pause as if to consider just how much detail to divulge:

"We spend most of our time on work, Adonis. In fact, it is more fitting to think of our occasional breaks as time off work. Aside from those, we correctors spend our entire adult lives on work!"

"Wow, that's a very unusual way to live," Adonis commented, seeming distracted. He had already decided that this corrector had a different style than the previous one. The previous corrector was more on point and more forthcoming with information. Adonis was considering how this replacement might make his plan harder to execute, and whether he might need to shift strategy to accommodate for a harder-to-misdirect corrector.

"He passed away, Alec. That's why I am here in his place."

Adonis looked him in the eyes for the first time. He wanted to say it, but he decided not to. Instead, he swallowed his cynicism and reminded himself that he wasn't really there for conversation.

The corrector gave him a piercing look from behind the spectacles, which was amplified by his Freudian facial features.

"I know what you must be thinking, Adonis. That for all our technological advancements, and our superiority over the Farmers, we still haven't conquered death. We're still just as vulnerable to death as those primitives are outside the City."

"Not at all, I wasn't thinking that," he lied.

"What I am thinking about, Adonis, is how your mind is so good at taking every fact, every conversational piece and channeling it into a thought about the Farmers," the corrector said, effectively ignoring Adonis' denial, "Do you know what that signifies?"

"An obsession?" Adonis replied, trying to sound sincere. "I know I'm not well, that's why I'm here to get better."

"Not an obsession, Adonis. That would mean a *benign* thought that you just can't shake away. No, what you have is a *pathology*. Are you familiar with that term, Adonis? A *pathology*?"

His predecessor had explained it before, but Adonis didn't remember. He decided he should hear it again, on the off chance that it might somehow make sense this time around. The corrector leaned forward and placed both elbows firmly on the desk.

"I know you consider yourself a libertine, Adonis. But the reality of the matter is, you have an illness. You are not a free thinker, far from it. Your thoughts are confined within the limits of your predicament. Simply put, you suffer from a mental condition. It is diagnosable, and manageable, though not curable. Would it help if we label it, Adonis? Just to make it official? The technical term is Pathological Altruism. It is a cognitive condition marked by abnormal empathetic tendencies towards unassuming classes to a counter-productive degree," the corrector recited like a lecturer opening with a cryptic message before explaining it to a puzzled audience. Adonis tried not to look obvious while he snuck some glances onto the monolithic library spanning the entire length of the wall behind the corrector's desk. From where he was sitting it wasn't possible to make out titles of the books or the labels of the many other objects on the shelves, but he could clearly tell that there were hundreds of them right there staring back at him. He tried to keep his cool as he reminded himself that he should soon be in a position to pick and choose whatever he wanted from those shelves.

"But forget about nomenclature. Your problem, in a nutshell, Adonis, is misdirected compassion. You see, empathy is a compelling emotion. In normal doses, it is an essential aspect of the human psyche, vital for the cohesion of Citizens within our society. A loyal friend looking after his friends in time of need, a devoted mother nursing her baby day in and day out. A caring son looking after his aging parents. What would the City be without the solid tapestry of caring Citizens going out of their ways to help and look after one another?"

"But in rare cases," the corrector was quick to add, "compassion can misfire. In the pathologically altruistic mind, compassion gets channeled toward undeserving targets. And in that case, what is supposed to be a force of good becomes an unneeded, unhelpful distraction, or if amplified further still, it can even become a disruptive force that interferes with daily activities and interactions,

preventing the subject from having a normal life, socio-emotionally speaking of course."

"Is that what I am then?" Adonis replied, breaking his own rule not to indulge the conversation, "Some sort of weird freak with destructive inner feelings?"

"Don't be alarmed, Adonis. Your condition is anomalous, yes, but in no means unheard of. In fact, your predicament is as old as time. Even before the Event, the concept of Extreme Altruism or "X-altruism" was already well understood, though not yet considered a cognitive condition. Over the centuries, we have perfected ways to diagnose it, to help cope with it, even overcome it. Now in your case, the X-altruistic feelings are directed towards the Farmers, but I've seen all sorts of cases. Some people came to see me who suffered from X-altruistic feelings towards birds, insects, cattle, all kinds of animals and plants, or even in-animates, like the environment as a whole."

"But I'm not one of those people obsessed with the well being of cockroaches!" Adonis couldn't contain himself. "I'm concerned with the well being of fellow humans! Flesh and blood just like us. Billions of them living a life of suffering. And for what?"

"Flesh and blood, yes. But not like us. Definitely not. Tell me, have you ever felt bad for squishing an ant or squatting a fly? You do realize they feel pain, don't you? And what's more, their pain is right there in front of your eyes. You cause them agony physically and directly, yet you don't seem to give it much thought as you proceed with the mechanical movement of your arm or leg. I mean, you can actually *see* them suffer right there, can't you? Farmers, on the other hand, their suffering is an abstract concept in your mind. Have you ever even seen one?"

"No."

"Exactly! They exist in a realm outside of your daily experience. You know they exist and you know they perform a function that you need, but if you don't invest a conscious thought into it, they might as well not exist as far as you're concerned. Just like cattle that routinely get slaughtered to fill your burger buns with beef patties. Are you concerned about the well being of cows, Adonis? When was the last time you had a beef burger? You realize that cows are flesh and blood too, just like us?"

"But not human!!!"

"Arbitrary distinction, Adonis. What makes the boundary of species so sacred? Both cows and Farmers are living beings that we utilize to serve our needs. They both suffer so we may live comfortably.

"The reality that you must come to terms with, Adonis, is that this planet we inhabit is characterized by injustice. The presence of injustice in our reality isn't incidental, it is deeply and permanently an essential component of it. For us to live well, other living things have to suffer. Immersing oneself in excessive guilt will not change that simple fact - and it will not by any means alleviate their pain. Cows, as well as Farmers, will continue to suffer whether you feel bad about it or not, whether you condone it or not, and whether you participate in their misery or not. Your feelings about them, for them, towards them, are completely inconsequential, and therefore superfluous."

The corrector allowed Adonis a long pause, as if appreciative of the time it takes for his undeniable logic to sink in.

"My feelings, even if they don't make a difference in reality, my feelings are a testament to my own sanity."

The corrector decided this answer deserved a cursory nod of approval, then with a slight grin, he proceeded to deliver the last element of his thesis: "That is true. Your feelings are a testament to your internal moral compass. And in your case, the compass is not well calibrated. Relative to the social norm I mean. And this is the very definition of a bad moral compass."

He leaned forward and through his spectacles gave Adonis a piercing look in the eyes, as if deliberately delivering a point known a priori to be in dispute: "There is no other definition, Adonis. Right and wrong are defined by our collective agreement on what's right and what's wrong. And you are in disagreement with the rest of us. Therefore you are sick. But we can change that, Adonis. By the time you and I are done you will learn to embrace that reality, or at least stop dwelling on it."

The contentious part of the argument over, he leaned back and proceeded with a markedly lighter tone:

"And the first step is to learn to have fun! If only once in a while. You see, in every case I worked on, the X-altruistic sentiment was over-amplified to the point it became disruptive to the patient's social life, not to mention their own well being. Just like you. You don't feel well Adonis, now do you?"

"No, I suppose not," he admitted with a sigh.

"And how could you? With relentless feelings of guilt following you around all the time. Eating at you on the inside? Imagine a reality where you are finally free of all those feelings. Where you can truly enjoy life unhindered by your own inner battles. Imagine if I can bestow upon you genuine inner peace so that you can finally live an egosyntonic life."

Then he quickly added in a tone that almost sounded like a redress, "Are you familiar with that term, Adonis? *Egosyntonic?*" and then without pause as if the answer was an obvious no, "It means living a lifestyle harmonious with your inner values and ideals. Wouldn't you like that?"

"Yes, I would" was the honest truth.

"Excellent. Now if you excuse me, I'll be right back with the first dose of your medication. You'll recognize it as the same as your treatment course with Alec the last time around. I'll be back in a few minutes," the corrector said while pacing out the door in an entirely unnecessary part of the ceremony since it was certainly possible to fetch the medication from the comfort of his seat with the click of a button.

But that being the part of the session Adonis was waiting for all along, he jumped out of his seat as soon as the controller left the room. Pacing up and down the length of the bookshelves in a rush nearing on panic, he frantically glanced over shelves here and there hoping to stumble upon a book title clearly worthy of the prize. He knew he only had a minute or two to decide, and his thirst for knowledge was so intense that only the most excellent source of information could possibly quench it. There must have been many hundreds of objects on those floor-to-ceiling shelves that engulfed his entire field of vision. Of those objects, the best contenders were thick books in antique-looking hardcovers, but there were also lots of magazines, pamphlets, letters, binders, and cardboard boxes with top lids covering whatever curiosities they might have contained. One title caught his eye: "An Introduction to Sim Theory" and he quickly reached into his pocket and produced a small transparent plastic strip no bigger than a fingernail. As he was about to stick the strip onto the book, his eyes caught sight of another one on the next shelf over: "The World before this World" and then adjacent to that there was a curious shiny folder marked with a cryptic label "2013 A.D.".

Adonis froze for a second or two. He was aware that time was running out, and he could almost hear the corrector's footsteps

getting louder already. He knew by instinct the prudent thing to do was to get back to his seat instantly, but he also knew full well that the information in that bookshelf was unavailable anywhere else in the City, and therefore most likely unavailable anywhere else on the planet. He wished he could somehow TP the contents of the entire library into his tile without arousing suspicion, but the reality was that he only had one TP strip, and so he could not pick more than one thing at a time. As with all important decisions that have to be made in a rush, Adonis resorted to sheer randomness as he stuck the tiny strip firmly onto the side cover of one book such that it wouldn't be noticeable from the front. No sooner had he done that than he began to second guess his choice, but he wisely decided to let it go as he quickly sank back into his seat, trying to look casual as if he hadn't just accomplished such a clandestine mission with only a second or two to spare.

"There we are," the controller said, placing a small bottle containing about a dozen pills on the table where Adonis could reach for it, "Those should last you till next time. And now, about learning to have fun. Are you seeing someone Adonis?"

"Yes, I am," Adonis said, trying to sound as unsuspicious as possible. "Good! For next time I want you to take Nyx to the Apples," the controller said in a commanding tone, happy to show off his prior knowledge into the details of Adonis' life, "Go on and have a good time now! I'll see you next week."

## delta

*"There is always something left to love." —Gabriel García Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude*

"You're staring again," Nyx said with a playful smile. Adonis was admiring her beauty, which got him to stare and wander away often when he was out with Nyx.

"Is it because I am so charming that one cannot help but stare?" she mused as she tiptoed around the thick green lawn motioning with her arms like a ballerina.

"Oh don't flatter yourself now. I mean don't get me wrong you're all right, but you're not exactly Princess Rapunzel over here."

"Douche!" she laughed. Adonis loved most about her how she always got his cynicism so that he didn't need to filter his humor around her.

Nyx jumped closer and sat on the grass right next to him, trying to look serious for a moment in a blatant attempt to pretend to say something important. As she leaned closer to him, he could smell her coarse lemony perfume which complimented her overall unladylike appeal. Nyx was attractive but not in a cliché way. Adonis had reflected on that matter before and decided that her beauty was simply unorthodox. Her lips rested slightly open and revealed a set of pearl-white if boyishly large teeth, which together with her slightly raised eyebrows gave her a rugged, indifferent look. Her slim nose arch ended in a slightly-widened set of nostrils, further accentuating her overall out-of-the-ordinary look. Her irises were big dull-green circles contrasting against pristine white. That, combined with her arching eyebrows and a gleam in her pupils when she looked directly at you, gave her gaze a piercing feel that made it seem like she could probe into your soul if she wanted to, and not be phased the least bit by whatever she found deep in there.

"Did I ever tell you how I used to despise Rapunzel when I was little?"

"Oh what is *wrong* with you? How could a little girl not adore Rapunzel?"

"I'm telling you. The first time I heard the story I immediately decided she was stupid. I mean why didn't she just click out of the tower and save that poor prince the trouble?" she said in between giggles so that it was hard to make out the end of the sentence.

"And the rest of the fairytales, I was always the one kid who'd spot technological gaps in the plot. I mean, the one with the rabbit and the turtle? That one doesn't make any sense since either one could just

click to the finish line and get it over with! And what's her name the one who got lost in the forest and ... "

"Goldilocks?"

"No, Goldilocks is cool. I mean the other one who ..."

"Snow White?"

"Yeah, her."

"What's wrong with that one?"

"Hello?! Lost in the forest? Please! And where's your device, huh?" she giggled loudly as she jumped back onto her feet and motioned with her eyebrows and shoulders at an invisible Snow White, waving her device at her.

"I guess you're right. These stories don't make much sense."

"Exactly!" Nyx flicked a lock of hair away from her face. Still seated on the ground, Adonis was at a perfect vantage of the full length of Nyx's thick flowing hair extending in unruly waves past her shoulders, halfway down to her waist. Her hair was dark brown at the top, but as it traveled down, locks of light-brown multiplied and took over, giving way to golden tips that she liked to flick back and forth as she played her mini theatricals. She would always braid random flocks with no apparent pattern and embed little beads here and there, which added an overall character, making her hair uniquely her own. Adonis decided that if there really ever was a Rapunzel, then Nyx might very well be her descendant.

"Why don't you just take a picture? It will last longer!" she smirked, happy as she always was to be the center of his attention. "Or actually no, don't take a picture. Bring me back here whenever you miss the sight of my mesmerizing beauty," she said with a twirl, a quick bow, then she leaped away and hid behind the branches of an old and overly large apple tree.

The Apples, of course, was home to all kinds of fruit trees, not just apple trees. Occupying a vast expanse of nearly five hundred square miles, it was a man-made garden just impossible to realize before the age of teleportation, at least not without a significant portion of the land dedicated to ugly overhead structures like service roads, parking lots, water pumping stations, sewers, garbage dumps, and electric service points. But in the City, no such overhead was ever needed, making it possible for a garden the size of an entire 21st-century city not only to exist, but to be made flat as a pancake, and dressed in thick, green lawn from end to end. All that was needed was for an automated system to teleport water to the plants once every night. First, the irrigation was infused with nutrients, plant meds, and pesticide and then merely teleported as a film onto the ground covering the entire surface area of the garden. As daunting as

that task may sound, in reality, it was no harder than the click of a button. Teleporting hundreds of thousands of gallons was no more demanding than teleporting one drop. All that was needed was a specification of the origin, the destination of placement, and the setup of a periodic nightly timer.

From a visitor's perspective, the Apples was an endless garden, with grass and trees extending as far as the eye can see in all directions. Across the entire area, easy-to-eat-fruit trees like cherries, apples, pears, plums, and apricots were neatly arranged into a uniformly spaced grid such that the foliage passed just enough sunshine to brighten up the garden, but not too much as to make the experience uncomfortable. You could spend the entire day walking around and never reach an end or encounter a boundary of any kind. It was also unlikely to bump into any other group of visitors, since the garden was colossal in size and groups were automatically assigned to randomized starting points as they clicked into it. For all intents and purposes, the Apples was everyone's private garden, and so it had quickly become the City's de facto destination for couples looking for a private outdoor experience. Every now and then during the excursion, the seemingly endless tapestry of fruit trees would give way to something unexpected. A giant oak tree to climb here, a boulder to lean against over there, a little creek, a fish pond, a few bushes to hide and seek around, or sometimes just an open field to race through. This, combined with the random starting point, made a visit to the Apples always interesting. You never knew what you might find out there.

Adonis got up and headed towards the apple tree where Nyx was hiding. He came in from the opposite side, which was sure to catch her by surprise, except as he turned around the backside behind the trunk, she wasn't there.

"Wow, you're getting really good at this," Adonis said to thin air. He looked around the endless expanse of trees, hoping to catch a glimpse of a sun-kissed beauty in a white summer dress running from hideout to the next or hear a trace of a muffled giggle. Nothing.

"A little too good if you ask ..." He felt the force of a heavy hand smack the back of his head. It caught him completely by surprise and, he thought it couldn't have been Nyx because it was too strong of a blow for a delicate girl's hand. As he tried to spin around, he felt a force twist him out of balance, and he fell into a heap under the weight of what turned out to be Nyx after all. She had climbed and hidden on top of a high branch, then tried to leap onto his shoulders from behind his back. They were both lying on their backs against the

grassy ground when Nyx finally started a giggle that quickly turned into a loud boyish laugh.

"Man you're so weak, you can't even handle the weight of a skinny lady. These hunky muscles are just for show aren't they?"

She ran her fingers teasingly over his left trap and deltoid and then groped her way down onto his peck without turning her head away from the canopy of branches and leaves right above.

"I never said I was a strong guy," he said while still trying to catch his breath. Then he leaned towards her and gave her a tap on the nose "And you are certainly no lady!"

A moment later as her giggles subsided, Adonis found himself staring again at those green eyes and traces of subtle freckles behind a fresh tan on her cheeks. He wondered how such a genuine beauty could still be as interested in his company despite everything. He had decided to try to keep it all about fun with her today, but as always he found in her long open gaze an invitation to open up a little.

"But seriously though, can you imagine a time when those fairy tales were not so ridiculously sounding? Maybe because they come from a time before people could click around, maybe even before they imagined TP was possible in the first place?"

"You mean like, before the Event?" she said in a dreamy voice, trying to sound as serious as the question just posed was.

"Yes, before. What do you think it was like, life before?"

"Well, for starters, the City must have been so very boring. Even more boring than it is now - hard to imagine, I know," she smirked.

"You know what I think? I think the City wasn't even there. I mean not just the one. There might have been multiple 'citys'. Five or six different ones even, maybe more. People were spread out all over the planet."

"Oh really, and where were the Farmers living then, genius?"

"There were probably no Farmers."

"Then who tended to the City? Sorry I mean the so many 'citys'?"

"Everyone. The Citizens. I mean, everybody was considered a citizen. Every human was a citizen of some city or another. There were no Farmers at all."

Nyx was of course mildly aware of Adonis' medical condition. Katina had explained to her that he had seen the corrector about it before and that somehow it had to do with an obsession over the Farmers. She was also aware of his troubled family history, having heard the rumors about his father's suicide - the first in the City in ages, and certainly the only such case that she ever heard of. What she knew didn't bother her, and she wasn't curious to learn more about it. She

was the kind of person who took people on a case by case basis, she didn't like to judge, and she didn't like to dwell on a relationship beyond the good times and the good company. He was polite, he was fun to hang out with, he was original, and he was gorgeous. That's all she cared about.

Still lying down, she bent her knees and crossed one leg over the other, freeing a bare foot to dangle and rock back and forth gently. Realizing she was a bit thirsty, she swiftly reached out to her device and clicked a little water bottle into existence, which she immediately emptied into her mouth in one quick gulp.

"That sounds like a horrible thing, by the way. Have you ever considered, Mr. genius, that if there were no Farmers, then *everyone* would have to be a Farmer? With no one to care for us, we'd all have to care for ourselves. It would be such a shame, if you were too busy growing your own crop, preparing your own daily meals or stitching together your own daily sets of clothes to find time to work out this firm round butt of yours."

She leaned towards him and reached out to spank his butt, but then she stopped abruptly and fixated on a patch of grass a couple of feet behind his back.

"What is it?" Adonis mused curiously. But Nyx ignored his question and motioned silence with her finger on her lips as she stared intently at the grass behind him and moved up to her knees slowly and gracefully. A second later, she pounced quickly as if to grab something with both hands before it could run away. Adonis pulled up to his knees and turned back toward her, now curious to know what she was after. When she turned, she had her palms clenched together and squeezed shut as if to keep something inside while careful not to squish it. She looked at her hands and then back at Adonis. "Check this out," she whispered, "Quick, before it disappears!"

Adonis scooted closer, still on his knees. In an overly slowed down gesture, Nyx lifted her left hand to reveal the treasure resting on her right palm. Adonis leaned in a bit more with his neck, careful not to move his body any closer. He was looking at a tiny black animal, small enough to fit in the palm of Nyx's small hand. It had many legs, eight or ten, Adonis thought, some much longer than others, and all arranged into spokes that converged into a disproportionately small body in the center. The thing was clearly alive, making slow movements with its legs while remaining stationary. It was either not startled, or startled to the point it couldn't run away. Nyx was obsessed with such finds. She was admiring the exotic beauty like it

was a rare treasure that had serendipitously landed right onto the palm of her hand entirely unexpectedly.

"What a beauty! Look at that red patch."

Adonis hadn't noticed it, but in retrospect, the patch of dark red contrasting against the black body was really hard to miss.

"And those many many eyes!"

Adonis scanned it back and forth, trying to locate the eyes, but before he could, the thing suddenly vanished into thin air. Nyx kept her palm up for a few more seconds as if hoping it might reappear somehow, then finally pulled it back with a sigh.

"Well, I guess you can thank your good friend Ponos for that! Didn't he do some more at Dummy-something back in the day? I think he mentioned he was working specifically on pest control."

He was, Adonis recalled. Ponos had spent two full weeks there a couple of years back, followed by several more weeks of enthusiastic evangelization to all of his friends about the vital but commonly overlooked role of pest control in the City. Demiurge, intentionally mispronounced "Dummyurge" by each of Adonis's friends in order to annoy Ponos, was the department in charge of urban zoning, terraforming, landscaping, and management of all other aspects of the layout of the City, including tile placement and allocation, overseeing outdoor facilities like the Apples, and last but not least, pest control.

"So where do you think it went?" Adonis wondered aloud.

"Where what went?"

"The thing, the black animal."

"You know, Dummy-dums got it. It's gone," said Nyx without trying to mask her disappointment.

"Yes, but gone *where*? Where do you think they TP them?"

"I dunno, outside the City somewhere. It doesn't really matter where."

Adonis leaned back onto the grass. He closed his eyes and paused for a while.

"I wonder if there is a huge pit somewhere outside the City where all these pests are dumped," he finally said. One of the rare qualities about his relationship with Nyx was that he felt comfortable wondering out loud with her.

A moment later, he felt something press on his relaxed abs. He tightened his muscles and opened his eyes to Nyx resting on his belly, her legs extending past his torso and knees folded and on top

of his shoulder blades. She lowered her head slowly and gently, allowing her quasi-braided hair to dangle on either side until it brushed against his cheeks. Raising an eyebrow and producing a delicate hand into his field of vision, she knocked gently on his forehead with a smirk on her face.

"You big handsome dork. When will you get it through this thick head of yours? The City is all that matters. Outside of the City, might as well not exist."

Before he could object to that, the knuckle knocking on his forehead turned into a palm caressing his cheek, and the authentic beauty perched on top of him lowered her lips all the way down to lock onto his own.

\* \* \*

Later that night, Adonis sat at his desk staring at his device in hand. His desk was slick and simple, made out of one nearly-oval piece of frosted glass. It stood on two metal legs and had no drawers, no bells or whistles, and almost nothing on the desktop except for a small framed portrait of an old, almost-bald man.

It had been two days since he placed that TP strip onto the book at the corrector's office. Although he knew a simple TP of one object out of that library and into his hands would probably go unnoticed since in all likelihood nobody really bothered to monitor the day to day TP traffic of Citizens, he still felt his heart leap every time he was about to click that button. Perhaps it was in the nature of clandestine actions to bring about a thrill, mixed with an irrational sense of fear.

Out of prudence, he had decided to wait till midnight, just in case the corrector happened to stay up late at his office staring at his books and counting them over and over again. He had also decided he couldn't "borrow" a book out of the library for more than an hour or two at a time. Sensible precautions, he thought, to keep his covert book-borrowing habit undetected for the long term. He had kept telling himself that he was going to read many books this way, that he was going to keep it up for as long as he could justify going to the corrector's office for more sessions. It was a brilliant plan, he had told himself in retrospect, to stop wondering and try instead to find the truth. The facts were right there, staring at him from behind the corrector's desk. Hidden in books, magazines, letters, and articles. Relics from an age long gone, left behind by audacious people, perhaps all long dead. He was hoping to find in their written

testaments the truth about what the world has been like before, what it could be like yet again. He simply wanted truthful answers, and he knew every mind capable or willing to draw an honest picture of the current or past human condition was now only existent in the form of a book behind the corrector's desk.

Adonis felt a little vibration in his hand. His device had announced midnight. It was time. Without any hesitation, he pushed the button, and a thick old book with hard leather cover immediately materialized on his mostly empty desktop. Even after having schemed for weeks, Adonis was still somewhat surprised to see the book actually there, right there within his reach. It was one thing to assert that such a plan might work in principle, but an entirely different feeling to have the plan materialize into tangible success in reality. Adonis ran his fingers on the cover. It was rugged and dusty. It felt like it had been around for ages, used by countless people, then neglected for a long time still. The title was deliciously refreshing:

The World before this World  
A Brief Summary of Pre-Eventian History  
by Ashley Ortiz

Adonis stopped at that word for a little while: The World. He knew what it meant, but he also realized that people don't use that word much anymore. The City, they said, in reference to the extent of all human civilization. When they referred to the City plus all the surrounding geography, they would say "the planet." Or even beyond, they would say "the galaxy" or "the universe." But very rarely would they feel the need to refer to such a thing as "the world." He decided that it must be because, for all intents and purposes, the City *was* the world, or what's left of it anyway. He knew he should savor the moment but he was too eager to wait, and the clock was already ticking away. Pouncing on the book with both hands, he flipped the pages here and there, looking for the optimal place to start. Certainly not the beginning, he thought. If old books were anything like the modern ones he had read, there was going to be a lot of fluff at the outset that wasn't worthy of his time. He opened the book towards the middle and dived right into the first section break he could find:

Chapter 5: The Event

The Event transformed the world fundamentally and at scale, in a manner that had only become possible by the advent of teleportation. The only other remotely comparable instance in history of a social upheaval driven by technological advancement was when home electricity, the automobile, flight, and telecommunications were invented in rapid succession, all within the space of five decades. By comparison, TP was a hundred times more transformative than all of those combined, and its development leaped from inception to mastery within just a few short years.

For the single broadest and most radical social transformation in recorded history, planning for the Event was remarkably straightforward and took surprisingly few people and little time. So much so in fact, that the entire plan was hashed out and executed in full secrecy, without any outsiders anywhere in the world getting wind of it before too late, if ever.

Not yet, he thought. As exhilarating as the prospect of reading about the Event was, Adonis knew absolutely nothing about the “world” before the Event. He needed to backtrack a quite bit to get some context. This ultimate treat of a chapter is going to have to wait, he said to himself almost aloud. A flick or two backward, he was at a dense bunch of paragraphs that seemed to discuss something that needed prior explanation still. He tried to open the book again somewhere closer to the beginning, and with a few more flips he stumbled upon what could hopefully be a perfect spot:

### Chapter 3: The World before the Event

Now convinced that he really did secure access to his long-sought treasure, Adonis felt a little more relaxed. He leaned back on his seat and rested his elbows on the desk. He angled the book just right, crossed his legs at the ankles, and started reading on.

# epsilon

*“Everything comes in circles. [...] The old wheel turns, and the same spoke comes up. It’s all been done before, and will be again.” —Arthur Conan Doyle*

The World before this World  
A Brief Summary of Pre-Eventian History  
by Ashley Ortiz

Chapter 3: The World before the Event

The world before the Event was characteristically different than it is today. The infeasibility of teleportation was, at once, a burden that imposed limits on all aspects of human civilization, as well as a guarding measure that kept the playing field flat enough as to allow for many interesting geopolitical divisions and interactions that would be impossible in today's world.

Not being able to teleport objects or people meant that all movement was limited and costly. More importantly, it meant that the price and duration of transportation grew linearly with the distance separating origin and destination. This limitation naturally created an incentive to keep objects and people huddled together as closely as possible. “Local systems” was the term used for such systems comprising clusters of people and things kept physically close to one another.

Consequently, pre-Eventian humanity lived in not one but many tiny “cities” for such a living arrangement as the City could not be sustained in a pre-teleportation world. Even the largest cities of the pre-Eventian era, like the one called Tokyo or New York, each still occupied an area well under 10,000 square kilometers. Any bigger than that and the cost of movement from one end of a city

to the other would become prohibitively large, both in terms of travel price and time.

Destined to stagnate in size, each of those tiny cities grew more and more crowded as populations of residents multiplied. As tiny as they were, the two most populated of those cities (Tokyo and New York) eventually broke the ten million residents barrier about a century before the Event. Many other cities followed suit, with the count reaching 25 so-called mega-cities just before the Event. Of those, Tokyo was the most populated ever, then housing no more than a mere 40 million residents.

To accommodate tens of millions in such small geographies, cities were made to expand in the one direction available: up. "Skyscrapers" was the name coined for exceedingly high and narrow buildings protruding towards the sky like barren tree-stems in a dense winter forest. Each of those buildings comprised hundreds of tiny dwellings stacked on-top of each other in impossibly dense arrangements. Unable to teleport into their respective portions within the stacked dwelling structure, residents had to resort to using tiny capsules that shot vertically up and down the structure in dedicated tunnels, often no larger than three square meters in cross section.

Three square meters! What claustrophobic hell, entombed in a capsule shooting up and down a dark tunnel, so tight you could barely extend your arms on either side without touching the walls. Adonis closed his tired eyes and started daydreaming about vertical living. Leaning back in his seat, he imagined what it must have felt like drifting off to sleep on a bed suspended hundreds of meters above ground, inside of a stacked dwelling dozens of layers thick. Knowing that many families are living separate lives directly above and below you, almost entirely segregated by thin layers of metal and concrete, apart from, perhaps the occasional bang on a wall or boom on the floor. Living in one layer sandwiched between many, like an

onion. What ironic existence it must have been, happiness and sorrow, hope and despair, love and resentment, and all sorts of complex social relationships bundled together in one residential package, with no part ever privy to the ongoing elsewhere in the same tile. It must have felt like living together with hundreds of people without ever really getting to know any of them. The sense of togetherness, he imagined must have been present but only in the abstract, with no actual faces to attribute it to. Is that what the "world" used to be like? A sea of abstract emotions and loose connections? He flicked a couple of pages forward.

Pre-Eventian cities, moreover, had to be located close-enough to natural resources, such as fresh water, plants, and animals. Otherwise, the cost of bringing such resources into a city became too high. Moreover, since most cities were founded before the age of flight, it was also necessary to found a city on or near a coast or a large lake, so that its inhabitants had access to the naval travel routes then connecting the world, necessary for commerce and travel. It was also essential to situate cities away from natural hazards like turbulent seas, unfavorable weather, or wide temperature fluctuations.

Once established, cities become fixed in their location even after some or all of the selection pressures that contributed to the original choice of location are lifted. This predicament, of course, was due to the prohibitive cost of relocating an established city in a world absent teleportation.

The city of Venice in the European continent, for example, was initially founded in an area of frequent floods and eventually started to slowly sink and tilt under the collective weight of its ancient buildings, until it was abandoned altogether, despite monumental efforts to reverse or even slow down its inevitable demise. The city of Mexico in the southern American continent was founded near a lake surrounded by volcanic

mountains and a hot earthquake fault line. As if that was not bad enough, the city eventually expanded onto the lakebed over thousands of years. Since it had been built on top of soil composed of three-parts water, the unfortunate descendants of the original settlers were born into a city that needed constant pumping of water from underneath their feet to keep it functioning. With so much water pumped out, the soil got compacted, and about half of the city started to sink. In some places, the ground sank more than 9 meters within one century. The surrounding mountains also meant that pumping water and sewage out of the city was an uphill battle in the literal as well as the metaphoric sense. All the same, generation after generation had to endure all perils to keep the city afloat because moving it was never an option.

Another notable example was the state of Monaco, one of the smallest yet most prosperous national units in the twenty-first-century world. Locked in place by the Mediterranean sea and surrounded by larger nations in all directions, it just could not secure the additional area it desperately needed to accommodate its wealthy citizens. The only option was to expand into the sea, by literally dumping soil and building an artificial landmass of a progressively larger area. Towards the end of that era, Monaco, while still tiny, had nearly doubled in size, eating into the Mediterranean sea at unimaginable cost for lack of a better alternative.

The inhabited world, therefore, was mostly comprised of a few thousand tiny cities collectively occupying less than 1% of the surface area of the planet, yet those were sprinkled haphazardly all over the globe in arrangements that follow the merciless randomness of natural phenomena, as

well as the irreversible choices of founding generations of settlers long since gone.

In that world, it would have been utterly impossible to create a megalopolis comparable to our present day City, which occupies an entire continent from coast to coast, housing some 500 million People at a density of under 65 People per square kilometer.

The limiting factor, of course, wasn't space, since cities used to be well spaced apart and separated by a large geographical void. Rather, a pre-Eventian city had to stop expanding once it reached a critical milestone at which point the distance between its opposite ends was too far for pre-teleport transportation technology to cover in a reasonable amount of time. Once at that size, it made better sense for future inhabitants to move to another, smaller city, or even to establish a new city altogether, than join the existing city further widening its boundaries beyond the limits of convenience.

To give an idea of scale, if you were to combine the landmass of all of the world's urban areas at the pinnacle of pre-Eventian civilization (a task that was unquestionably out of the realm of possibility before the advent of teleportation), you still would wind up with a living area smaller than half of our City today. Inside that collective area lived most of the inhabitants of the world, some 9 billion humans. As one might imagine, it was a grossly overcrowded lifestyle, with population densities reaching as high as 50 thousand humans per square kilometer in some of the most populous cities like Delhi, New Mexico, Tokyo, or Shanghai. In practice, some one billion people lived in filthy slumps, while the rest lived relatively privileged lifestyles in dwellings not so derelict as to pose

sanitary or safety concerns, yet still very modest at best, and typically deplorable in modern standards.

Adonis couldn't help but do the math in his head. This meant that the people in Tokyo, wherever that used to be, must have been crammed together so badly that more than seven hundred of them would live within a tile as big as his own. He couldn't help but swing his head left to right, scanning the width and breadth of his office. It was probably 30 meters across, he guesstimated. It occurred to him that he had never before bothered to examine its dimensions. He had always taken it for granted that an office ought to be that wide. Might it have housed an entire family of Tokyoans back in the world before this world? Or maybe even more than one family?

Even in the least crowded cities, it was still not possible to allow for an arrangement comprising less than 2 or 3 thousand inhabitants per square kilometer. Consequently, only one in a thousand residents was lucky enough to enjoy the rare privilege of a dwelling as large or luxurious as a standard home in today's City. Those prized rarities were classically called "palaces" and in later ages "mansions" and were understandably subjects of envy from the scores of citizens who could only dream about what life might be like in one.

In a sense, the pre-Eventian world was similar to the way it is today in that a tiny proportion of its inhabitants enjoyed a life of luxury while the rest toiled away in extremely modest life arrangements in order to support the elite. That divide, although much milder in gravity back then than it is now, was and had always been the general characteristic of all societies since the dawn of time. It is there, though, where the similarity ends. Aside from the marked difference in magnitude of social inequality characterizing the present from the past, two other differences are most important to understand.

The first is that the haves and have-nots had always been compelled to live side by side within the same general urban area. However segregated societies might have been, pre-teleport locality limitations meant that most services rendered to the haves by the have-nots had to be undertaken within proximity. This setup effectively created a natural limit to how different the lives of different social classes could diverge, because, ultimately, every one of those tiny pre-Eventian cities was inhabited by a mixed population of rich and poor. People from different social classes might have lived different lifestyles, but they still had to interact on a daily basis. They were within frequent sight of each other. They had to communicate, often face to face. This critical distinction proved highly consequential because what is within sight is hard to alienate mentally. Just think of how humane animal farming must have been back when it consisted of small barns scattered all over so that most people were able to observe the treatment of animals at all time. Now compare that to how inhumane animal treatment became (indeed even a century before the Event) as soon as animal farming moved to isolated silos in remote areas such that most people were not able to observe animal treatment directly, even though they might have been fully aware of it in the abstract.

The second significant difference between the present and past systems of social injustice is that in the past, social class distinctions were penetrable. Perhaps as a direct consequence of the co-mingling of different social groups within the borders of the same tiny cities, it was always possible (although with varying degrees of difficulty and success from age to age) for an individual to make the transition from one social class to another. It was possible, at least in

principle, for a poor person to become rich, and vice versa. It was possible for a peasant to marry into royalty, or even for a slave to be freed. In fact, especially towards the decades leading to the Event, it had become increasingly common for people to cross the boundary into privileged life by virtue of merit alone. A talented artist, a gifted novelist, a smart technologist, a pretty model, a successful businessman, were all examples of common ways for any gifted individual to ascend to social privilege simply by proving helpful, innovative, or interesting to his or her peers. This social arrangement caused a general sense of potential equality to simmer throughout all classes alike. People's subscription to classes were temporary, and therefore much less acceptable as a basis for social interactions. If one is convinced that they could potentially jump a fence, then that would compel one to stop thinking about it as a barrier, which in turn changes one's perspective about the general layout of their surroundings.

This, in a nutshell, was the state of the world before it pivoted on its head and ventured into an entirely new age. It was a claustrophobic world weighted down by the sluggish limitation on all of its moving parts, inhabited by tiny clusters of crammed populations each encompassing peculiarly close-quartered combinations of haves and have-nots dancing in and out of the increasingly permeable boundaries between social classes.

At this convenient break point, Adonis lifted his device off his desk to check out a ping. He had heard it vibrate a while back while immersed in the book. It was a ping from Nyx, which was a tad unusual at such late hour. Having started to feel a little tense in the legs, it was a welcome distraction for a few minutes. Adonis grabbed his device and marched out of his office and down the hallway to his guestroom. Once there, he swiped his device to let her in. Nyx materialized on the brown leather sofa to his left. She had a bag of

something in hand which she was munching on. Somehow she emerged in a perfectly fitting posture for the sofa. She didn't need to flinch a muscle to adjust to her new location, as if she had clicked out of an exact copy of it.

"Wow I didn't think you'd answer since it's probably way past your bedtime," she said, indifferently, while focused on her bag of munchies. Then she suddenly looked up at him as if realizing she skipped the pleasantries: "Hey there! Miss me yet?"

"Of course, it's been four long hours. So what's up?"

Nyx finally adjusted her posture, bringing her bare feet off the couch and down onto the marble floor, and swinging her spine straight up.

"Well, Mr. Boyfriend, being that our half-anniversary is coming up. I just wanted to formally, and cordially invite you to a night of celebration, at a hot new quartet known among the cool Citizens as Elysion." She said with a theatrically dramatic overtone.

"Elysion? And what is that?"

"Woohoo! I was hoping you never heard of it," Nyx shot with excitement, "Actually I take that back. I *knew* you must have never heard of it, you hopelessly clueless dork! That's exactly why I picked it. It's a surprise!"

Then a moment later after having thought about it a bit more: "Hey! Don't you dare look it up. Promise!"

"Ok, but I mean, what's it going to be like? Where are we going?" Adonis said with naked suspicion.

"Surprise, Adonis! Are you familiar with the term? It's when you trust your girlfriend and move your clueless butt wherever she ..."'

"Okay okay, I get it. Nothing too crazy though please, I know how it is when you get overexcited about ..."

"Say Yes. Say yes say yes say yes!"

Adonis paused for a second, took another glance at the anxious beauty clenching her fists together in anticipation, and realized that no was not an option.

"Ok. Fine. You win, but don't you ..."

To that Nyx immediately jumped out of the couch and up in the air. "Yaaaay! It's a date then. January 18. Put it on your device. Oh, shoot! I totally should've guilted you for not remembering our half-anniversary date first. Oh well, you're off the hook now. See how nice I am? What a keeper, lucky you!"

She reached out to her device, but just as she was about to click out, she looked back at him and repeated: "Don't you look it up now! You promised."

Adonis couldn't help but smirk. Looking up a new quartet was the last thing on his mind. If she only knew he was counting the seconds to go back to his book and find out more about a world long gone, a world of fragments and chaotic, sacred allure.

"I didn't promise actually. But don't worry I won't."

A sweet smile and a click later, she was gone. Adonis hurried back to his office, only to realize that he had neglected to mark the book before closing it. Not wanting to waste more time getting back to where he left off, he started looking again for a satisfying spot to dive into.

#### Chapter 4: The Century before the Event

The century leading to the Event was referred to as the 21st century by its contemporaries, "21st" relative to a now-extinct calendar system, the specifics of which are entirely irrelevant. During that 21st century, the collective human psyche had come to overvalue concepts like equality, justice, and freedom.

The valuation of such concepts was, of course, ceremonial rather than real. The reality was -as much in the 21st century as during any other time before or after- that in order for the global human project to be prosperous and stable, it must be characterized by sharp inequality, bias, and tyranny. This condition was (and still is) necessary since, in order for any social group to prosper beyond the basic needs of sustenance, another much larger group must dedicate its existence to providing sustenance for it. In other words, in order for a select few to prosper, their needs must be met by the labor of the many.

This zero-sum game is at the heart of every social arrangement man-kind has ever conjured. It is the common abstraction that gave rise to concrete setups such as masters and slaves, peasants and feudal lords, rich and poor, first-world and third-

world, white collar and blue collar, haves and have-nots.

However, this mandatory imbalance, while necessary to support higher human civilization, wasn't at all self-preserving. On the contrary, it was always necessary to exert deliberate effort in order to maintain the imbalance in itself. With those at a disadvantage yearning to level the playing field, and those at an advantage struggling to keep their elevated status, there was always a need to use force to maintain the status quo.

Force in support of inequality was given multiple names and endless justifications, as can be traced throughout the ages. Going to war, maintaining law and order, policing, imprisonment, preemptive strikes, posing sanctions and trade embargoes were just a few of the commonly used aliases.

In being needy of constant reinforcement, systems of inequality were always fragile, and never lasted more than a few centuries in one form or another. Like an unborn avalanche, building potential with every bit of snow piling up on top of a steep mountain, every system of imbalance always carried within itself the seeds of their own eventual and inevitable demise.

Consequently, now and then across civilizations and throughout the ages, the imbalance-de-jour would shatter. Waves of temporary change would sweep across society at a local scale, and illuminated people would proclaim a bold new era of equality. Of course, such a spirit would always be ephemeral. No sooner than a system of inequality shatters, a new minority group would find in the resulting void an invitation to gain the upper hand, creating in doing so a fresh new

system of inequality that is equally needy of guarding measures.

Put in such terms, the Event was just another shift of imbalance, just another swing of the pendulum.

However, one critical property made the Event unique - it was a shift of imbalance into the hands of a new, favored group such that, for the first time in history, there was no longer a need to support the imbalance via the active use of force. The new system of inequality was of a new, markedly different kind. It was inequality that could self-sustain. It was inequality that did not require effort to perpetuate. Taken to the ultimate extreme, inequality was finally turned into something perfectly stable, self-reinforcing, and therefore permanent. In a real sense, the Event was human cruelty at its most refined manifestation.

In order to understand the Event, this final swing of the pendulum before it came to its current and final resting position, one must be made aware of the state of the world in the decades preceding it. It was a world fragmented into dozens of self-governing regions called nations. Those nations varied greatly in their size, access to natural resources, and strategic location. This variance was very convenient since it enabled the bigger, better-located nations to grow stronger and dominate over the less fortunate ones.

One particular nation called America -named after the North American continent where it was situated- had finally come to dominate over all other nations in a unipolar arrangement unprecedented in history. America had risen to that position of power following a rapid succession of global wars which allowed it to flex its geopolitical muscles and demonstrate the

superiority of its geographical location relative to all other nations.

This is because America, as it happens, was the result of the progressive unification of 63 smaller zones over a period of over three centuries. The resulting unit of government was in control of an entire continent, with vast oceans on either side separating it from every other competitor. To the North lay the vast impassable arctic region. To the south lay Mexico, a satellite nation that, though technically sovereign, had been reduced in practice to nothing more than a protective buffer zone.

In a pre-teleport age, being cloistered by such vast geographical buffers served an enormous advantage in safety and therefore in stability. It meant that, for an enemy combatant to set foot on American soil, they would first have to cross an entire ocean onboard a battleship, a journey that took more than a week in plain sight of the unblinking orbital sensor arrays that were already in standard use by national security agencies at the time.

It was of course still possible to attack America using aerial, ballistic, explosive projectiles which would cause damage at a cross-continental distance, but those weapons were only capable of minimal damage using conventional explosives. The only weapons capable of causing significant damage over a distance at the time were nuclear fission explosives, but using those would have been effectively ruled out as an option by any rational party since it carried the risk of cascading, global, and irreversible environmental disaster.

It was therefore well understood by all other nations that mounting any significant offensive on

America would amount to a formidable challenge. Moreover, mounting an offensive big enough to pose an existential threat to America was squarely beyond the realm of possibility, save a scenario of assured global catastrophe.

In contrast, every other nation in the world was relatively vulnerable to attack. Nations were fragmented over the geography of continents such that most were surrounded by peers from all directions, forming land borders that were inviting for armies to cross quickly and unexpectedly. What few other nations occupied islands (like Japan, Greenland, Taiwan, New Zealand, and Madagascar) were too small to be self-sufficient, too vulnerable to harsh climate, or too close to the mainland to be effectively sheltered.

Worse still, the relatively small size of most nations meant that their cities were within reach of the aerial combat vehicles of neighboring nations. Such proximity meant that an attack, if it ever came, could come whizzing through the skies above at supersonic speeds, and with as little as a five-minute warning.

Apart from America, the only nation large enough as to have a relatively safe interior was a nation called Russia. This fact made Russia a natural contender for world dominance, but its location did not allow access to international waters via any coastal lines. Consequently, while relatively safe from attack, Russia could not mount an attack of its own without its armies first having to cross the boundaries of some of its neighbors, a huge complication effectively ruling out the possibility of surprise warfare.

Controlling an entire continent from coast to coast also allowed America to profit from a vast and very

diverse pool of natural resources. The abundance of supply made that nation uniquely self-sufficient and therefore capable of forcing its hand on all other nations when needed. With the balance tipped in its favor, America soon grew to control all maritime trade routes and deployed fleets of fighter ships to every corner of the globe. In effect, America had its military forces deployed at the doorstep of every nation, while maintaining an ocean-wide separation between its homeland and the armies of every other nation.

As the era of fossil fuel energy drew to an end, America proceeded to deploy the world's first and only orbital solar array, then known as OSA, an innovation that cemented its state of independence by making it the world's only energy-sufficient nation, and the largest supplier of energy to most nations all over the world. Perhaps more importantly, that project secured America a solid foothold on space, preempting the possibility of another nation developing any space-based military capabilities as to pose a threat to America from up above.

With space warfare no longer an option, the only remaining threat scenario that was geopolitically feasible would have been for a group of nations to ally with Mexico against America and mount a ground offensive from the South. Against that, America prepared simply by deploying troops all over Mexico, first on the pretext of drug traffic control, and later for peacekeeping and policing and increasingly violent population. Not surprisingly, most of the citizens of Mexico welcomed the presence of professional American troops as a fresh alternative to failing local law enforcement organizations. Besides, in order for American troops to troop around Mexico efficiently, much of the missing civil infrastructure

had to be built to American standards and on America's expense. In the end, and over the course of a few decades, Mexico was effectively reduced to a well guarded, well-compensated buffer zone protecting America's Southern borders from the inhabitants of the vast continental landmass known as South America.

Amazingly, neither spare warfare nor Mexican betrayal was considered a significant threat to American stability at the time. Instead, the American population was focused on entirely invented threats such as cyber-warfare, which was a term coined at the time meaning warfare conducted over the medium of telecommunication. It is perhaps impossible to explain to a present-day audience how the superpower of that era was serious about protecting its virtual (i.e., nonexistent) property. Perhaps during the "Information Age" -as it came to be called-, possession of information was viewed to be a hard asset. It is also possible that, in a pre-teleport age, control over telecommunication channels was as important as any other real asset, since telecommunication was the only means for societies to stay organized over large distances. Alternatively, it may be that, during those primitive ages when humanity's control over the physical world was still feeble, nations resorted to focus on controlling virtual assets as an alternative.

At any rate, with all real and imaginary threats to their prosperity thwarted, and towards the end of their era, some 95% of the world's wealth was under the control of the Americans, who accounted for less than 5% of the total human population. To maintain their burdening advantage, Americans had to resort to policing the rest of the world's nations, picking regional wars

now and then, here and there, just big enough and wide enough to assure that no other single nation, union, or alliance grew strong enough as to pose a threat.

However, unlike any other superpower throughout history, the American nation took an overly soft approach to power. So much so, that much of the vassal world was effectively allowed to prosper. Under the leadership of America, and in an effect that became known as Pax Americana, war was virtually non-existent globally, except in small temporary pockets here and there over the decades wherever and whenever America deemed absolutely necessary to maintain strategic interests. Hunger was mostly absent in all but the poorest regions in Africa and for short periods inside war-stricken cities. Much of the world population was sheltered, well fed, even reasonably educated. A formal declaration of an unprecedentedly generous set of universal human rights was drafted and ratified by most nations, including not only the right to freedom from servitude, but even the right to education, healthy lifestyle, and personal fulfillment.

In short, the have-nots of that era were living in remarkably good conditions, considering that they were living under the boots of powerful lords. This arrangement stood in sharp contrast with all historical precedent, from the Roman and Persian empires of the Iron Age to the Japanese empire, European colonialists and the Soviet Federation of the Post-Industrial Age.

Perhaps that marked difference in world order came as a consequence of the fact that America, unlike any other superpower ever before, wasn't in any need to expand. It had already conquered an entire continent, with sufficient natural resources to

secure its basic needs and more than enough space for its inhabitants to prosper. Conquering any off-shore lands beyond the neighboring islands it had strategically grabbed hold of would have presented more significant complications to America than it would have secured benefit. This meant that other nations, while weaker and indefensible, were safe from being conquered by an expansionist America. They would have also been safe from invasion by any other nation since America had a vital interest in enforcing world peace since the status quo ensured that no other nation grew strong enough to pose a threat to its dominance over the world.

Another critical factor that might have helped induce America's soft-power strategy is that America, unlike any former superpower, was not the embodiment of any one race, or one ideology. Instead, it was composed of a massive body of inhabitants from all sorts of races, ideologies, aspirations, histories, and cultures. The only common denominator between Americans was that they had all wound up on the inside of its borders whether by birth or immigration and were all therefore invested in its continued preponderance of power. It was much harder, therefore, to justify cruelty or insolence over citizens of other nations, cruelty being much more comfortable to justify based on profound, inherent differences such as race, language, or culture.

In that one respect, America was perhaps not unlike our modern day City: An extensive collection of People with no common denominator other than happening to be on the right side of the table when the music stopped.

At any rate, America's peculiar way of running the world resulted in significant problems as one might

expect with hindsight. Since most of the nations of the world were allowed to remain industrial, global environmental consequences were set in motion that made it necessary to divert primary resources to expensive, complicated solutions like exploring renewable energy and curbing industrial waste. Since most of the inhabitants of the world were not only well fed but empowered to explore culinary cuisines, a considerable strain on global food supply chains inevitably started to build up. That global strategy of prosperity for all wouldn't scale for long, as everybody was starting to realize since the planet could not support lavish lifestyles for its billions of inhabitants simultaneously. Decade after decade, the problems grew more substantial, and the deficits piled up. As with any unsustainable system, America's global empowerment strategy carried within itself the seeds of its own demise. It so happened that the relief, when it came, was delivered swiftly and preemptively by another party altogether - thus bringing our planet to our present state of equilibrium, with about half a billion people living lavishly while the rest of humanity wallows in pre-industrial hell.

Adonis was struggling to keep up with the book as the text was peppered with unfamiliar terms. It felt like the more answers he found, the more questions he was left with. Still, he decided to plow through and follow that long America story to whatever point the writer was trying to make. A couple of pages later he stumbled upon a spot that felt worthy of careful reading:

Even though the United States of America as a nation seized to exist abruptly during the Event, the cultural heritage of America has survived. It is probably the sole cultural survivor from the pre-Eventian age. The reason for this exception is that, during the decades immediately preceding the Event, America's cultural dominance was at a peak, essentially overwhelming every other culture of the time. The American way of life, along with its social

norms, status symbols, food, language, music, even sports and hobbies, all became globally dominant. So much so in fact, that every other competing cultural presence dwindled in comparison, even among its respective people. The Europeans had progressively become less and less European and more and more American, the nations of the Far East had effectively become geographically distant satellites of America, and so on. Even the world's many different ways of speaking and different writing systems, then known as languages, had all but disappeared in favor of the American way of speaking, then called English. When the Event happened, the world had already become a giant America culturally speaking. Since all the Event did was to select a tiny few and bestow upon them the privilege of citizenship to the City to the exclusion of all others, those and their descendants whom we now call the Citizens naturally carried forward with them what was once the American culture. In the sense of cultural continuity and not nationality, it is America and America alone that survived the Event. In that sense, we the Citizens, though not American, are the descendants of the American way of life.

It was an appealing thought, Adonis decided, for an ancient city to be wiped off the face of the Earth, yet somehow survive in spirit through the actions of those who inherited the planet from it. It was a bit like our dead ancestors, all long gone, yet in a sense still somehow living precariously through us, in as far as their personalities got imprinted onto our own through upbringing. He wondered how much of his own character was genuinely his own, and much an echo from the distant past. If the writing he was reading was an American thing, and the food he ate, the clothes he wore, were all American things, then wasn't he in fact at least in part a citizen of America? And if that much can be said about the imprint from hundreds of years ago, then how about the imprint from a couple of generations past? How about the imprint from his own... He pushed the thought away. Sent it back where it came from. Doubling back on the book in hand, he flicked a page forward as if to make sure to reset his train of thought. Then he dove back in:

The more Americanized the world became, the more secure America felt about its prominent status among other nations. By the middle of the 21st century, there was hardly any open competition left, excepting Russia. Being effectively landlocked in a world absent teleportation, Russia was understandably engaged in a constant game of wits with America centered around gaining and losing favor with the ring of small nations separating Russia from sea access. However, even there, it was not a real rivalry as much as it was an effort to block Russia's access to international seas using proxy conflicts, cyber warfare, and espionage, always carefully maneuvering to avoid escalation into a direct military confrontation.

Aside from that, there were only very few tiny pockets of regional challenges to America's dominant status, including a small inconsequential nation in the Korean peninsula, and a few rogue militias in the Mesopotamian region, all too primitive as to pose any real concern.

This perceived lack of worthy challengers triggered a false sense of national security throughout America, which built up over the years until it became deeply rooted during the later decades of the 21st century. Free from all pressure to maintain superiority, the collective American culture developed a focused interest on the improvement of the general human condition everywhere in the world, by making sure other nations were given a chance to develop and prosper. In that spirit, American universities were open to students from all over the world, and American scientific organizations would eagerly share scientific findings openly and would often enter into extensive collaborations with foreign counterparts.

There was even an official American governmental agency dedicated to giving significant monetary aid to developing nations in order to help accelerate their growth trajectory. Naturally, this strategy of global empowerment allowed for an increasingly developed world, with pockets of scientific research thriving everywhere outside America.

So it went on, with years and decades passing by, and America increasingly preoccupied with theoretical concerns and phantom threats such as puny organizations declaring open hostility from impossibly large distances, and increasingly complacent towards real rivalry from the nations of the "developed world" which it viewed as friendly allies.

In a zero-sum game, of course, there is no such thing as an ally, as history would ultimately confirm.

With hindsight, one can see that America's soft-power strategy was always inherently flawed since it allowed for many other nations to be stable and prosperous enough to carry out their independent scientific endeavors. It was of course just a matter of time until a nation stumbled across a scientific discovery that would secure the technological breakthrough required to nullify America's hitherto-insurmountable geographical advantage.

As it happens, the discovery of teleportation and the ensuing demise of America was eventually delivered at the hands of residents of a most benign ally: A peaceful, remote nation called Australia.

Adonis put the book down and let his head sink back into the seat's headrest. He allowed his eyes to drift closed for a second and

marveled over a "world" long gone, a world full of conflict, allies and enemies, constantly engaged in duals, sometimes overtly, but often covertly. As turbulent as such a world must have been, it must have been much more interesting to inhabit. All things considered, he thought, theirs might have been a better age to live in. An age of conflict, with all the implied choices one must make about allegiance to a "nation" in defiance of another, surely presents one with a choice to be a hero. That alone is enough for life to be worth living. Today's world, with its blinding monotony, achieves safety and prosperity only by blurring away all colors into one depressing shade of grey. He mulled over it for a second, then reached a conclusion that psychotherapy must be an invention of the new age since nobody in the passionate times of the "Information Age" could've had the mental vacancy to develop a problem such as depression or the like.

He closed his eyes and dreamt about Australia. That primitive city-among-many, each fragmented into hundreds of tiny cities separated by vast empty land, and each city so overcrowded that people had to resort to living vertically above each other in minuscule, tomb-like residences. Yet those primitives were on the verge of turning the world on its head with a bold initiative that was going to cross the concept of social injustice to brave new frontiers.

A buzz from his device interrupted him drifting away. Time was up. He reluctantly closed the book and gave the cover one last touch, as if to ascertain it was real. He contemplated peeling the TP strip out of it, but then decided he wanted to "borrow" the same book again - perhaps after a few days to avert suspicion- and finish reading the interesting part. With a click on his device, he made it vanish, then dashed out of the office. Once in his freshroom, he took off his clothes and watched them disappear off the marble floors and into oblivion as he closed his eyes and prepared for jet-water to rain on his tired body before he'd lie in bed and surrender to sleep.

## **zeta**

*"Against boredom the gods themselves fight in vain." —Friedrich Nietzsche*

The sea has a remarkable ability to be calm and turbulent at the very same moment. It is something you wouldn't notice looking out from the shore. But when you're far enough offshore, like onboard a yacht or on an island, the sea just might welcome your visit by revealing some of her inner wonders. You'd be treated to a vast canvas of waves, leaping out and crashing back into nothing, far out in the distance as far as the eye can see. Hundreds, thousands of them, incessantly battling each other with impossible determination. Yet for all that rioting and commotion, the sea remains a surprisingly calm creature. Just close your eyes or gaze up at the bright blue sky, and you'd immediately realize the big contrast between the turbulent visual and the serene, soothing sound that comes out of it. Is it perhaps put in place as a symbolic reminder for us? That however tempestuous the here and now might seem, everything ultimately washes out if you zoom out far enough. And all that remains is the calm of monotony. A rock, gently spinning around a shiny star, both drifting silently into...

"Which would have been Okay except that the bastard still maintains that he *eventually* will get the haircut right. Like I'm *ever* going to let him touch Eos again! Just look at the poor thing! Now she looks like a cross between a poodle and a squirrel."

"What's the big deal, she's still a work in progress! Trust me, when I'm done with her, she's going to be the best-groomed poodle in the whole wide City!"

"Yeah, in your dreams maybe."

Katina's dog was actually a fluffy-white Samoyed. Somehow, Atlas had talked her into letting him experiment on grooming the poor little thing last week, and it had been nonstop drama ever since. Unapologetic as Atlas always was, Katina decided to bring the dog along to the pod this morning in order to end all controversy and get everyone to admit how horrible the haircut actually was. Faced with a unanimous vote, Atlas quickly switched to a work-in-progress narrative with the skillful tact of a pre-Eventian politician.

"The real question is why did you let such an objectionable character like Atlas anywhere near your precious dog in the first place?" Adonis finally broke his silence, having lost all hope of a calm,

meditative time at the pod. In retrospect, that was too much to hope for given present company.

"Yeah, why did you?" Ponos agreed, "And why don't you come lie down over here with the rest of us? If I keep twisting my neck like that, I'm gonna get cramps."

"No way I'm lying out in the sun, you guys ruin your own skin all you want. I don't have any wrinkles, and I don't plan on getting any, thank you very much!" Katina yelled from under the gazebo where she was lying, ironically in a tanning bed. Ponos, Atlas, and Adonis were out in the sunny part of the pod, on tanning beds lined up in parallel, each facing the full view of the ocean. Lying in swim trunks right next to each other made Adonis stand out as that man with the most athletic figure. In contrast to Adonis's naturally toned torso, Ponos's body looked brown, short and frail, and Atlas's fat hairy belly looked like it belonged to a different species altogether. Had they been a pack of wolves, Adonis would have definitely been the alpha male and they all knew it, yet never spoke of it. Being a group of Citizens, however, destined for a life of endless luxuries without a hint of struggle, meant that somebody like Atlas can capture the spotlight instead.

The pod, of course, was a man-made island, one of the hundreds sprinkled around the southern coast of the City. Each was flat as a pancake, and about five acres in size. Typically built in a bay or a lagoon about a mile away from the coast, a pod was the perfect destination for a day of lounging with friends and dipping into the refreshing pool, or even venturing out in the ocean when no sharks are in sight.

All you had to do was book it a day or two ahead of time, and Hermes would make it so only your invited friends had access to your private outing.

Every pod featured a large circular platform extending partly out of the island and over the ocean. About twenty yards in diameter, the entire platform was made into a pool, with a 10-foot deep center that tapers off to a 1 foot shallow around the circumference. Tanning beds and benches were dipped right in the shallow part, facing radially outward so that one might lie down and take in the ocean view to the fullest while partially submerged in pristine fresh pool water. The entire platform rotated slowly counterclockwise so that the loungers can enjoy a full scenic view without moving a muscle.

At the center of the platform was a raised wooden deck just high enough to clear the water. It came fully equipped with outdoor couches and tables, as well as fire pits and torches for when it got a bit chilly. Most of the area of the deck was under the shade of a large gazebo made with swaths of silky white fabric. This made for a perfect retreat from the outer tanning beds whenever the sun's sting got uncomfortable. As usual, Katina had arranged for a tanning bed to be set under the gazebo so she can relax in the breeze away from the sun. The rest of the group always gave her a hard time about it, although one look at her pasty white skin would convince any skeptic that she might very well melt out in the open.

"Oh, there he is," Atlas said in response to a muffled buzzing noise from his device that was buried under the towel on his bench.

"Mr. Solon is finally ready to grace us with his ominous company. Let me go see what's the holdup."

Atlas tapped his device and disappeared. To Solon's tile most likely, to guilt him into getting ready faster. In a moment they'd be both here, a round trip of a thousand miles perhaps, who knows maybe even farther. Nobody knows where anything is situated anymore because nobody really cares. A mile away might as well be a thousand. Everywhere is precisely one click away. Adonis tried to map out in his mind the specifics of the trip Atlas just made, in pre-Eventian terms. First, there'd be a walk to a deck, then a boat ride from the pod to the mainland. From there you'd have to take a car or a bus to an airport or a looport, then pass multiple security checks, wait for your scheduled ride however long it takes, then board and sit in a tiny container smaller than a freshroom, for hours possibly, until you reach the landing destination. Another car or bus ride still, or even a whole other connecting flight, all to get you from here to there.

"The bastard's ditching us. Some girl he met last night, they're going to the Apples. What a traitor!" Atlas was back in a flash. Alone. Amazingly, he had materialized on his tanning bed in the exact same position as before he left. It was almost as if he never departed on a thousand mile journey.

"Amateur!" Ponos echoed.

What a shame, Adonis thought. What used to be a memorable adventure has now been reduced to an absent-minded tap of a finger. Adonis felt a vague sense of loss like a born-blind person might feel

when considering what the experience of vision might be like. He had been reading more regularly lately. In the few weeks since he first started seeing the corrector, he had perfected the routine. Twice a week he'd switch the strip from one book to another right under the corrector's nose, and then spend night after night diving into a world of wonders no longer known to anyone but a select precious few. He had gone through books, magazines, letters, even boxes of memorabilia full of refreshingly unfamiliar objects. His obsession had started to pull him away from his real life and plant him in a between zone where every thought, every moment, is laced with reflection on the world before this world. And he had welcomed it. Embraced it. He ached to know more, savored every little detail. His thrust had only grown more insatiable. As primitive as it was, as violent, turbulent, and contentious as it was, the world before the Event had one inescapably alluring quality: It hadn't gone irreversibly awry yet. It hadn't tipped over and was therefore fixable. That sense of hope that something could *still* be done, at least in principle, to make things right again, it made Adnois fall in love with that era. He wanted to hold on to the taste of that sentiment, if even in daydreams fantasies. Just for a few minutes at a time, to have it linger on just a bit longer. Why do the most precious feelings always tend to be the most fleeting?

The other night he had come upon a wooden memorabilia box, small enough for him to hold in a single hand. It had a tiny metallic clasp that had apparently rusted a bit, which was a sure sign that it was the creation of an ancient civilization that hadn't completely mastered metalworking. With great curiosity, he had swung it open, and inside it, he found a few curious objects. The first two were wrapped together in a single sheet of wrapping paper: A metallic model structure bearing the cryptic phrase "La Tour Eiffel" etched on one side, and a bronze model of pyramid fused together with a creature that seemed to have the head of a man and the body of an animal. Left without any protective wrapping was a metallic loop stuck to a rectangular sheet shiny rubber that was painted on either side with red and white stripes, with a red leaf in the middle of the white stripe. Beside it, he found a block of ivory, so elaborately decorated with etchings of dragons and stars and lions, bearing markings that consisted of groups of intersecting lines and dashes and boxes, that felt to him like a written message of some sort although he had no way to decipher it. Adonis, of course, hadn't the first clue what any of these objects were supposed to be. But that didn't stop him from enjoying a lengthy, elaborate examination of each object, trying to find a common connection that could explain why those particular

ancient objects ended up preserved inside the box, surviving the Event and persisting for eternity as the rest of the world they hail from had perished. He failed to think of any reasonable explanation, and as is the way with the allure of any unsolved mystery, ever since that night he found himself often going back in thought to the matter of the box and its contents.

"Wooohooo, way to go Adonis!" A loud cheer brought him back. Apparently, the group's conversation had once again landed on a topic that involves him.

"An actual quartet? I would ask except I'm pretty sure you've never been to a quartet before."

"Not any quartet you guys," Katina yelled from her shady hideout, "Elysion is the hottest most romantic quartet in the City!"

"Yeah, yeah oh wow. That's the one where they take you to ..."

"Shush! not one word!" Katina quickly interrupted Atlas's opportunity to show off his knowledge of romantic getaways, "Nobody tell him anything. Nyx made me promise not to tell him anything about Elysion. She wants it to be a surprise. Isn't she the sweetest?"

"Lucky man. This one sounds like a keeper," Ponos agreed, "But hey what's the occasion?"

"Oh, nothing big really - " Adonis tried to say.

"It's their half-anniversareee!" Katina took over, singing out the last syllable while petting her fluffy little dog who had curled up on the bench right next to her, "Isn't that the sweetest thing? I'm telling you guys I'm the best matchmaker ever. She's the best, isn't she you guys?"

"Well then how come you never hooked *me* up with any of your friends miss matchmaker?!" Atlas was quick to complain.

"Maybe because you're such a great gentleman," Ponos mused. Adonis cleared his throat. "Guys, calm down. She hooked up her best girlfriend with me cause I'm obviously the best guy she knows. I think now she should match the runner-up to the runner-up, and then whoever remains can go out with Atlas."

Katina's chuckle came loud even from as far away as she was. "That's exactly it Atlas. Don't worry we'll figure out someone for you. Are you maybe interested in dating furry little creatures? Cause I happen to have an excellent hookup. She might even let you groom her if you promise to do a better job than last time."

"Yeah yeah, you guys make fun all you want. I do well on my own thank you very much. You should've seen the beauty I went out with last week. Long blond hair with a bronze tan." Then a second later,

"No wait that was the one from before that. Last week was the brown girl I think."

"Sounds like somebody's mixing reality with fantasy," Ponos smirked.

Yes, somebody was. Just not Atlas, Adonis thought.

A quick chilly breeze had convinced Katina to get up and out of the shade for a bit. Standing at the edge of the wooden deck, she started to lower her little toe just enough to skim the surface of the water with the focus and care of an open-heart surgeon. The way the central deck was positioned, there was no way in and out of it except through the deep part of the pool. Of course one could click past the pool, but then one would have to admit to Atlas that one was too chicken to dip into the water. This provided for endless entertainment whenever Katina decided to cross out into the sun for a minute or cross back into the shade for a while. She was as finicky about the cold as she was about the sun, and so she never failed to shriek loudly as soon as she dipped her pinky toe into the water now and again.

Eos stood up on all fours and watched her mistress intently as she dipped and screamed and then dipped some more.

"You can do it you daredevil you!" Atlas and Ponos somehow yelled out in unison. The laughter eventually drowned away exposing the cries of seagulls in the distance. Adonis couldn't spot the birds as the platform had already rotated past the ocean and his bench was now facing the grassy section of the pod. His vantage point was saturated in dark green, as a vast expanse of lush lawn, perfectly groomed into a leisure field lay in front of him. About an acre in size, the area was bordered by thick bushes landscaped into perfectly vertical walls, this had the effect of blocking the wind and noise from the ocean making for a comfy, quiet paradise for pets and their owners to let loose and have fun. Soon Katina would get out there and bounce a beach ball around for Eos to run after. Every fifteen minutes or so she'd click a sun spray into existence and use up the last bit of it on herself and on Eos, even though her pet's skin happens to be protected by a thick white coat of hair.

Adonis felt like he knew the routine so well, he could pretty much fast forward the day in his mind. As Katina played with Eos the boys would walk to the sandy part of the pod for a round of volleyball. With Solon's absence ruling out a doubles game, Atlas would propose taking turns, then he'd come up with a slick argument of why he should take the first turn. Later in the evening the four of

them would transition to the white plastic patio set that's sitting in the opposite, shallow part of the pool, and turn on the fire pit to balance the chill of their bare feet submerged to the ankles. Atlas would splash Katina until she threatens to leave, then apologize profusely and promise to stop, keeping a smirk on his face all along. Throughout it all, and despite being an essential part of the group experience, Adonis would experience an all familiar yet always curious spectator sense about it all. He would feel as if he was there to observe, not to participate. Eventually, hunger would set in, and they would grab their devices and tap some food and drinks, then spend a couple of hours more munching and laughing about each other, exchanging endless streams of cynical remarks. Talking about nothing is what it really was. If they do get on a topic, it would be about a new work project that Ponos had started or a heated discussion about dog breeds featuring Katina on one side and no real opposition from any of the guys. Invariably the conversation would veer towards a hot new pastime in the City. Maybe a new activity that opened up, a new tile that they discovered, or a new dating destination like a quartet or the like. It occurred to Adonis that he couldn't remember the last time he had discussed anything of value with them. Or with *anybody* for that matter, except maybe the corrector. But even with the corrector, it was never really a dialogue. It was more like listening to someone preach while trying not to say much back as to reveal the real reason of the visit.

Adonis felt an unexpected tingling on the fingertips of his right hand which was extending out of his bench and down towards a square tabletop. Glancing over to investigate, he had apparently rested his hand over the brush Katina had brought to groom Eos. The brush, no doubt, was made of high quality "sapien" hair, which was just a fancy way of saying it was made of hair from Farmers. At first realization, he cringed a bit. Adonis had always steered away from genuine sapien products, from down winter jackets to fluffy pillows as well as natural, sapien-fat soap and candles. But then he found himself overtaken with curiosity, and he grabbed the brush and flicked its well-trimmed bristles with his thumb. He smirked inwards at the irony that this was perhaps the closest he was ever going to get to touching an actual Farmer. He found himself wondering who the hair actually belonged to. Was it a man, or a woman, or perhaps a child? He wondered whether that person, whoever he or she was, had any idea what their hair was going to be used for: to groom a pet dog that lived life at a much higher standard than they could ever imagine, much less hope to experience. He wondered why his thinking was so different than that of all of his friends, but that

thought quickly degenerated into a silent protest against everybody else. Why couldn't *they* be more sensible to these matters like he was? He eyed them, lounging peacefully and running around playfully. Why couldn't they sympathize with Farmers like they do with each other? Why couldn't Katina cringe at the thought of using the body of another human being for benefit, like she would at the thought of a pin prick to her little dog's paw? Why couldn't Atlas stand up for Farmers like he does for his buddies, always looking after the group and making sure everyone is comfortable and taken care of, and going out of his way to see to it that everyone is having a good time? Why couldn't Ponos invest his endless work energy in ideas to grant Farmers a better standard of life, like he does tirelessly week after week at one City department or another? Why couldn't...

A big wave crashed, as if to metaphorically wash off his negative-thought cycle as the corrector would have called it. The group chuckled in harmony, still apparently cheering for Katina to let go of the deck where she was still struggling to keep her hips from sinking into the chilly pool. An ocean's width away, people were probably dying of thirst. Except they were not people. They were Farmers, as in human animals. In all likelihood, they were herded in flocks and locked up in sheds like cattle. Adonis hadn't slept much the night before, reading about slavery in the old world. At least they had the decency to call it what it was. To call somebody a slave implies that you had arrested their freedom, which means that you accepted that they *could* be free, at least in principle. You wouldn't call a *cow* a slave. But in the here and now, most human beings aren't even considered sentient beings. To be regarded as slaves would be a step up for them. Adonis found himself clenching a fist, then decided to let it pass. He surrendered to the sun and the breeze and the rumbling of crashing waves of an ocean separating him from the countless souls trapped like him in an age they don't belong to.

## eta

*"It's not enough that I succeed. Everyone else must fail." —Atilla the Hun*

Tonight's book was slim and modern looking, even though it must have been published no less than fifty years ago. Its cover was plain-white and glossy as if to match the frosted glass of Adonis's office desktop. Its design was minimalistic. No cover art, no fancy fonts, no elaborate binding like the other books he'd been borrowing over the last month. Adonis held it in one palm and flicked the pages quickly from end to end with his thumb. Its sheets were fresh as if nobody had opened it before. Could he really be the first? It was doubtful. But perhaps more plausibly, he might be the last.

### How Teleportation Changed the World by Sudhakar Parashuram

#### Preface

Among the endlessly shifting pressures facing humanity throughout the ages, one particular challenge was ever-present in every era since the dawn of civilization: the challenge of moving people and things from place to place across geographical territories.

Different stages of technological advancement allowed for different solutions to that age-old problem, with horse and carriage trails giving way to tiled streets, paved roads, railway networks, highway networks, underground mass transportation systems, jet planes, hyperloop systems, supersonic capsules, plasma aircraft, and so on in a seemingly endless succession.

However, to a skeptic or perhaps to a realist, this progression might have seemed like an uphill battle against the unyielding inertia of objects. The more clever man could get, the more efficient the devised mode of transportation might be, yet it

always and forever needed to combat the unyielding friction of inertial bodies moving through physical space. The more stuff one had to move, the more the time and energy required. The more massive the objects, the more effort needed to transport them, longer distances and tougher terrains always proving more taxing to move across.

Towards the end of the pre-Eventian age, it seemed like civilization had hit a glass ceiling relating to advancements in the field of transportation. Supersonic speeds in the order of Mach-2 to Mach-3 were becoming commonplace for everyday transportation of people and goods, and the general scientific consensus was that transportation probably couldn't get much faster or more efficient than it already was. Consequently, the global scientific apparatus had turned its attention to other matters. In retrospect, such tends to be the general atmosphere before every truly transformative breakthrough.

As it happened, the next breakthrough in transportation was not one of quantity, but of a different quality altogether. For the first time in history, a human being (perched onto a desk in a lab room somewhere in the world) succeeded in the transport of an object from point A to point B without having to move the object along a path between those two points. It was, in every way, a radically different approach to solving the problem of getting objects from place to place - instead of moving an object from A to B, said object would vanish from A and instantaneously appear at B. The process would not take any measurable time, but that's not the most astonishing part of the innovation.

The most astonishing part was that the amount of energy needed to get an object to vanish and reappear somewhere else, was not proportional to the object's size or weight, nor was it dependent on the distance between A and B, or on the terrain separating them. Rather, the amount of energy needed was constant and considerably smaller than the energy needed to light up a small room for a few hours.

Sitting on his desk somewhere in the world, that first scientist who accomplished that feat might have been thinking to himself that their innovation was going to transform the entire world into a Utopia of never-before-seen magnificence, turning most of the world's problems into things of the past. Little could they have known how diabolical the consequences of their invention are going to be, and how, far from being the world's new hope, it was going to be the prerequisite for the world's darkest and most cruel era of inequality - turning most of the inhabitants of the world into much worse than slaves.

That person, that scientist, whomever he or she might have been - we have no hope of ever knowing - had unknowingly ushered in the era of hopeless subjugation of man by his fellow man, the era of the farming human beings like cattle.

The preface went on for a few more pages. Adonis put the book down. It is the *details* of the transition into this hopeless new era that he ultimately wanted to know. The step by step, play by play. How did the world die exactly? And what agents brought about its final demise? He had already decided that he wouldn't be getting the answers from this particular book. He imagined chapter after chapter talking about the particulars of the scientific discovery itself, not the horrors that it unleashed. Although this book was clearly written after the Event, perhaps at a time when people were still interested in documenting history, it just didn't sound like the kind of book that tackles the big picture. It certainly wasn't thick enough to fit the big

picture, he decided. He should've never put faith into a book with such thin profile and glossy white cover, in retrospect.

Adonis still didn't fully understand why he had decided to pause on reading the first book he had landed. "The World Before this World," it was titled. That one, in between its old leather-bound covers, *that* one had the answer. And he knew it too. Down to the right chapter. He had stopped at "Chapter 5: The Event". Knowing full well that in it was what he ultimately wanted to get at.

Perhaps it was precisely because he knew that he had decided to wait some more. Those books, they were the only truly exciting aspect of his life. Something inside him wanted to prolong the experience as much as possible, to save the best for last. It was the kind of patience that would compel one to save the dessert for the last course of a meal. Salad just doesn't taste as appetizing once you've had a slice of crunchy smooth apple pie.

So he had been pacing himself. Taking controlled dives into that mysterious world of the past. Night after night, careful not to click more than one object at a time, and not to keep anything in his possession for more than a few hours at a time. His strategy was skillfully crafted, and his execution was flawless. This way, nobody in the whole wide City could have possibly been alerted of his secret nightly perversion. Adonis felt proud of himself, of his ability to pull something so daring unaided. He decided that it takes a remarkable person to do that. He had "the spirit of a lion," Atlas had told him the other day at the pod.

Not that Atlas would ever say something like that in public. Surrounded by friends, Atlas was all about cynicism, sly remarks, and captivating half-made-up stories. His heartfelt sincerity, he only showed to his closest friends, and always in private, since those are not good currency if you were trying to score popularity points and keep the spotlights continually shining on you. But when the group had headed out to the sandy stretch at the pod the other day, racing for a skinny dip in the dark before the sea got too cold, for a few minutes Adonis and Atlas were left behind on the benches, and Atlas was quick to take off the mask for a few.

"I feel your pain bro," he had suddenly started. "I know you don't want to talk about it, but I just want you to know you're not alone."  
"It's not that man, it's just that ..."   
"The Farmers I know. You can always talk to me man, you know that

right? I'm not one to judge. And if I were to judge you, I would never say you're sick. If anything, I'd say that you have a heart of pure gold. So much so that it's causing you all kinds of trouble. But I respect that, I really do. You're kind, to a fault. You care too much for your own sake, you care about everyone and everything - absolutely everything, not just in the whole wide City but even beyond. You feel responsible not just for your friends, but for animals and plants, for the whole world and everything in it. Even the framers. That's too much weight for any one man to carry, and I can see how much it weighs you down. But hey, if there's anyone strong enough to carry all that, it would definitely be you bro."

"Thanks, Atlas. I really appreciate you saying that."

"It's just that, you're my buddy, and I worry for you. I can see it eating at you on the inside. I can see it in your eyes just how tired your kind heart is making you. You're too smart for your own sake, maybe you can try to let go and kick it once in a while."

Atlas paused for a while. He must've felt like he needed to lighten up the atmosphere after such a solemn speech. He turned to face Adonis and added:

"The corrector will help. He helped you last year, we all noticed. You got much better after you started on the treatment. You totally rocked it!"

"Yeah well, I'm going to see him again tomorrow. I promise I will do my best to stop caring so much," Adonis assured, knowing full well the cynicism will be lost on his friend.

"Right on man! I bet anything you're going to bounce back to normal and totally rock it on Elysion with that knockout blondie you're seeing. Man, I hear she's melting for you!"

He would have fit right in, this Atlas, into whatever world he might have been born into. Had he been born into the twenty-first century, he would undoubtedly have become one of those politician people Adonis had read about in the old books. He even had the looks to fit right in, with a fat belly, mostly balding white hair, and a big smile that masked whatever else he might be feeling on the inside. But the world being free of politics in this age, people like him wind up using their slick tongues and powerful persuasion tactics to coerce Katinas to surrender grooming privileges of their fluffy little pets. What a waste of talent, and to think, Atlas will live and die never knowing what good his skills would have been for in another life!

Not just yet! Adonis caught himself drifting to sleep. Leaning forward onto his desk, and staring back at the book as if to make sure not to fall asleep, he flipped around with the book some more.

Chapter 2, didn't look interesting at all. Maybe he'll read the next chapter before returning the book and calling it a night.

Next time - he had promised himself. In a day or two, he'll have "The World Before this World" back in his hands. He'll dive straight into Chapter 5. The Event! He'll feast his eyes on the detailed rundown of exactly how that intricate web of nation-societies of long ago was crushed and reduced to the lifeless ghost of a world that exists today... just a couple more nights.

He opened at the beginning of Chapter 3 and soldiered on, racing against the clock with less than twenty minutes left to his self-imposed book return safety rule.

How Teleportation Changed the World  
by Sudhakar Parashuram

Chapter 3  
The Discovery of Teleportation in Australia

Ironically, most of the research that led to the breakthrough in teleportation was not only fostered by American efforts but even funded chiefly by American entities. American businesses, research organizations, educational institutions, and even governmental agencies were very cooperative with their counterparts elsewhere in the developed world. This international collaborative effort was intended for gaining a better understanding of the properties of matter and the natural laws that governed its behavior at the sub-particle scale. This held great promise, since all digital computing devices that operated telecommunication functions could greatly benefit from rendering circuitry at a nanometer scale, thereby unlocking computational potential at a speed and efficiency unattainable using traditional circuitry (during that age, all circuitry had to be embedded into micrometer-scale semiconductor wafer chips, aptly dubbed digital microchips).

America, as the world leader in, and the biggest benefactor from digital computing and telecommunication advances, was adamant on accelerating the pace of innovation into nanotechnological circuitry and consequently spearheaded the international research effort, enlisting and almost fully funding a large number of research institutions in rivaling nations like England, Germany, China, Japan, Brazil, and Australia (pronounced Oh-strayliah). In the spirit of collaboration and openness that was predominant among research endeavors at the time, all details of experiments, hypotheses, and confirmed findings were communicated to all involved parties without delay. This policy of transparency dramatically accelerated the pace of discovery, with each party benefiting from the learnings of all others and avoiding wasted exploration of all avenues that were proven unfruitful.

Two decades or so into this arrangement, a significant breakthrough was achieved at the Australian Defense Science and Technology Group, or DST for short (since it was common for such organizations to self-promote using cryptic pseudonyms based on first letter agglomerations). This particular research body was part of the government of the nation of Australia, mandated to advise on science and technology best suited to the defense and security of the nation. Since the nation was at peace and not under any direct (or even indirect) threat, DST had gotten into the habit of looking into random science projects with varying degrees of success potential, especially the ones that were promising but too far-fetched for the taste of research institutes with budgets, deadlines, and actual work to do.

Somewhere within the bellies of the DST, building upon the most recent theories of sub-particle

physics of the time, a team of scientists finally succeeded in getting an object to teleport in a controlled fashion from one location to another instantaneously.

It was already established, well before then, that individual subatomic particles tend to teleport under certain extreme conditions. However, that was the first time human beings had succeeded in initiating a controlled teleport of a macro-level object. The milestone was huge in itself, yet two ancillary findings were perhaps even more astounding:

- 1- The mass of the object did not make it more cumbersome to teleport
- 2- The distance between the origin and destination did not matter either

These findings, as rudimentary as they may seem to a present-day audience, were absolutely stunning to the researchers of the time. With every other mode of transportation devised by man, it was necessary to translate objects across space, a process which was resisted by mass's inherent inertia, making it more difficult to apply the more massive objects were and the longer the journey was.

Teleportation, of course, does not involve a fight against inertia. In contrast, it is in the nature of all matter to teleport, and it does, all the time. What was needed was solely to harmonize and direct that natural tendency towards the right point in space-time, and voila. The amount of energy needed to orchestrate the teleport itself was minimal and constant regardless of what was being teleported. Whether a pebble of stone from here to there or a giant boulder across a continent, it mattered very little. What mattered, as it happened, was the resting potential of the

teleported object. If one were to teleport a boulder to the top of a mountain, for example, then that would require energy to offset the added potential energy. Conversely, if one were to teleport a boulder from the tip of a mountain to the valley below, then not only would that not require external energy, but it would instead release a corresponding amount of potential energy, making it a net-positive operation.

Those facts, surprising as they might have seemed at the time of discovery, make perfect sense when considered from the perspective of gravitational energy accounting, a perspective that hadn't been applied in such a context before. As is predictably the case with the most transformative of discoveries throughout history, the underlying logic makes perfect sense in retrospect, while always remaining most elusive prospectively.

And transformative, it unquestionably was. It is no understatement that the advent of teleportation was as big a leap for humanity as the invention of the wheel. Unlike with the wheel though, the social transformation following the discovery of teleportation was not organic but intentionally premeditated and executed according to an elaborate plan.

This remarkable historical exception makes sense in retrospect since the DST, unlike most research organizations of the time, was not comprised of compartmentalized teams of ultra-specialized scientists. Instead, it was organized into a single, exceptionally well-rounded research body, comprised of scientists with broad research interests and an unmatched capacity to bridge the gaps between disparate scientific disciplines. This unusual setup was not regarded as an advantage at the time, quite the contrary in fact. The

consensus of that era seemed to be that science ought to be done one laser-focused project at a time, like tiny pebbles dropped into a lake here and there, and let the waves of discovery ripple and interfere with society as haphazardly they might after the fact. Not at the DST though. There, science was approached holistically, with physicists and mathematicians conferring with anthropologists, historians, and geopolitical experts on a daily basis. This different way of doing science, as subtle as it might have seemed, proved to be the most potent advantage Australia had over the other nations of the time. Decades into it, the DST had developed the body of knowledge and skills necessary to understand, and later to predict, the effects of newly emerging technology on the tapestry of society at a global scale. Eventually, they were able to reverse the trick, starting with social and political norms and engineering the optimal scientific and technological advancements to best meet the capacity for societies and nations to evolve. So that when teleportation finally cracked, it was immediately understood within the very inner circle of research that invented it that teleportation was going to be a transformative technology powerful enough to uproot the entire global social structure and turn it on its head.

At this juncture, it is necessary to explain that, while teleportation as a technological advancement was realized in the twenty-first century, the ability to block or defend against teleportation was not, and is still not attainable. Some scientists would argue that it is principally impossible to devise a technological advancement that would prevent an object from being teleported, or even limit the spacial scope of where it might be teleported from or to. This inherent asymmetry in technological feasibility

meant that, if teleportation were going to be employed to the advantage of one group against another, the other group would have essentially no means to protect itself. Moreover, the converse being true, if one group were to secure an advantage using teleportation against another, it would have to presume an equally indefensible retaliation from the other party.

Therefore, and in a world where teleportation had proliferated, traditional national-defense strategies would necessarily be rendered obsolete, and so would most military defense and offense apparatus. The entire geopolitical playbook would become obsolete, and a whole new system of rules would have to develop. The brightest minds at the DST were scrambling to make sense of what would come of the world if their discovery was to go public. What they predicted did not appeal to them. They quickly realized that a post-teleportation world, after the dust had settled and a new equilibrium reached, would unavoidably have to be a world of chaos and unfathomable terror. In hindsight, of course, that fact is self-evident. One might as well imagine what would happen in a zoo once animals figured out how to beam in and out of their cages unhindered. With none of the world's systems of checks and balances any longer efficacious, every nation in the world would find in the inviting void potential to rise and leverage the new technology to secure a more dominant spot on the global pyramid. All prior world wars had eventually concluded with some party dictating terms on another, cornered party no longer capable of sustaining a military conflict. Since the era of teleportation meant that no party could ever be cornered, it followed, therefore, that post-teleportation global conflict could potentially be perpetual, with one party or another gaining the upper hand momentarily but

no party ever capable of forcing any other into a resolution.

The prospect of perpetual war was not the only black cloud looming over the offices of the DST at the time. They were also aptly able to predict domestic upheavals at levels unprecedented in history. With social inequality being the one constant factor throughout the entire social history of humanity, it was not a big leap to imagine what the world would be like once every incarnation of the lower class was endowed with the ability to penetrate the defenses of the upper class and help itself to their wealth. In fact, there could no longer exist a distinction between classes in a world where teleportation was commonly achievable. Moreover, since every social scientist at the time already knew that social class distinctions were the beating heart of every social structure of all time, it was concluded that the proliferation of teleportation in the world would equate to nothing less than a stab at the heart of human civilization.

Except, of course, if teleportation was somehow secured in the hands of one social group to the exclusion of all others, and so it remained forever. That was, in fact, the only stable solution to a zero-sum mathematical equation involving multiple competing agents and one infinitely empowering resource.

The DST knew teleportation for what it undoubtedly was, a de-siloing technology, with the potential to break down barriers between nations and social classes. Those barriers, however, were the only things keeping the world ticking. Those barriers stood between the civilized world and complete anarchy.

That is how the DST realized that something had to be done to protect the civilization from impending doom. And that something was the Event.

It was time. Adonis clicked. The book vanished, revealing the pristine-white gloss of the glass desktop under it. Adonis was suddenly aware of his own level of exhaustion. He wasn't just tired of reading, he was tired of thinking, of pondering, of trying to make heads and tails of a matter decidedly much grander than him. He was convinced that it took more effort to read that text than it might have taken for Sudhakar Parashuram to write it back in his day. Or her day maybe? Who knew. He had never understood why pre-Eventian names were so different, or why they always came in pairs either.

That night he dreamt that he was alone. Not momentarily, but permanently. His imagination spun up a reality where he had always been and was always going to be, completely alone. Like a sole inhabitant of an alien planet, with not a soul anywhere to share the world with. The absence of all other vantage points was surprisingly liberating. It made him feel like his own was not merely a perspective, but rather the absolute. There was no right or wrong, no comparatives, no superlatives. A soft and warm feeling engulfed him as he contemplated his world of no competing versions of the truth, no shades of grey. Just him and his own pure, uninterrupted expanse of white.

## theta

*"If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong."* —Abraham Lincoln

Fifty million years ago, the great wide ocean engulfed everything within its primordial blue monotone. But under the surface, billions of creatures dwelled. And as they lived and died and multiplied, their lifeless residuals slowly precipitated onto the ocean floor. Shells, algae, and corals, all piled up in due time and formed layer after layer of sediment. Millennium after millennium, the relentless crush of gravity worked on the bottom layers, fusing sediment into limestone, layer after layer until the bodies of countless living things became mountains of solid stone. Then the water receded, and what used to be the ocean floor became a vast expanse of rocky cliffs by the shore, suddenly vulnerable to the harsh elements of open weather like an infant no longer shielded in its mother's womb. As the whistling winds polished the tips of the cliffs, the crashing waves worked on the bases, eating away at the softer parts of the limestone, uprush by uprush, and backwash by backwash. Tens of millions of years passed, and the waves chiseled through the cliffs. First, they formed caves, then the caves became gorges, and the gorges became arches. Ultimately the weaker stacks of rock collapsed, leaving behind magnificent pillars of limestone standing in the middle of the water, some 50 meters high or more.

And this morning, as the sun was gaining in the sky, its light reflected off the surface of the ocean and lit the giant pillars with a bright shade of sandy yellow. Young Adonis trotted down his favorite path by the coast, glad to be alone as he always was for his morning walks. Being the crepuscular creature that he was, he had gotten into the habit of going for walks very early in the morning. It had started last year, right after his ninth birthday, and grew quickly and progressively into a long and elaborate routine involving spontaneous exploration of the City coast using his device's random TP feature. He had discovered this majestic rocky path some months ago in a session of random clicking and hadn't told a soul about it yet. Not even his daddy.

As he reached the tip of a cliff, he took a deep breath and slowed down to a stop. This was his dedicated vista point. Dozens of repetitions had gotten him to perfect this little adventure, and by now he had it down to a step by step program. He even gave names to the interesting parts of the sequence. The long, odorous climb to get to this point was called Hades, and this upcoming treat was the

Eos vista, a rock cliff featuring the widest viewing angle of the ocean below with all the stone pillars and arches in full view, surrounded by blue and white webs of foamy waves crashing against the sandy yellow shore. Next up on the excursion would be Lyra, named after that annoying girl at school. Lyra was a ten-minute descent down the steep rocky cliffs away from the ocean and towards where the trees are. A little while after the drop you'd reach Selene, a dark and windy path through the rainforest, carpeted with green leaves and moist brown moss, thriving under a thick canopy of ferns and eucalyptus trees. By the time he'd get there, the sun would be high enough in the sky for rays of light to protrude through the foliage, tracing spotlight circles on the ground and prompting snails and all sorts of slimy creatures to come out and play.

But this right here, this moment when you first get up onto Eos, would always be his favorite part. Adonis always liked to stare at the ocean for a while, almost expecting to see something new. This morning, as usual, there was nothing out of the ordinary. Blue waves with white crescents crashed against the pillars, slowly working on them at a time scale much more significant than his own. Seagulls circled around, occasionally landing on the tips of the rocks, always making their loud shrieks seemingly without purpose. And those other birds also did their part, the little ones with black and white patches. Adonis was supposed to know what they're called since they were even more common inland than by the shore. But for some reason, he always recognized them as "the patchy black and white birds," never caring enough to remember their actual name.

Beyond the pillars an expanse of yellow sand received the waves, always welcoming, always somehow able to absorb their relentless barrage with seemingly infinite magnanimity. As Adonis was scanning the scene, his eye caught sight of something unusual. An object on the distant part of the shore below. It was dark grey, the size of a rock, lying flat and motionless right where the sand meets the water. What could it be? Adonis had explored this landscape often enough to know that it didn't belong there. Squinting towards it with a palm over his eyes to block the sun, he still couldn't make out what it was. A giant lump of seaweed maybe? Or a dead fish? No, it would have to be a ridiculously large fish for him to be able to spot it this far out.

Adonis gladly decided he had to investigate. It wasn't so much because of the urgency or even the curiosity of the matter, but rather

the excitement of there being something out of the ordinary in a morning routine that had always unfolded precisely as expected.

Climbing down the cliffs then crossing the sandy beach would probably take about 20 minutes, he estimated. As much as he would hate to break his own rule of no TP use during the morning journey, his curiosity overpowered his patience. He reluctantly reached for his device, like someone who's already ashamed of what he was about to do. With a swipe and a click, he placed himself right over the unidentified object. At first, he couldn't make out what it was still, because a wave uprush had it covered with foamy white water. Feeling the wetness and the cold immediately sting his ankles as he had clicked himself right into an incoming wave, he held his breath and planted his feet firm, waiting it out.

As the wave receded, he found his eyes fixated on a most unusual find. It was the body of a man, dressed up in dark grey overalls. Curiously, Adonis felt no sense of panic or urgency. The man clearly looked dead and must have been gone for a very long time. So long, that even for a little boy like Adonis who had never seen a dead man before, the matter of his livelihood was out of the question. The man's overalls were at once ragged, faded, and soiled. So much so, that even a journey afloat in an ocean wouldn't account for their battered state. Adonis decided that the man must have worn the same clothes more than once, perhaps for many days even. The thought brought about an immediate rush of blood into his cheeks. He was embarrassed for the man since, apparently, they shared the secret habit of re-wearing garments from the day before. Adonis himself had been caught wearing yesterday's t-shirt or shoes a few times before. His mother always being the one to catch him, pull him aside, and give him a lecture about it in a faint but ultra-serious whisper. Such bad hygiene was a sure way to get sick, she had always reminded him. Besides, what were the other kids to think about him if they were to notice him going about wearing used clothing? If you like it so much, just click for a fresh pair of the same kind the next day, she always said to wrap up the lecture. But hygiene or not, for some reason Adonis never registered the need to dispose of today's pair of shoes only to get oneself a new pair of the exact same kind the following day.

The face of the dead man suspected of similarly bad hygiene to Adonis was ashy pale, with an overly large gaping hole in the middle. His mouth, it must be. As wide open as it was, and with so many teeth missing, Adonis still couldn't account for how overly big

the mouth opening felt, or how dark it seemed. Adonis leaned down over the body. Upon closer inspection, he realized the man's mouth opening was missing something. Could it be that... yes, something must have bit away most of his tongue during his drift in the ocean. Luckily the rest of him seemed to be intact. His nose was in place, and his eyes were bulging out as expected from behind the shut eyelids. Who was this man, and for how long has he been drifting in the ocean? Also, why was there a very long number written on his forehead? Was it his identifier?

No, it couldn't be. For one thing, people didn't walk around with their identifiers plastered on their foreheads. More importantly, the number was too long and didn't have any letters in it. Adonis' identifier was 9nLnR, as he had newly learned. He was the only Citizen in the whole wide City to have that particular identifier, whether alive or dead, his teacher had said. The nine was a tell-tale sign that he belonged to the last generation of Citizens born into the sequential assignment of never-before-used identifiers. Before long, the teacher had explained, perhaps by the time Adonis was in his thirties, the City would run out of sequential identifiers, and would start recycling the identifiers of dead Citizens for the first time. But in any case, the number of the dead man's forehead was very long. It had at least ten figures in it, maybe more. And besides, how come the writing didn't come awash in the water? Adonis was too intimidated by the sight of the dead body to try to touch it, but he had a feeling that even if he were to scrub the man's forehead, the writing wouldn't come off or even smudge. It seemed to him that it wasn't written with ink, but rather somehow made permanent, like etching on metal or engraving on stone. Not exactly sure how or why one might etch or engrave a number on a man's forehead, he let the thought drop for a moment.

Then it suddenly hit him, the way belated yet obvious realizations often do once the necessary inputs had gathered in one's mind for a while. This human being here was *not* a Citizen. That much was, retrospectively if belatedly apparent since no Citizen could have faced trouble in the ocean without Hermes immediately clicking him to safety. So this man must have been washed ashore from somewhere *outside* the City. That would explain the unusual clothing, and the unreasonably long identifier advertised on his forehead. And since he was human and yet not a Citizen, then Adonis must be looking at the body of a real life ...

"Well, have you?"

"Huh?"

"Have you ever seen a Farmer Adonis?" The corrector restated his question, abruptly bringing Adonis back from his trip down memory lane which his initial ask had ironically prompted in the first place.

"No," Adonis lied, comfortable in the safety of the lie since the question was obviously rhetorical, and since he hadn't seen one alive anyway, "Have *you*?"

"Not in real life, of course not. We *do* have cameras though, that we correctors TP back and forth into the Farms to keep an eye on them. But aside from that, no Citizen will ever encounter a Farmer, or come into any kind of communication with one through any means however indirect. Do you know why that is, Adonis?"

Adonis leaned back in his seat. He felt it a little rude to look at his device, but he estimated they must be halfway through the session. All he had to do is keep his cool for a while longer. Any minute now he will be left alone in the room, and he will grab hold of that leather-bound book from the top library shelf behind the corrector's dark mahogany desk. "The World before this World," The title read. He tried his best not to glance towards the book, or even past the corrector towards the library. He kept his sight on the corrector, who was touching his thumbs together over locked hands the way he always did when he waited for Adonis to answer a question.

"Because you don't want the Farmers to envy the Citizens, or learn so much about them as to plan to rise up against them," Adonis replied, stating the obvious reason why the have-nots were to be isolated from the haves.

To his surprise, the corrector grinned, then he giggled loudly.

"The Farmers? No of course not Adonis. We don't care what they know or what they think they know. They're powerless creatures. What they think, if one were to call it *thinking*, doesn't matter at all. We're only interested in what they do. And what they do, is exactly what we want them to do, all the time. They're mindless beings, but they serve us well, so we keep them around."

Then the corrector leaned forward, adjusted his spectacles, and lowered his voice as he transitioned to the material part of his thesis.

"We isolate the Farmers from the Citizens because we don't want the *Citizens* to think about the Farmers. Out of sight, out of mind. And we do recognize of course that empathy is a powerful human emotion. When channeled correctly, it helps build cohesive social units. But if we were to put a Farmer in the middle of the City, I bet a lot of Citizens would feel sorry for him, sad even. Not just people like you, but even perfectly healthy people, it's just human nature. In that

case, their empathy would be misplaced. Counter-productive. By keeping total separation, we make sure Citizens channel their empathy where it is appropriate, only towards fellow Citizens. That is why no Citizen will ever come in contact with a Farmer, and vice versa.

"Compartmentalized humanity is orderly humanity, and orderly humanity is prosperous humanity." He concluded with the tone of an official announcement.

"Except it is humanity hollowed out of all love and all sympathy!" Adonis shot back, failing to control himself for a second.

Apparently, that earned him a few seconds of silence as the corrector gathered his thoughts. Never losing his calm, he adjusted his posture and started:

"Not hollowed out of *all* love, no. But rather with carefully engineered boundaries for love. Love is administered to the extent to which it helps build civilization and not a pinch more. There is no place for destructive love in our City, Adonis. Every bit of it better be directed towards the appropriate people, or not at all."

Then, shooting his eyes back directly at Adonis from across the table, he added: "Your problem is that you're fixated on our own narrow perspective. To understand the big picture, Adonis, the grand scheme, so to speak, one has to rise above all emotion. Not just above jealousy, pity, and greed, but one also has to rise above love, sympathy, loyalty, and gratitude. You'd have to realize that, during the thousands of years that came and went by before you were allowed to chime in with your first heartbeat on-stage, during that massive expanse of time, every plot had already played out. Every emotion had already been felt to the fullest, every thought already pondered, every scenario, every twist, already happened a thousand times over. Every personality had already lived and died long before you were even born. Nothing is new under the sun, Adonis. And yet, in the end, none of it ultimately mattered. That endless cacophony of discordant voices all turned out to be insignificant in the big picture. Because here we are, when our moment finally came, living out on a clean slate as if none of those before us had ever lived. *That* is the big picture, Adonis. Once you grasp that your own feelings do not define reality, once you come to terms with your own insignificance, only then can you truly be free. Until then, this quixotic feeling that overpowers you incessantly, to which you can't even attribute a proper name, it will never ease off of you. You will squander what little time you have left on this City feeling entirely out of place."

Adonis fell quiet. His eyes showing a hint of tearing up. It was true, the last bit anyway. He was, completely and hopelessly out of place.

Perhaps feeling his sorrow, the corrector started more softly, striking a consoling tone.

"It is ok, son. What you're feeling is typical for people with your condition. If it makes you feel any better, we see it so often, we even have a term for it. You are now in the Monachopsis stage of your disorder. It is defined by the subtle but persistent feeling of being out of place. But we're going to guide you out of it, all the way into the Liberosis stage. Do you know what that is?".

"No, what does it mean?" he humored him.

"It is when you have developed the practical habit of caring less about things in general. Reflecting less, Second-guessing yourself less. Basically to loosen your grip a little and learn to enjoy life instead. Stay with me, and you'll get there. I promise."

Adonis nodded, avoiding eye contact. He had no desire to get there. He did have an obsessive desire though to get his hands on that book sitting in full view in the library right behind the corrector's desk. And if he had to endure all those masterful mind games to get to it, then that's a price he was willing to pay.

"Let's practice looking at the bright side together, shall we?" The corrector started again hurriedly, after too brief a pause. Then without waiting for an answer, he commenced the proposed joint exercise all on his own: "You and I, we live on this freak accident of a planet, uniquely hospitable among the endless expanse of impossibly hostile environments out there in the universe. Just the mere fact that you exist, right here on the one spec of cosmic dust where you *can* exist, that's a testament to how lucky you are. You have been handed the winning intergalactic lottery ticket! So let's count our blessings, Adonis! And let's stop looking for reasons to be miserable. Or if you *want* to be miserable, then you might as well pick a more grandiose reason than being a member of a dichotomy of affluence.

"Why don't you feel bad, for example, for all those extraterrestrial creatures that could have existed, yet were denied mere existence by a random predicament that rendered their would-be home planet inhospitable to life? Isn't that a more worthy cause for sorrow?"

"That's different!" Adonis couldn't help but object.

"How so?"

He didn't know how. Or rather, he knew very well but found it very hard to articulate the difference. He tried anyway:

"Because those are imaginary pains. I'm concerned about the real pains of actual existing beings. Billions of them perhaps! All living right here on this planet ..."

"Not this planet, Adonis," the corrector interrupted, "*The City* is our planet. The Farms, they're so out of reach, they might as well be on

an exoplanet somewhere on the opposite end of the galaxy. It isn't the distance that separates, it never was. It is the impasse in between that counts. Be it empty space or a ferocious ocean, it makes no difference."

The corrector reclined back a little and gave Adonis a moment to reflect on that. Then he eyed him victoriously as if about to reveal the winning card, but then instead he just kept going:

"But let's humor your logic for the sake of argument here. If you're going to direct your empathy based on the entirely arbitrary distinction of earthly creatures, then why stop with the Farmers? I don't see you worried about any little lamb that might be about to get devoured by a pack of hungry wolves somewhere or another on this earth? In fact, it probably happened several times just since we sat down here today. Don't you find it curious that you don't even care?"

*"I do care!"*

"No, forgive me. It isn't that you don't care. It is worse. The matter is completely outside your scope of imagination. I had to bring it up for you to even consider it! Admit it, Adonis. You'd like to think you care, but in reality, all those cute little birds and rabbits, sheep and deer and almost everything else that faces horrible prospects every single day, all the misery out there doesn't even register in your mind as something worthy of a single fleeting thought! Tell me, have you ever tried to close your eyes and imagine the herd of all animals and birds that have lost their lives so you could devour parts of their bodies plate after plate throughout your pathetic little life? Do you really, honestly think you can call yourself a sentimentalist? The mere fact that you are still alive is in itself a testament to your cruelty towards countless innocent creatures."

Adonis fell silent again, feeling somewhat ashamed at the slight hint of truth behind the accusation.

"Don't feel bad, Adonis. It doesn't reflect badly upon you that you couldn't be bothered by the unfortunate demise of every little thing that hops or crawls or slithers or flocks or burrows in this endlessly cruel ecosphere. You're just one man. You simply don't have the mental or emotional capacity to carry the weight of the whole planet on your shoulders. It is a grim reality out there, I grant you that. But there is order to the misery. Every quivering lamb satisfies the relentless cry of hunger inside the guts of an equally worthy predator. The collective misery of all prey is the currency that balances the books of nature. You need to stop fighting it. A reality without misery would be a pathetic reality, a silly childish approximation. That is, if it were conceivable at all. Surely at some level, you do understand that. All that is needed is for you to take that understanding and apply it a few steps higher up the ladder.

Farmers, just like lambs, are but elements in an intricate balancing act. Their misery, it is how you and I get to satisfy our desires. Try to keep an open mind about this thought. All I ask is that you consider it."

He considered it. And in the abstract, it did make sense.

"Society was always destined to wind up this way, Adonis. The only reason this bold new way of life took so long to be established is that before the Event, it wasn't possible for people to consider this setup completely in the abstract, without misplaced empathy seeping in and unsettling the balance. But now, with TP, our entire civilization can be kept a safe distance away from the Farmers. We don't see them toil away, we don't hear their cries of hunger and anguish. Only now can we consider this arrangement objectively, based solely on rational thought: The Farmers now live and die in a distant universe, forever out of sight, while the fruit of their labor simply materializes for the Citizens on demand. Our primal empathetic circuitry is effectively bypassed by a deliberate effort to curb the senses that trigger it. It is an exciting time to be alive!"

Adonis wasn't excited. At least, not about the principle of enjoying a life of endless luxuries made possible by the forced labor of billions of miserable strangers. He did feel excited though, about the prospect of the corrector leaving the room to fetch the meds. Any minute now. He had even formulated a step by step plan of his exact movements as soon as gets the chance. First, he'd dash around the corrector's desk as fast as he can, since even though going over the desk might be faster, it ran the risk of toppling over the desk lamp. Next, he'd step over the lower shelf with his left foot, lift himself up, then quickly grab onto to the upper ledge with his right hand to support his weight. He would only need to balance himself in that position for a few quick seconds, while his left arm reaches out and snatches the book. Next, he'd step off onto the floor, quickly fetch the TP strip out of his right pocket, stick it onto the inside of the cover, then climb back up to deposit the book to its inconspicuous resting spot. The whole stunt would take about 20 seconds, leaving a generous safety margin so that even if the corrector should decide to rush back much sooner than usual, the book would already be safe and sound where he had left it. Until, of course, Adonis summons it, tonight after midnight, when this office is dark, and the corrector is fast asleep.

The corrector kept talking for a while longer still. At times, he would pause for a bit as if to transition into the next part of the session, but then he would only rub his eyes or adjust his little round spectacles and then keep going. Seemingly forever, the conversation dragged

on. If you could even call it a conversation since all Adonis offered in the way of reciprocity was a nod here and an "uhuh" there, and maybe a succinct answer once or twice whenever he was put on the spot by a direct question. Finally, the corrector said the magic words:

"Tell me, are you feeling any different on the meds?"

"Yes, more grounded, and a little less focused at times."

"Not nauseous anymore?"

"No, that started to subside last week. Now I feel more like lightheaded if anything."

"Excellent. Sounds like it is time to up your dosage a little bit. If you would excuse me for just one minute..."

Adonis blinked, and the corrector had already disappeared behind the giant door, his footsteps already well into the usual decrescendo down the corridor. Even with the plan so well rehearsed in his mind, Adonis still froze for a few seconds. He swallowed dryly and felt a rush of panic at the thought of being already too late to carry out what he'd been waiting for all along. His strength came back to him a moment later just as suddenly as it had failed him. Jumping off his seat, he dashed toward the library, overshooting the right shelf at first and then overcorrecting for it. With a quick pounce, he was afloat on the shelves, balancing his weight on the tip of one foot and the fingers of the opposite hand. With his free arm, he reached out as far as he could but still couldn't grasp the book. Pulling some more, his fingers could brush against the hardcover, but as he scrambled to somehow elongate his arm a few more millimeters, he felt his foot slip, and then immediately tumbled down flat on his back. The sting of the fall and the rush of panic made his heart skip a beat. It was already too late, and he knew it. All that time he had waited in anticipation, and because of one stupid slip, it was all over. He felt beaten by gravity, figuratively in addition to the very real physical beating that he now felt at the base of his spine. But as the rush of panic subsided, instead of disappointment he found himself feeling angry. Very angry. Of all the things he struggled with, and all the imperfections he had to endure, physical disability simply wasn't one. He was very fit and powerful. And while he might have been willing to accept defeat, he just wasn't prepared to allow failure due to *physical* limitation. Not today, not ever. With one quick swoop, he was back on his feet, ignoring the stinging pain in his back and the swelling ache around his left knee in what must have already been a bruise. As the footsteps of the corrector started their crescendo back through the corridor, he jumped back on the shelf like a hungry tiger determined to catch its elusive prey. Careful to climb closer to the

book this time, he executed the sequence flawlessly, if hurriedly since he was already out of time. With the book in hand and the rest of limbs his gripping for balance high on top of the bookshelf, he somehow managed to snatch the TP strip out of his pocket and stick it on the inner side of the cover, then shoved the booked back as quickly as he could. He jumped off to the floor, then it was cover up time. No sooner than he sunk back to his seat, he heard the door crack open again, and the corrector let himself in. Trying not to sound obvious, he let go of a big sigh of relief. He did it.

"Something wrong?" the corrector asked as he laid a bottle of meds in front of Adonis.

"I'm sorry?" Adonis played dumb as he frantically crossed his legs to hide his bruised knee, just in case there had been any blood on it.

"You look worked up all of a sudden."

"Oh, no I was just... thinking about what you told me," was all he could come up with.

The corrector smirked and sat back on his desk. Adonis knew he sounded weird, but it didn't matter. He did it. And tonight, he will be alone with the book. Free to read "Chapter 5, The Event," and finally get to learn what had really happened, how the world really turned into living hell for almost everyone alive, save the Citizens of this luxurious oasis who know nothing but endless comfort.

The corrector eyed Adonis repeatedly as if waiting for him to say something. Adonis waited impatiently for what should be a few parting words at this stage before he could take off. When the corrector finally started, his expression had suddenly shifted from playful to something else. Adonis hadn't seen him quite like that before, he appeared very serious, almost confrontational.

"It used to be called a *cigar*, by the way."

"Huh?"

"A *cigar*, Adonis. That little brown cylindrical object you found in the metal box that you... "borrowed" from my bookshelf last week. They used to call that a *cigar*."

Adonis felt his heart sink. He *knew*? Avoiding eye contact, he fell silent and tried as much as he could to not reveal his distress. But, *how*?

Realizing that Adonis wasn't going to respond, the corrector started again.

"Far from being a relic of any spiritual significance, a *cigar* was simply a consumable smoke inhaler that would fill your lungs with poisonous deposits and fill your bloodstream with addictive chemicals to keep you coming back for more."

How on *earth* did he find out? Are they keeping tabs on every single TP event all over the City? No way. That would be an intractable undertaking of gargantuan proportions! But then, how else? And he *did* make sure to be meticulous the other night, stuffing every last bit of minced dried leaf back into that brown cylinder. How on *earth* would he have noticed? Even more inexplicably, the corrector seemed to know not just about the metal box, or the brown cylinder, but also about how Adonis had decided it must have been a sacred relic of some now-extinct civilization in order to have earned itself a spot inside a metal box in the most exclusive bookshelf in the City.

"It was a pre-Eventian control mechanism, Adonis. Crude but surprisingly effective. It was just another way for the rich to keep the poor needy, sick, and preoccupied. That cigar, while completely out-of-place in today's planet, still serves as a tangible historical testament to the fact that man's cruelty to man predates our City and us. All that happened since is that we've become more efficient at it. It is a difference in degree, not in nature."

Adonis's heart was starting to beat heavily in his chest. Even if he wanted to respond, he felt that his voice would fail him at the moment. How *long* has he known for?

"I'm sure that, at some level, you knew that someone like me would have the prudence to set a flag on all TPs out of this office. Still, your curiosity compelled you to go for it. I admire that. But did you really think you're the first troubled patient to try to smuggle controlled material out of this office?"

Adonis was silent, the shame of getting caught still bitter in his mouth. The corrector leaned back in his chair, reciprocating the uncomfortable silence for a moment longer. Then he shot back up.

"It's a rarity, I give you that. Most people wouldn't bother to seek knowledge about the planet beyond what they learn in school, let alone take risks seeking it. But you're certainly not the first."

Adonis decided that the corrector knew everything about everything, all along. There he had been, trying to outsmart the system with diligent planning and careful execution, but in reality, he had been nothing more than a rat in a maze, always under the watchful eyes of that omniscient old man with infinite powers and stone-cold logic.

"So tell me, Adonis, what have you learned from all those books you've been smuggling?"

Adonis tried in vain not to steal a glance at the leather-bound book on the top shelf behind the corrector's desk. There it was, so close yet so out of reach, it might as well be on Mars. TP strip or not, he would never be able to lay hands on it again. Since quite likely it was the only surviving copy in existence, and since he was quite likely the

last living human interested in reading it, then denying him access to it would equate to removing the book from existence altogether. Yet there it was, sitting comfortably where he had shoved it a minute ago, as if everything was in perfectly good order, or as if somehow it was already well adjusted to its predicament.

"I learned that the City was built over the agony of millions of souls," he found himself answering defiantly.

"Indeed it was," the corrector echoed, visibly impressed with Adonis' new found courage, "And in that one respect perhaps, the City is similar to those tiny old cities you've been reading about. Did you think those were founded on benevolence? Far from it! From ancient Jericho to Athens and Cusco and Carthage and Varanasi, to the mighty Rome and Constantinople and Baghdad the "house of peace," to New York and Hong Kong, every last one of those puny ancient cities primitive humans had ever built, was raised upon the ruins of what used to be there before it, brutally ravaged and mercilessly destroyed in order to make space on the canvas for what was about to come next.

"You see, Adonis, there is nothing unethical about doing whatever it takes to make space for a City who's time has come. Or if there is, then one might as well brand the entire human project as pure evil."

Adonis was barely registering what he was hearing. He felt absolutely crushed. That old man knew everything about everything, including about him. He not only knew what Adonis was doing but apparently also what he had been *thinking*. It seemed like he was somehow aware of every issue Adonis had pondered upon in the privacy of his own mind, as well as what conclusions he had reached while sitting alone in silence by his home office desk in the middle of the night. The bruise on his knee was burning up now, and he started to feel a growing ache pulsating from behind his eyeballs. His head began to feel light again, and to his surprise, his heart started racing abruptly. Fearing he might collapse or throw up any minute, Adonis snatched the meds off the desk and raced away towards the door, hoping to outpace the ultimate moment of utter physical and emotional humiliation that was now imminent. Yet even in such dire condition, Adonis still adhered out of habit to the pointless tradition of not clicking directly in or out of that office without doing the entirely ceremonial walk through the giant door first.

As he was rushing out, the corrector started stating his parting notes matter-of-factly: "You will be taking these new meds twice daily, first thing in the morning and late in the evening. I know that your

girlfriend is taking you out to a quartet next month. Try to have fun will you? Oh, and I will see you back here next week, on time."

Adonis knew full well that the last part was more of a demand than a reminder. And indeed he realized that he would do as told. It went without saying that he would be borrowing no more books now, and hence had no real incentive to take any meds or come back for any more sessions. But for all he knew, the corrector had trackers on every pill and was following his every move. As he reached the door, he swung it open and rushed outside without as much as a look back. Yet even as he exercised the freedom to barge out of the room in the middle of a session, before being dismissed and without bothering with an excuse, even then he knew that he was hopelessly trapped. He was just one troubled man in a clockwork system far more powerful than he could ever resist. The corrector had total knowledge and total control. And the City was one giant open-air prison.

## iota

*"We are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe, we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn."* —Michel de Montaigne

The days and weeks that followed were exceptionally hard on Adonis. Often he felt trapped, exposed, and ashamed. But above all, he felt outsmarted.

Whether alone or among friends, he found himself going over the sequence of events with the corrector, again and again, always trying to find a clue that might have alerted him that the corrector was onto him, or maybe a missed precaution that might have helped him keep his plan under wraps. But no matter how often he pondered over it, still there was nothing he could point to and say, there, this is what I overlooked. *There I went wrong. There I could have planned better.* Instead, the conclusion of what was starting to become an obsessive mental exercise was always that no matter what he did, he was still going to be outsmarted. The repetitive arrival at that same conclusion wore him down little by little. It made him feel small and weak, even pitiful.

Little by little, he started to feel withdrawn and stopped enjoying the company of others. It was due in part to that never-ending monologue going on in his head, but also because he started finding his friends dull and predictable. Are people now less surprising than before or has he grown less prone to surprise? After giving it a moment's thought, he would realize that the two propositions were, in fact, one and the same.

In any case, he resorted to staying alone at home most of the time. Alone at night, he would find himself enumerating the traits he lacked or the many things that his peers were better at. Atlas was better with handling people, always able to make everyone feel comfortable, always good at diffusing tension in any situation. Atlas was also much better than him at reading people. He wouldn't have been taken by surprise by an old man from behind an even-older desk. No, Atlas would have seen it coming from miles away. He would have not just anticipated but counteracted the corrector's every move. He would have also been better than him at defusing the corrector's mind games, maybe even messing with *his* mind in return a little.

And Nyx, she would have swallowed the corrector whole and spat him out one bone at a time, strong-spirited as she was. She might have drawn the corrector closer with her disarming smile while at the same time cutting through his skull with that razor-sharp gaze of hers. Then when he opened up his mouth to spew some mental poison at her, she would have crouched over the table like a nimble tigress and pounced at him with the grace and might of a cheetah. Yes, Nyx wouldn't take bullshit from anybody. If she had any interest in ancient books, she might very well have casually strolled to the library and grabbed one to read right in front of the corrector. Unlike him, she wouldn't resort to trickery. Only he was cowardly enough to hatch elaborate schemes to get to the books under cover of the night. And only he was naïve enough to think his childish schemes would fool anybody, let alone the corrector.

Katina was perhaps as naïve as he was, though. Yes, Katina couldn't have fooled the corrector. Still, Katina wouldn't have ended up at the corrector's office in the first place, because unlike him she was a normal person, with no unhealthy obsessions and no tendency to sink into depression. She was quite the opposite actually. Cheerful, bubbly and as lively as they come. Instead of caring for an intangible group of humans theoretically alive somewhere out of reach, she cared for her dog. Unlike him, her obsession was over a real, physical being that you could see and touch and feel. She'd give her a grooming and take her out for a walk, and then she'd feel good about herself. Her sense of duty fully satisfied, she'd then go about her life making friends and having fun and talking about little pointless things, cracking jokes and laughing together. Socializing, the way healthy people are supposed to. No, Katina might be naïve, but her naïvety was different than his in that hers was healthy. She was a typical Citizen, and that alone made her a better person than he could ever be.

Yet even being atypical wasn't a satisfactory excuse to account for his predicament. Ponos was also an atypical Citizen. Unlike most, Ponos was hard working, almost to an obsessive degree. When any Citizen would only go on work for one week once every six months or so, Ponos would go on work for many weeks in a row, stopping only out of embarrassment about how odd his long work engagements seem to his peers. And as soon as he's out, he'd start planning to do it again in a couple of months if not sooner. Even when not on work, Ponos spent most of the time talking *about* work. At every gathering, he would show up all excited about some work project or another. He was always the one to bring up what Planetes was up to in space, or

what the Demiurge was doing right there in the City, or what Demeter was experimenting with out there in the Farms. Yet for all his weirdness Ponos was never really out of place. The gang received his odd behavior with fondness. To be sure they made fun of him to no end, especially Atlas who never tired of coming up with new jokes about his workaholism, but it was always the endearing kind of fun, the kind that grows out of admiration rather than resentment or pity or even concern. That must be because Ponos was unusual in an endearing way. Him, on the other hand, he was unusual in a regretful way. When the gang made fun of *him*, they always picked on superficial things, avoiding anything related to his real issues altogether. They never talked to him, whether seriously or jokingly, about his depression, or his obsession with things outside the City. That on its own must be a sure sign that his issues were sinister, at least in the eyes of his friends.

Yes, in comparison to anybody he could think of, he was a deeply troubled person, in every way inferior. And night after night alone in complete silence, Adonis felt his self-pity transform into self-loathing. Now he consciously wished he was someone else. He often fantasized that he could click his device to simply become someone else. It was almost plausible in concept, not any more magical than leaving the tip of a mountain to the bottom of a valley instantly with the click of a button. Whom he would become was different every time he played the mental fantasy. But he was convinced that just about anyone would be a better option than his own self.

Alone in his tile for days at a time, he stopped dressing up for the most part and even skipped meals sometimes. He would lay for hours in silence, zoning in on the sound of the water streams running steadily in his freshroom nearby. He'd get lost in thought about Farmers, scores of them going thirsty in a land impossibly out of reach, perhaps not ever knowing or imagining how water streams went continuously to waste in every freshroom all over the City. He would feel upset, even guilty about his inability to shut off the streams if at least the ones running in his own freshroom, a few feet away. The thought often made him feel even the more powerless, and hopelessly out of control.

But despite coming almost entirely unhinged, he did still take his pills on time. He didn't do so just because he had to -since the corrector no doubt had ways to check after him- but also because he felt they helped. The pills made his mind feel deliciously numb. They had the effect of guiding his thoughts away from the dark depths.

They helped counteract his habit of thinking deep behind the surface of everything and made him feel more content with a thought process that started and stopped on the surface. And since he didn't have access to any old books ever since the corrector caught him, not being able to intellectualize was a blessing. It was almost as if he was suffering from withdrawal symptoms from his addiction to contraband books, and the pills had become his only respite. Now and then when the effect of one doze started to wear off, he would again be overcome with depression, and feelings of despair and hopelessness. He would dwell over how everything he had planned to do had failed. He would question why, and sometimes in desperation, he would find himself fleeing into fantasy.

Eyes closed, he would dream up a reality where he never got caught. A world where he got to read many more books and learned all that he needed to learn. With repetition, he started getting really good at fantasizing all the little details. *There* were the books, complete with author names and titles, and covers of all shapes and colors. Having learned all about the Event and the Farms, he would proceed with formulating his master plan. There he is, sitting on his desk in the privacy of his inconspicuous tile, drawing timelines on a piece of paper and hashing a perfect scheme. Step by intricate step, he would then carry it out, like clockwork, and succeed in doing what no other Citizen had ever done; he would succeed in leaving the City. He would get in touch with the Farmers, and help them organize and rise up. At first, they would not trust him, they would think he was a spy, or perhaps just an imposter. But ultimately after getting to know his true character, they would come to trust him and would eventually follow his lead. And though scattered and unprepared, he would help them prevail with their large numbers and their will to rise above slavery and establish a global system of fairness and equality. Future generations would come to remember him as a folk hero. And then suddenly and without warning, the dreams would evaporate, and he would find himself lying alone in bed or on the floor, half-naked, abandoned and defeated. The worst of it was that voice, deep inside. It would start faintly at first, soft but regular like the gentle beating of a drum: "You will never do it. You will never do it. You will ..." but then it would keep getting louder and louder, harsher and harsher, faster and faster until it is a continuous angry scream that fills him up with despair: "You will never do it because you just don't have what it takes."

But then it would be time for his next dose, and soon the vicious cycle of fantasies and self-flagellation would subside. He would start

to feel numb again and remember that escapism into fantasies and self-tribunals is just an unfortunate symptom of his condition. "Negative reinforcement mechanisms," the corrector had called them, that the pills would help him overcome.

Sometimes he wished it was winter already, even though summer was still in full force. He felt that had it been winter he might have been a little more justified in spending so much time indoors. Something about staying home on perfectly sunny days was just wrong. Yet he simply had no desire to step outside anymore.

One afternoon he was awakened from a nap by a particularly terrible nightmare, although as soon as his panic subsided, he realized that he couldn't remember much about the plot. Dragging his feet off the bed and across the frosted glass barrier to the freshroom, he stood in front of the mirror and examined himself. His hair was too messy, and he already had the beginnings of an unattractive beard. His eyes had black circles around them. He felt his age weighing down on him. There he was, almost in the middle of his twenties already, and probably worse off than he'd ever been before. What stopped him from cleaning up, dressing in the finest silk summer outfit, and clicking out there to enjoy the endless fun activities the City has to offer? Nobody other than the corrector even knew about his humiliating defeat. He could just stop seeing the corrector, stop obsessing over his master plan, catch up with his friends as if nothing had happened. He could just live out his life from this moment on the way everybody else does. Nobody and nothing would stand in his way. Not even the corrector would interfere as long as he lived the life of a healthy well adjusted Citizen. But no, his enemy was lurking inside his own mind. His enemy *was* his own mind. And when your enemy is that close to you as to be inseparable from you, you had no hope, except maybe in the pills. The mirror was getting foggy, and he found himself writing on it with his finger "Dreams evaporate ...". Out of space on the mirror, he finished the thought in his head: "Dreams evaporate at around 24 degrees of age, morphing into a bitter smelling gas that is corrosive on contact". Reaching out to the bottle on the sink, he swallowed a pill, immediately realizing as he did so that it wasn't time for his medicine yet since he was just up from an afternoon nap, not from a night sleep. Having swallowed it already, he expected a lightning bolt to zap him or something, but then felt a little silly when he caught himself actually surprised that nothing terrible happened. A few hours later when it was officially time for the pill, he just took another one. The effect of the doubled dose made him feel exceptionally light, almost happy. He found

himself wanting to get outside for a change, and he put on some clothes and strolled out in his garden a bit. He slept comfortably that night and didn't have to struggle to keep his mind off of things.

The next morning he swallowed two pills in one gulp. From there, things became easier. He started to overdose regularly, two pills at a time, three at times. He knew he wasn't supposed to, but he argued to himself that if anybody was monitoring his dosage, then better they find him overdosing than skipping. For a while longer, he found escape in the pills. Morning fused into afternoon and evening blurred upon night. Life became a disarmingly monotonous haze stretching across cyclical solar orbits with no particular significance to phases or to the passage of time. Until one evening he reached out to the bottle, and it didn't rattle. He flipped it into his palm, but no pills came out. He was out of tablets, with five days to go before the next corrector session.

The meds started wearing off the next morning. Again, Adonis felt hopeless and depressed, but above all glad to be back as himself. With the haze of fake serenity wearing off, he found the clarity of his depression to be a welcome upgrade. As harsh as it was, he decided he wouldn't trade reality for any amount of made-up contentment.

So he decided not to ping the corrector about it. He would just wait out the five remaining days and show up at the corrector's office on schedule. The transition back into his naturally troubled state of mind was hard on his weary soul to endure, but he accepted it with newfound resolve since he had already explored and rejected the alternative. He clicked some breakfast for the first time in almost a week, hoping to find in food a distraction of sorts. But it didn't work. With the plate still untouched an hour later, he caught himself obsessing over how he might hatch a new elaborate scheme to somehow get back into his reading habit. But he was once again just out of ideas.

Throughout the rest of the day, he found himself regurgitating mental notes about what he had read back when he had the freedom to read. Little by little, the most minute details came back to him from the books. Being all he had left, the tiniest piece of information got amplified in importance, until the collective memory of the reading experience became in his mind a sacred relic. Now and then his device would interrupt his ritual, chiming pings from various people. Once it was Atlas checking in on him, and another time Katina wanted to confirm meeting the gang for breakfast at the usual time of

the week. Always he would ignore the ping and stay faithful to his focused meditation. There he was reading about a world of tiny cities, dispersed throughout the whole geography of the world. Full of elevators and roads and aerial vehicles. Life was slow and cumbersome, but people were happy because they didn't know a better way to live, and because they were living together, the rich and the poor, the good and the bad. Always in proximity to each other, always within sight and within range of human capacity for compassion. Misdirected compassion, the corrector had called it. But compassion nonetheless, as fresh and cleansing to the soul as can be.

Adonis was, of course, aware that his obsession with reading the ancient books was a mere symptom of a disorder. An unhealthy addiction he was expected to recover from. Yet at the same time, he had a deeper understanding of just *why* he was so addicted to it. He read, not only because he wanted to know how things in the City and the Farms came to be the way they are right now, but also because he wanted to learn the full story of mankind, the story of his own ancestors. He placed great value on that long chain of events that eventually led to him being born to *this* reality, to the exclusion of all possible others. It really mattered to him, what happened before his time. He felt almost like he owed it to past generations to acknowledge, or at least be aware of their choices, since he owed his very existence to the way they collectively arrived at all those little and big choices during their time that caused reality to unfold in this one particular way by the time he was born. The fact that the City did not teach history, wasn't preoccupied with the past and did not even recognize that discipline as a matter worthy of study, made him feel like he was living among people who were suffering from mass amnesia. Oblivious to the fascinating twists and turns of the timeless story of man. Man, that troubled creature that had dwelled on this earth for so long, eventually learning a few things by trial and error, then building upon the learnings, bit by bit, through endless mishaps and troubles and violence and wars. Until ultimately, one singular Event reduced his entire journey into a bunch of books inside a modest library made of dark mahogany wood, housed in an office most people don't know of, let alone dwell into. And even the one human descendent who was still aware of, and interested in, that library, was now no longer able to access it. So that if he Adonis was to die tomorrow... might the story of mankind also die with him?

The matter of death had always been more or less recurrent on his mind, but ever since he fell into solitude, Adonis was starting to ponder over it from an entirely unusual perspective. He was now

interested in death, not as a dreadful event for an individual, but as a deplorable discontinuity in the flow of information between generations. What if the original masterminds of the Event were still living, whoever they might have been, might they not have perspectives on contemporary matters to share with us? Little bits of relevant information about the past, now forever forgotten, that might help us understand the present much better, and therefore make better-informed choices? How about the people who ran the world before the Event? How about those generations, now long gone, who could have formulated the best counter-arguments to the corrector's stone-cold logic about the necessity and the inevitability of the Event? We would never know. For they are gone, and so are the millions of life experiences and anecdotes that collectively defined the wisdom of their generation. Death wasn't bad news merely for *them*. Death also forever robbed *us* from the opportunity to hear what they had to say to us. And when death takes away someone you actually had a chance to know and interact with, then in that case death is doubly as tragic. It is tragic, not just because of what you know or remember dearly about the person you lost, but even more so because of what you do not know about the person, and now that they're gone, you never will.

Or perhaps it wasn't all that tragic after all. If anything, maybe life would be so unchallenging as to become dull if all the people who ever lived were still with us, and therefore the entire story was available to be told. After all, where there are gaps, the imaginative mind gets a chance to work. Genius could be aptly defined as the capacity to fill in what is not there yet, what is lacking in the picture. If the story was given to us complete with the full account of every soul that had ever lived, then there might be nothing left for the creative mind to work for, and it would, therefore, be left to atrophy.

What scared him the most was the knowledge that there *is* knowledge out there, that now lay forever out of reach for him. In that regard, the death of past generations and the denial of access to the corrector's library were equally dreadful prospects.

And most tragic of all, of course, as hard as he tried to push it out of his mind, was the death of Abas. Over the years he had perfected the skill of navigating his conscious thought away from it. But every now and then it surfaced, as sure as the sun was to peek out of the clouds now and then no matter how thick the overcast. Curiously, the bad memories of him were always easier to recall than the good ones, although he was certain that most of his times with his dad were

good times. Yet for some reason, the good memories were never sharp enough in his mind as to be distinguishable, but rather smudged into one another so as to leave only the overall feeling of having had great times together but with no particular detail. The bad memories though, they were always distinct and detailed.

It was still hard to believe that more than ten years had already passed since his dad had gone. To Adonis, it just didn't feel that long, perhaps because Abas still crossed his mind just as often as did those other people who were still around in his everyday life. Very often when among friends, he'd find himself wandering off thinking about how Abas would have acted if he were right there with them. Sometimes the vision was so vivid, that it was as if he was going about his life with an invisible person coming along for the ride, that only he could see or hear. Whenever Atlas went on a theatrical show-off episode about something he did or someone he met, Abas would cringe in disapproval, the way he always did when he tried not to confront somebody who was doing something he didn't like. Or whenever Katina dressed up her dog for the day in some fancy silk garment studded with sparkly jewels, he would roll his eyes and mutter "What a waste." Adonis remembered mostly how his dad always seemed obsessed with things not being "gone to waste." It was perhaps the most unusual thing about Abas. Growing up, it was a daily spectacle watching his dad shake his head silently in frustration whenever the soiled plates and cutlery disappeared off the dinner table after every meal. "What a waste" he'd sometimes mutter on days when he was exceptionally frustrated. "What? Do you want us to keep the dirty plates and utensils now?? Who does that?" Adonis's mother would sometimes call him out on it. But he would always concede, on the dinnerware anyway. The one thing he sometimes put a fight for was leftover food "going to waste." He'd get visibly upset whenever Adonis didn't finish his plate and would insist that he did. "But why?" Adonis never understood. He remembered clearly the sense of injustice at being the only kid among all his friends that had to finish his plate every time. But no matter how much he pleaded and cited example after example of households where that was not a thing, Abas never relaxed that odd and nonsensical requirement. One day he even...

Bad memories, somehow they made a more lasting impression. When it came to particular memories, Adonis mostly remembered his dad as a grumpy old misfit, constantly disappointed with his life and everybody in it, always frustrated because he wasn't able to change any of it. Yet somehow, the overall sentiment was that of

overwhelming happiness. That day when Adonis had bumped into the dead Farmer's body at the beach, he must've been nine or ten, that same day at dinner Adonis wouldn't finish his plate. Something about the sight of a grown man's dead body for the first time must have given him the courage to stand his ground. Argument after argument and plea after plea, he just refused to finish up those last few spoonfuls of potato puree that were left on his plate after a delicious three-course meal. Or was it dessert? That part was foggy. He did remember clearly though what his dad did in the end. To his mother's surprise, Abas snatched the spoon out of Adonis's hand and shoved its load down his throat, forcing Adonis's jaw open with thick stout fingers. Adonis remembered being stunned. Such heavy-handed response was the last thing he'd expected from his father. The force of Abas's rough hand tingled his cheeks for hours after that. And the violation of trust stung for weeks to come. As traumatizing as force-feeding must have been to a ten-year-old, in the end, what made a lasting impression wasn't the physical act or even the violation of free will. But instead, it was the look on his father's face as he did it. He remembered the most unusual expression as Abas shoved food down his throat. He wasn't angry, not even upset. He looked, determined? No, it was something else. It was the look of, desperation! Yes, Abas seemed positively desperate, almost to the point of panic. Adonis could never figure out why. It was just another mystery piling up about dad, just like he could never figure out why he was the only person he knew who kept using the phrase "going to waste" to refer to food leftovers. Adonis never figured out what the big deal was. After a meal was over, all plates and utensils were trashed. Napkins, tablecloth, table runner, and decoration, they were all discarded. One click and the whole setup would vanish into oblivion, never to be used again by anybody anywhere. But of all that, it was the food that Abas especially considered to "go to waste." What was it about the food that was so special?

If Abas was still alive, might he have something to tell him about life, or about his own childhood, that might shed some light into the matter? It was a question that was destined to remain forever unanswered. At the very least, he might have something to say to defend his own odd behavior. His own account of events at a minimum. If nothing else, it might put to peace those memories of a father figure riddled with mysteries. Not the least of which the embarrassingly controversial way he ultimately chose to end his own...

The muffled ping on his device was a welcome distraction from thoughts that had carried him away too close to a scar. He stood up and reached for it for the first time in days. His device was hidden between the wraps of his crumbled bed sheet. It was Nyx, reminding him about their big half-anniversary date the following day. He hadn't forgotten, had he?

He hadn't forgotten and was meaning to send her a ping all day. He wanted to keep it short and on point: "I'm sorry I won't make it." But something about the memory of Abas and what had happened to him changed his frame of mind. He felt like a third person watching the fingers type a surprising sequence of letters. First a W then an o. Abas would have canceled and moped home for months longer. But Adonis wasn't going to allow himself to become a grumpy old misfit. The person holding the device opted instead to reply with "Wouldn't miss it."

## PART TWO

## kappa

*"This present moment used to be the unimaginable future." —Stewart Brand*

The statue in the middle of the entryway to Nyx's tile never ceased to amaze. Standing about 30 feet tall and made entirely of blue marble, it made you feel compelled to pause and squint up at it every time. It was a sculpture of a vivacious woman in a wavy robe, holding her palm up with her arm extending as far out as it can reach, and some sort of an oversized bird froze mid-air as if flapping its wings to stay afloat while feeding on whatever it was in the lady's hand. The combination of lady and bird was carved out of a single slab of marble such that the bird's offset position to the lady's body always made Adonis stop and give a moment's thought to how the weight of the bird was supported afloat. The little touch point where the beak met the lady's open palm was the only visible support for the bird. Otherwise, its entire body hung five or six feet long in mid-air, with its center of gravity far away from where it connected to the rest of the statue. This seemingly impossible setup must have been conjured with the intention of enticing the viewer stop and wonder, which worked on Adonis every time even after having concluded that the artist must have ported the insides of the bird out, leaving only a lighter hollow shell made out of a single uninterrupted surface of marble.

Which is not to say that the rest of the entryway wasn't as breathtaking by any stretch. Elegantly simple yet grand in scale, it featured green lawn surrounding the statue in a circular expanse at least fifty feet in diameter, bordered by a thick ring of tulips that formed a gradient from baby blue to dark blue around the edges. The giant statue and its circular plant base together made the centerpiece of the entryway, which was positioned midway between two long columns of palm trees shooting perfectly straight up to equal heights and equal spacings all the way down the hundred yard path to the main residence building.

"You made it! My my, you do clean up well! I was wondering if you would actually show up, Mr. too-busy-to-answer-any-pings."

As practical and fuss-free as Nyx was, when it came to a romantic date she always made a point of receiving Adonis all the way back at the entryway to her tile. The regular receiving point in the main lobby was of course just as accessible, and a lot more practical. But to

her, the ceremonious stroll together down the sunny path to the residence must have been one of the joys of dating. Adonis never understood that sense of fondness of one's own tile landscape that was so common among the girls. The guys liked to exhibit too, but they were more often fond of their gyms, toys, and amenities than they were of their gardens or residence architectures.

"You're looking pretty nice yourself," Adonis joked at the obvious stunning beauty of his companion. She had clearly put a lot of effort into looking her best, and it worked: A sleeveless cocktail dress, long and slim in jet black with subtle glitter shimmering all over it. A pull-up hairdo kept her unruly locks in check as to match the elegance of her cocktail dress. Gold plated fingernails and matching toenails were cradled in nimble black stilettos that shot pairs of tight strappy leather loops crisscrossing up her ankles and calves before disappearing under the bottom of her dress. It was rare for Nyx to take the time to style up. Her typical appearance was of the genuine, improvised-causal kind, which made one often forget how feminine she can be when she wanted to be. This surprise factor served to amplify the breathtaking effect of her sight even more on such occasions when she did take the time to do something elaborate with her looks.

Adonis was also looking sharp. Deceivingly so for someone who hadn't stepped out of his tile for weeks and was on the verge of a total psychological meltdown. But something about this date made him decide to pull back together. Now clean shaven and well groomed, his muscular body tracing attractive contours from under a stylish silk suit, he had perfectly camouflaged his recent episode of acute depression.

The path to the main building was long and straight, but Nyx had interesting sights and stops arranged along the way to make it as entertaining as possible for her special guests. The first of those was a large koi pond covering the entire width of the path, on which a narrow windy wooden bridge floated, barely clearing the surface of the water. Large bright orange fish swam around and across under the bridge, and white petals of some sort of aquatic plant floated on the surface here and there. Next down the path was a gazebo to the right with a seating area for ten around a circular stone and metal fire pit. Further down still, there was a narrowing that led to a twisty primrose path with pebbles lining up the walkway and wooden arches supporting the canopy of flowers overhead. The plants covering the canopy were arranged into transversal rows, each with

flowers of a different color dangling densely from above, which gave the overall effect of a spectrum of colors overhead. In succession, the flowers were white, cream, pink, and lavender. Then the pattern repeated.

Strolling together with Nyx having reached for his arm and wrapped it around her narrow waist, Adonis couldn't help but feel a sense of pride of his privileged status in the eyes of the classy lady by his side. It had been quite long since they last touched, and he had rather forgotten the sense of pride that came with the physical assertion of being the chosen man of such an attractive beauty.

Once the couple cleared the windy path, a stone arch yielded to the main façade featuring an enormous pool of no discernible shape and five fountains shooting straight jets over the backdrop of the primary residence of Nyx's tile. One can speak of a "main" residence because Nyx's tile was one of those modern *archipelago* tiles commonly known as arps. The trend had been catching up in the City lately, although Nyx was always sure to point out how she was one of the earliest adopters. An arp tile came with not one but many separate residence buildings. Each building contained just a few rooms, or sometimes even a single room. The buildings were completely detached and sprinkled over the area of the tile with no connections to the outside or to each other, like disjoint islands in an archipelago. This setup brought about the advantage that every room could have windows on each of its four walls, resulting in much better-lit interior. And since a tile was typically five acres in size, each window on each wall of each room could open up to a potentially fantastic and unobstructed view. The resident of an arp tile would program their device to port them from one room to another upon walking to a designated spot so that they wouldn't need to lift a finger while they wandered around seamlessly from room to room in their virtually seamless but physically disjoint residence. Nyx's arp was a little different in that it came with one large main building, housing her guest lobby and memrooms, and about thirty smaller buildings housing her personal rooms and amenities.

Walking hand in hand through the main door, Nyx led Adonis through the main lobby and down to an unusually wide hallway that extended seemingly forever. Adonis had never been to that part of her residence before, and she wouldn't tell him where she was taking him. Playing into the whole surprise date routine, Adonis didn't press the question and marched instead towards the unknown destination down the endless hallway. The flooring was entirely

made of marble of the same brownish patchy pattern as the main lobby and apparently designed as an extension of it. But the ceiling of the hallway was a little lower, perhaps only twenty feet high, and it was arched with sets of stone pillars extending the entire length of the corridor on either side. Every fifty feet or so a chandelier dangled from the tip of the ceiling arch, with golden frames holding shiny crystals each as big as a fisted palm. Noticing Adonis fixated on those, Nyx was quick to point out that they were "real Neptunian diamonds, by far the largest and shiniest in the City," although when he pressed her, she reluctantly revealed that she had no idea where they actually come from. Adonis silently wondered if they really were ported from their eponymous plane, as he had once heard Ponos rave about such a project in the works at Planetes. Except where doors were standing, the space between every pair of pillars was made into a window or a mirror, in an alternating pattern. The mirrors were shaped to fill the entire area between a couple of columns and had a frosty smoky finish that made one's reflection look like a ghost, further adding the overall allure of the setup. The combined effect of sunlight shining through the windows and mirrors reflecting it around the marble floors and diamond chandeliers gave the entire hallway a magical glow as if one was walking through a star-studded galaxy.

"Have you ever walked the full length?"

"Yes actually, it only takes about ten minutes. This walk always makes me feel better whenever I'm down. Luckily for your lazy ass, we're going into that room just over there," Nyx said, pointing to a door coming up on the left.

Unlike your typical memroom which was labeled by age or date, Nyx's had her memrooms labeled by words that she used to say often at every stage in her life. The room she was pointing to had a golden plaque beside the door that read "Whatever." Apparently back in her late teens, she used to say that in response to anything her parents told her. Once inside the room, Adonis was immediately taken aback with the amount of artwork plastered all over the walls. The furniture, posters, photo frames, and carpets were all typical for a teenage girl, except that about twenty large drawings were hanging on the walls all around. Some were charcoal, some pastel, and flumaster. But they all looked authentic, and of excellent quality.

"Did you draw all these?"

"Tadaa! That's what I wanted to show you. I did all these back when I was sixteen and seventeen. I used to spend hours working on them.

I kept my desk right over there. That's where all the magic used to happen."

Adonis took a few steps around. Nyx's memroom was in perfect order. The room was square, about thirty feet across, with most of the furniture clustered in one corner and the rest of the area dedicated to hand-drawn art interleaved with posters of teen idols. Among the furniture was an ultra-girly bed with an oversized headboard, a dresser, a vanity complete with a huge mirror shaped like a heart, a few cabinets full of art supplies, and a wide drawing desk were all the artwork was apparently divined. Adonis couldn't help but wonder if an area the size of that room might have housed an entire family back in pre-Eventian times. And there it was now, forever uninhabited, frivolously dedicated to Nyx's memory of her late teens.

"This here is my favorite memroom. I had it for five full years until I turned twenty, then I decided it was time for a freshroom for a fresh new decade in life. So are you impressed yet or should I move on to the main attraction?"

Nyx had a playful smirk on her face as she waved her arms around as if to subtly get Adonis to look towards what she wanted him to see.

"Over there?" he asked. Trying not to spoil the game by being too obvious.

"Yes, you dork! I've been winking in that direction all along. *Man* you're hopeless!" she giggled as she gave up and pulled him towards a smaller drawing hanging right above the drawing desk between a shelf full of sparkly candles and another framed poster of a boy band Adonis didn't recognize. As he got closer, he immediately realized why she wanted him to examine that drawing in particular. It was a charcoal silhouette of a young man flexing his biceps and staring chin-up into the distance. The contours of his body were complete, but some of the details were artfully left out. Yet his face was exceptionally detailed, and although some of the features were a little off, the man was undeniably Adonis.

"Is that me?"

"Is it, isn't it?!" she exclaimed, acting as surprised as he was to see a drawing of himself in her teenage memroom.

"You drew this? When?"

"Back when I was fourteen or fifteen. Long before I met you that's for sure. Don't you think that's crazy?"

"For exactly how long have you been stalking me, Nyx?!"

His attempt at humor was surprisingly well received. Nyx laughed so hard she started to tear up. Then she put on a fake serious-face and whispered as she stepped right up to him. "I guess it was always meant to be. I knew you deep in my heart long before we first locked eyes, my dear."

As obvious as her mockery was, Adonis couldn't help being excited by her sudden closeness. Her body well wrapped in a sexy dress hovering inches away from his, the enticing smell of whatever cologne it was that she put on whenever she wanted to get his undivided attention, the shimmer of her silver loop earrings, and the tips of her hair grazing his torso. He met her playful eyes and felt his heart unavoidably skip a beat.

But then she moved away with a sudden but graceful hop to the back, and swirled around on her tiptoes, humming softly and rubbing her two index fingers as to mime a tiny violin playing a solemn tune.

"Oh knock it off! You seriously have issues you know?"

Nyx started laughing again, and Adonis couldn't help but smile at her goofiness. It was the first time he smiled in weeks.

"Come on quick! let me show you some other memrooms."

Adonis followed his unruly chaperone from room to room, entirely uninterested in the exercise but happy to be in the company of somebody for a change. In one room there was an elaborate maze of pillars and platforms all over the walls, apparently meant as an obstacle course for Nyx's late cat whom she had mentioned before although Adonis couldn't get himself to remember her name. In another room, a giant brick wall housed some twenty borderless canvas prints, scattered around randomly like a cluster with overlapping edges. They each had a fragment of a photo printed on them, and together they formed an incomplete mosaic of a single scene. It was a black and white photo of Nyx, dressed in a cute furry toque and winking at the camera, with snow blanketing the background.

Adonis never really understood the habit of fossilizing one's past lifestyle purely for enjoyment as an exhibit. He did keep his own baby and toddler memrooms, but only out of respect for his parents who had arranged for it in the first place. Beyond the early years, as soon as he was old enough to be expected to see to it himself, he simply never did. Yet in that regard, he was the exception to the rule. Pretty much everybody else he knew had a separate memroom for every stage in his or her life, from infancy all the way up. Whenever a

Citizen felt like he outgrew their current lifestyle, or needed a fresh start, instead of renovating their quarters they'd just move to another room, and leave the old one forever available as a keepsake of earlier times. The frames on the walls, the furniture, the toys, the books and magazines, along with everything else, all collectively enshrined as a timeless memory.

Adonis couldn't help but muse at how, for a society that was entirely unbothered with the history of humanity, it was the greatest irony for its Citizens to be so obsessed with keepsakes each from their own inconsequential past.

"Why the smirk?"

"Oh, nothing... Nothing"

"Okay, so are you ready for your baby's baby memroom? This here is a sight for only the most privileged ..."

"Are you ready, Nyx and Adonis? Your Elysion is waiting for you," a pleasant but still undeniably robotic voice echoed in the distance.

Nyx's face lit up despite being interrupted mid-sentence. Having abruptly and entirely lost interest in showing Adonis whatever was fossilized in her baby memroom, she slipped her hand behind her back and produced a pair of bracelets, one golden and the other silver. Adonis was still trying to figure out where she had been hiding them since her little black dress definitely didn't have any pockets, but she had already slipped the silver one on his right wrist and started slipping hers on with a look of sheer excitement on her face. Adonis eyed his bracelet. It was wide but elegant, with his name etched on one end and the word "Elysion" etched on the other in a light, cordial font. Adonis never wore necklaces or rings, let alone bracelets, on account of them being too feminine for his taste. But whoever designed that Elysion bracelet went to great lengths to give it a masculine feel, with thick contours and dark, brushed-steel finish. Nyx was already showing hers off to him with a twirl of her wrist. Hers was shinier, more delicate looking, and came with four button-like bubbles on the outside that were marked with ascending numerals. Before he could ask, Nyx held her thumb against the bubble marked "1". Realizing she was anticipating a look of anticipation on his face, he tried his best to play the part. "Put your device down. You won't need it where we're going. Ready or not, here we go!" she announced as she squeezed the first bubble. Adonis heard it pop, and then he wasn't there anymore.

The first act of the popular new quartet Elysion took place on a tiny island in the middle of a calm, shallow sea. Adonis found himself facing his date on opposite ends of a small circular table covered with fine ivory cloth. Just to the right of his view, the sun was already well on its way to set, filling the open sky with a dominant gradient of orange and purple that vanished into the calm azure of the water. Adonis tried to do the math in his head. Wherever this island was, they must have ported a couple of thousand miles due East at least for the sun to be about to set already. It was most probably a man-made island, he decided, for it to be shaped like a perfectly flat heart made of impeccably yellow sand just ten feet in diameter in the middle of an endless expanse of shallow waters. The table, candlelit and perfectly set, was full of fine delicacies of every kind. Food that was grown by Farmers, no doubt. It was unavoidable to imagine them, toiling away in the Farms tending to crops hungry under the scorching sun. Forever unable to savor the literal fruit of their labor. Not even granted the dignity of knowing where their produce vanished: into the first course of a meal featured in the first act of something called a quartet, for the pleasure of one couple of strangers on a heart-shaped island impossibly beyond their reach.

"Slip your shoes off," Nyx advised authoritatively as she unstrapped her own heels and buried her bare feet in the cool sand beneath the table, "What do you think?"

"Unbelievable," Adonis replied, still unable to shake off the irony.

"You just wait, this is only the first act!"

Music played in the distance as the young lovers exchanged flirty comments and nibbled on gourmet finger foods. Where did the music even come from? No matter. Course after course vanished off the table, making space to the next on cue. As the sun charted its grand descent towards the horizon, Nyx talked about all kinds of things. She was more chatty than usual, perhaps because it had been a while since they went out. Apparently, a lot of funny things had happened that Adonis needed catching up on. But with nothing of value up for discussion, he quickly drifted off, focusing instead on the range of facial expressions his date was masterfully switching. She was the only person he knew for whom one needed to learn how to read visual affect from the ground up. Her rugged features combined with her piercing gaze made her every expression quite inimitable.

When facing Nyx in animated conversation, you quickly realized that whatever you thought you knew about reading facial expressions simply didn't apply. There was regular happy, and then there was Nyx-happy, and so it was for sad, upset, hopeful, and all the rest of emotions. With repetition, Adonis had gotten quite good at reading

her, although in that beautiful dress and hairdo he felt a bit like he was in the company of someone else. He'd never seen her in anything sleeveless before, and he admired how it emphasized the full roundness of her toned shoulders. Her diamond necklace, resting on her prominent collar bones, adorned the firm definition of her traps. Altogether he decided that her strong athletic appearance somehow added to her feminine appeal rather than detract from it.

"You haven't tried the truffles - they're the best in the whole wide City."

Adonis smiled and took a deep breath. The serenity of the landscape combined with the nonchalant attitude of his date had started to lighten his mood.

"If you say so. I'll put them to the test."

The sun had already drowned behind the waves by the time the last course of the meal was over, giving way to candlelight shimmer against the dusking sky. The couple, well fed and a little tipsy, now had their hands embraced over the now empty table. Bracelet clang against Elysion bracelet as Nyx whispered: "Shall we?"

Adonis nodded, this time feeling a little bit excited to see what the second act was. Keeping her eyes fixated on her date, Nyx freed a hand and popped the bubble marked "2". Adonis immediately squinted against the surge of ambient light as he found himself on a sandy beach somewhere back on the mainland, with the sun glowing in its youthful beauty further up the in the sky where it used to be back at the beginning of the first act. It was the hour before sunset all over again, as if time had been somehow rolled back to make space for a barefoot stroll down the beach before dark with his date in his arms. Whoever thought of this was pure genius, Adonis decided, making use of TP over thousands of miles to follow sunset from region to region and prolong the magic of the experience. Nyx, standing just a few inches away, wasn't at all preoccupied with the cleverness of the choreography. Instead, she was taking it all in, one deep breath at a time. Eyes closed and arms open, she let out a loud slow exhale and smiled with utter contentment. Then when the moment was over, she clutched the tip of her dress with one hand and charged towards the incoming waves with the zeal of a mischievous child. Adonis found himself running after her. As dry sand gave way to wet sand, smirk gave way to grin, and the two started kicking and splashing each other under the magenta painted sky.

## lambda

*"Here was a new generation, grown to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken."* —F. Scott Fitzgerald

Adonis and Nyx were entirely alone as they strolled down the beach during the second act of Elysion. The beach was not familiar, nowhere either of them had been before. It was apparently exclusive to Elysion, brushed clean of all dirt and pebbles, even seaweed leftovers. It stretched for what seemed like miles, winding at times, straight as an arrow at others. Scattered along the way were little round high tables planted in the sand, hosting refreshments and champagne to keep them fueled.

The sun did its familiar dive, painting the entire scene various shades of violet and orange as it did. The waves crashing and seagulls flapping in the distance only added to the phantasm of the experience. Nyx talked of countless little things as she always did. Champagne tended to make her even more chatty. Adonis only listened and reflected at first, but then as the alcohol, sand, and waves did their collective magic, he started to lighten up a little.

"You know, remember that time last year when we were hanging out at Katina's, and Eos started howling like crazy all of sudden?"

"Yeah, I remember that. What was wrong with her that day? I forgot..."

Nyx buried her feet under the sand in a silent declaration that the remark was of the stand-and-face-me, not the walk-along-with-me kind. Turning around to face her, her eyes locked on his in a way that almost demanded that he embrace her, which he did. "I don't remember either. I think it turned out she had a stomach germ or something. But that day, Katina and I eventually pretty much lost it on the poor little dog and started yelling at her to shut up in the end. But you, you knelt down to face her and started talking to her, like she was a real person. Remember that?"

"Not really no."

"I remember it well because you don't really talk much, not to people anyway! But you kept talking to her and petting her until she calmed down. I think that was the first time I realized that I was into you."

"For real? Right at that moment?"

"Yeah," she shrugged.

"Can we make it another moment?" he smirked.

"Sorry, too late. It was right then that I realized something special about you."

"And what was that?"

Nyx looked out in the distance for a moment, then she said: "You know, the summer before you and I met, that summer I went on work for a few weeks as a lifter. It wasn't the first time I did the lifter thing. I really like helping life people's spirits, and I'm told I'm good at it. Actually, around the same time, Katina was on work as a singer at Eros. I used to pull her with me to go do lifting rounds - I'd goof around, and she'd do her song routine. By the end of it, everybody would be in a good mood. I really enjoyed lifting the spirits of downers.

"The thing is, before that day I've always thought of you as a downer. But right there with Eos, I realized you just care so deeply. You care about everybody, even dogs, even strangers, even long-dead strangers. To most people it makes you look like a depressed soul. But I don't think you are, deep inside. I think your caring is the cause of all your troubles. I actually think you'd make a great lifter, just like me."

Nyx had her unique way of turning a casual conversation into a serious one in an instant, like the click of a button. She didn't do that often, but when she did, it was masterful. She had that look that she reserved only for such occasions, where she would gaze into your eyes with an intensity that felt at once invasive and vulnerable. Adonis had even invested the time to find the word for it before: "Opia". He contemplated kissing those deliciously pouted lips with the passion to match the heavenly backdrop, but only stopped himself because that would have cut short the conversation. And for once, Adonis really felt like he wanted to talk, really talk to someone.

"This beach, it wasn't always ours," he started, not sure how to articulate his thought using language that wasn't overly hyperbolic.

"I mean it wasn't always for Elysion, or even for the City. Do you realize that thousands of lovers walked over these sands long before even ... before the Event, even."

"The Farmers, you mean?"

"No," he gently said with a smirk as he figured he needed to backtrack to more basic axioms still.

"I mean, long before there were even Farmers, long before the world was like this. There were many different worlds before ours. The City, it's just the latest thing. The latest show in town."

"Like Elysion!" she smiled, happy to have landed such a witty comeback.

"Yes, just like Elysion. Our City and everything in it are just the newest things. Before it, there were countless older things, all taking turns on this same world we now live in. They don't teach you that, but it's true."

"I did study that," Nyx said without trying to hide her cleverness, "Cavemen and stuff. Hunters and gatherers. I know all about the planet before."

"No no, ..." Adonis paused. There was so much she didn't know, or couldn't care to know maybe. Might it be hopeless to even try to get her to acknowledge, let alone appreciate world history? How can one convey such grand sentiment in just a minute or two of small talk before she lost interest?

"What is it?" Nyx whispered softly, her arms now wrapped around his neck, "Please don't go back in your head. Whatever it is, you can really talk to me."

Perhaps it was a bad idea to even try. Unless... maybe a conversation in the abstract wasn't the right approach. If growing up as a Citizen had made her into a grown-up child, then one can perhaps get the point across like one would with a child, through actual stories and real-life details. And he certainly had plenty those stories to share.

Adonis decided to give it a try. He sat down on the sand and motioned for her to sit next to him, and before she could, he had already started his narrative in a slow, overly animated tone:

"A very long time ago, long before the City or the Event, some people used to live in another city, one much smaller than our own and far far away from here. Their City was just one of many other cities spread all over the world, so they had to give it a name, just like a person, to tell it apart from all those other ones. So, those people from long ago, they ended up naming their city China."

"Like the dishes?"

Adonis sighed, then continued, undeterred.

"Yes, just like the dishes. So anyway, the people who were the citizens of China had a leader to help them run their city. They called him Emperor. He was a very powerful man, and everyone obeyed his orders. But he was miserable because, for all his power and wealth, he didn't have anybody he truly loved. Until one day, he ordered his men to travel to every corner of the land and find the most beautiful woman in the whole wide City. But nobody ..."

"What do you mean, to find her?" Nyx interrupted with a grin, "How the hell did she get lost in the first place?"

She didn't care the least about the story but was happy nonetheless to see Adonis talking about something so passionately. His eyes had that gleam, and his tone was authoritative and compelling. It was a

welcome surprise in a man who was usually as introverted as he was attractive.

"She wasn't lost. It's just that they had no way of knowing who the most beautiful woman in the City was in the first place. This was long before TP, and they couldn't see the women face to face except by riding on a horse and trotting tile to tile all the way across the City. It took them many months, and the men brought beauty after beauty back to Emperor, but his heart didn't flutter for any of them. But then one day, when he was bathing in the hot springs he noticed a young..."

"Umm, excuse me, question?" Nyx interrupted again, playfully raising her hand at her cute teacher.

"He was bathing in the springs out in the open just like that?"

"Yes, that was long before people figured out how to run water streams in their freshrooms. Even the most powerful man in the City had to get naked and dip in a spring to enjoy a hot bath."

"Well, that's weird, but could be good or bad depending on how sexy the guy was."

"True... Anyway, so while he was taking a bath in the spring, he noticed the young daughter of one of the men who worked for him. She was bathing in the spring, pouring water over her silky hair and ivory white skin. They say she was so beautiful, that when she smiled at you, she could melt your heart with a single glance."

"So, almost as pretty as me then?"

"No, she was just pretty. You, you are as pretty as you are annoying!" Adonis showed an annoyed face, but really he appreciated how well his date could take his jabs.

"Anyway, that Emperor fell for her at first sight and took her in as a concubine. Ever since then, he became completely consumed by her love. He missed on work often just to spend time with her, and all but neglected his duty as leader just to be with her. Until one day, the City was shaken by the war drums of a revolt."

"A what now?"

"A revolt. It means the people of China didn't want that man to be their leader anymore. They wanted to kill him and put someone else in charge. Emperor's guards and helpers carried him and his women away from the City under cover of the night and took him up the hills to safety. But then while on the way, the guards rebelled and told Emperor they would not help him anymore until he punished his favorite concubine because she was the reason for the whole trouble. She ended up strung up on a tree with a silk rope, a victim of her own arresting beauty."

"Serves her well for dating a guy who was already dating other ladies!" Nyx declared.

"He wasn't some guy, he was the leader of everybody, and she wasn't dating him, she was chosen to serve as his concubine."

"So they were not dating? Wait, I thought you said the dude loved her like crazy?"

"Yes but not as an equal, she was sort of, his servant."

"Like, a Farmer?"

"No, it was before all that. I guess the closest thing is a pet. He loved her and brought her in as his pet."

"Well, I bet she didn't like that!"

"No, probably not. But her feelings about it didn't matter. What matters to the story is how he felt, and how his love for her destroyed the whole City and ended his reign which he had inherited from his father and his grandfather before him. The story goes, the rebellion went on for a long time, and by the time the dust would settle, Emperor's dynasty had ended, and some thirty-five million citizens of China had died in the fighting. All because of one man's heart beating for one beautiful woman."

Now sitting next to him on the sandy beach, Nyx looked out into the ocean and reflected for a moment. She found it to be an interesting tale, even though she didn't know what a concubine was, or a rebellion or a dynasty for that matter. Finally, she ventured her opinion with the resolved tone of a final verdict.

"The whole story sounds made up if you ask me. But if it really happened like that, then it's a good thing that we don't live back in those times. Are you sure it isn't just a fairy tale?"

"I get why you ask that. I mean, our lives today seem worlds away from this story. But it's not a fairy tale, no. It was actually written as a poem and preserved through the ages. The poet who wrote about it a long time ago used to work for that Emperor. It starts like this: 'The city is gone, but the mountains and rivers remain.'"

Adonis paused for a second as if chasing a thought in his own head. But then he started again, compelled by his newfound interest in sharing his inner reflections with someone for a change.

"Don't you think that's deep? I think the reason ancient writings are so beautiful is that they had real matters to write about."

"I dunno, I was never really into poetry I guess."

"But that's the thing, the poetry we have sucks. Poetry is at its finest when it is written out of misery and pain. Today, the masses that suffer, they suffer in isolation and silence, and we the Citizens who have the luxury and privilege to write poetry live catatonic lives void of all real emotion. Or, maybe they do, write poetry I mean. Do you think Farmers write poetry that we just don't get to know about or..."

"Not all emotion," Nyx interrupted, still hung up on that part, "No

senseless killing of lady-pets or whatever, sure, but we feel passion, and love."

"Can't you feel me right now?" She then whispered, driving her lips into his. He did feel her, with an intensity that only made him want to share more with her. More than his body, but his mind as well, whether or not she could reciprocate.

"Where did you read that poem anyway?" She said with an endearing smile.

Adonis ran his fingers through the brown curls, careful not to disturb the many shiny jewels and ornaments adorning her many little braids here and there. A short pause later, he decided, what the hell.

"I read it in an ancient book that I stole from the corrector's library." He immediately looked away in shame, but hearing a thud, he looked back right away, only to find his date on her back, tearful with laughter.

"Oh my god, that's hilarious! Only *you* would do that, you weirdo!" then after a pause to catch her breath between giggles, "That's awesome though. Way to go, I didn't think you had a naughty side to you."

Adonis would have expected any reaction except this one. He was surprised but mostly relieved. He smiled with ease and chuckled.

"Well, it doesn't matter. I got caught and won't be reading ancient books anymore."

He felt a hand wrap around his far shoulder, and a deliciously attractive body squeeze a little closer. Nyx eyed him with what felt like a mix of sympathy and admiration.

"Well, of course, you'd get caught! You poor damaged soul. You're so hot though, so it's all good."

Adonis fell silent for a second.

"How are your sessions going anyway?" Nyx finally prompted him. He found himself telling her all about the meds, the conversations, the mind games. He told her about how he got caught stealing, the embarrassment, the depression. As difficult as it was for him, it felt good to open up to someone. He started explaining the details of his condition, borrowing the corrector's terms and phrases whenever he felt at a loss for words. Damaged or not, he was who he was, and that beautiful young lady went to great lengths to arrange for a night with him on a deserted beach, so there must be something different or even exciting about him after all.

"Well, I wouldn't be too sure to call what you have a 'condition' in the first place, you know."

"How do you mean?"

"You seem perfectly fine to me. Quirky as hell, but fine. For all we know, maybe your problem is that everyone around you is sick, and

you just happen to be healthy. Maybe you have a rare, what do you call it, I dunno ... ”

“Natural immunity” Adonis said, looking into the distance as if thinking aloud.

“Yes, immunity. Maybe we’re all sick, and you’re not. Maybe that’s why you’re different. Who’s to say it’s the other way around?”

“Fuck the corrector,” Adonis whispered after a long contemplative pause. Apparently, Nyx took that as a big joke, and she swung to her back again giggling loudly.

Yes, fuck the corrector! He wasn’t sick. Everybody else was. He knew it deep inside. He had always known it. He just didn’t dare to bring it into his mind as a conscious thought, until his surprisingly wise woman spelled it out for him. Adonis felt a surge of relief as he quietly assured himself that he was probably the healthiest person alive. But his internal monologue was cut short with a nudge on the shoulder. Turning around, he saw that Nyx’s expression had suddenly shifted to sheer excitement as if a decision had flared in her mind that she hadn’t shared yet. She unwrapped her arms and reached out for her bracelet.

“Tell me another stolen-ancient-book story!” she demanded as she popped the third bubble.

Adonis felt a sudden rush of wet warmth engulf his entire body as the colorful ambiance of sunset abruptly disappeared into darkness, and the cries of seagulls vanished without as much as a fadeout. For the third act, the couple had been ported out of their clothes and into the middle of an infinity pool under a quiet starry sky. The water was warm and fresh, and shallow enough to for Adonis to tip-toe around. Nyx, being a foot or so shorter, naturally resorted to balancing her weight with her arms wrapped around his neck. It felt like the darkest hour of the night, but a little moonlight still shone through the water to reveal a silhouette of Nyx’s naked body swaying in and out of distortion under the mercy of the ripples their arms and shoulders emanated.

“Surprise skinny dipping. Nice touch!” he teased. The thought of being a couple of feet away from her nakedness instantly aroused Adonis, which must have been obvious to Nyx who missed no chance to tease:

“Easy tiger, the night is still young.”

“The night literally just started,” he mused, mulling over the irony of how, just a few seconds ago, the sun was still up in the sky encompassing their entire view with shades of violet.

"So that's why I wasn't allowed to bring my device with me..." Adonis added, tracing gentle circles with his fingers over the surface of the water in which he suddenly found himself all but submerged. Nyx opened her lips to say something, but whatever she wanted to say, it had to wait. She knew just by looking at him that he was about to start another ancient tale. Adonis paused for a second, taking in his new surroundings, then he started:

"Back when the world was full of little cities, and people lived in groups each loyal to their own, there came times when the people of one city would set out to fight those of another. Big fights, bigger than you've ever seen, and more organized, more destructive. Imagine a thousand people fighting a thousand others all at once. The people of long ago, they built big weapons that brought about great destruction to each other's cities. They called it war. It was a time of pain and horror, but at least everyone knew who their enemies were."

Nyx was already humming a somber melody to serve as a background for a dramatic tale from long long ago.

"Stop making fun! It's a serious story. It really happened."

"Sure, sure," she teased, swaying gently from side to side in the water.

"One time, the people of a tribe who used to live in the middle of a desert decided they must build a new city somewhere safe from the attacks of others. But they had nowhere safe to resort to in a landscape that only offered steep rocky mountains surrounded by sand dunes without end. They looked, and they looked, until finally they settled on a huge cluster of mountains shooting vertically up in an impossible incline hundreds of feet high, and occupying an area hundreds of acres across."

"What, so they built a City on top of a mountain? Big deal!"

"That would have been a *huge* deal, but no, they couldn't do that. Remember this was a long time ago before TP was possible. So they had no way to climb a steep mountain, let alone carry things up and down." Adonis then switched back to his slow story-telling tone:

"But there was something extraordinary about those mountains. Together, they formed a natural barrier surrounding a small open area in the middle. A safe haven, shielded from the attackers by thousands of tons of sandstone from all directions, except for one pathway, a very narrow canyon rising hundreds of feet that twists and turns deep into the mountains for almost a mile. Those desert-dwelling people, they decided to make the canyon their entryway, and the hidden enclave between the mountains their home."

Adonis paused again for a bit, hoping for admission from his partner that it was indeed a brilliant plot, but he eventually settled for her lack of objection.

"There was a problem though. The enclave in the center of the mountain cluster wasn't big enough to house an entire group of people. So if they were to settle in there, they had to literally carve much of their city out of mountain rock with chisels and hammers. And so that's what they did. They named their city Rakeem. And somehow, somehow, they managed to carve its dwellings out of solid rock by hand. They carved a mausoleum towering more than a hundred feet right into the face of a mountain. They carved a six-thousand seat theatre entirely out of sandstone. They even lined up thousands of pieces of ceramic pipe into a five-mile conduit to channel water from the nearest spring. Then they somehow carved a massive network of underground channels all around the city to get the water everywhere, turning that stretch of unforgiving desert into a lush green oasis. How they found the tenacity to do all that, we will never know. What we know is that their city prospered and that for all their audacity, the citizens of Rakeem became the richest people on earth. Their stone-hewn city stood the test of time, for five hundred long years or even more."

"What happened to it in the end?" Nyx quickly asked, unable to hide her interest in a tale that was unlike anything she'd heard before.

"The bad people, they got to it anyway. Rumors of its glory reached far and wide, until the people of a more powerful city far away heard about the riches that lay within it, and decided they wanted them all for themselves. They tripped across the desert riding on horses, bearing swords and arrows."

"Umm, okay I don't get it. What does all this have to do with horseback riding or fencing or archery?"

"No, no. Back then those weren't sports. Horseback riding was the only way to get around. And the swords and arrows, they used them as weapons to kill each other in real fights for survival. The bad people, they took the city by force and kicked the citizens out of it forever. They basically stole it and made it their own. They even gave it a new name more familiar to them - Petra."

"Oh, I *love* that name! Much better than Rikum or whatever the hell it was called! I had a friend called Petra when I was little. She had the sweetest brown eyes. But she used to get sick a lot, always had boogers running down her nose."

Nyx giggled at the endearing memory of her sickly friend.

"*That's* what you got out of the story?" Adonis shot back in mock frustration.

"Well pardon me Mr. joy-kill, but your story doesn't make any sense in the first place - why would so many people get into a massive fight with each other using nothing but sports gear? And what were they doing living in the middle of a desert in the first place? Also, what the hell is a tribe? And what kind of a name is Rikum?"

"Rakeem."

"Yeah, like that's less weird of a name!" she teased him, flashing her tongue out with a wide grin.

Adonis pulled his playful princess closer, fixating on her eyes and wondering if he should bother to plainly spell out his uncanny thesis to her. Oh, what the hell.

"It really happened though. That was the name of a real place out there. And those desert people, for all we know, they're our great grandparents. So don't believe what you've been told. It didn't use to be just a world of savages roaming around chasing rabbits with sticks and stones. The world was a wonderful place, full of struggle and ingenuity. It was intricate, sophisticated, and wonderful. Even more so than it is today. It probably still is like that, outside this bubble that we keep telling each other is all there is."

"I was just kidding, by the way. I kinda like the story," Nyx admitted, "Come on, tell me another one. Tell me tell me!"

"Well, if you liked this story, you might like the one about the people who hid their city underground."

"For real?" her eyes lit up.

"Yes, in a place called Turkey. Their entire city, home for thousands of people, it was all dug hundreds of feet underground for protection from attackers. They made it so it could be closed from the inside with large stone doors..."

"Wait, that place was called what now?"

"Turkey."

"You mean like the sandwich?"

Adonis sighed, but before he could even answer, Nyx was in tears, her laughs muffled out of respect yet still loud enough to echo into the silent starry night.

"They named their City after a cold cut sandwich?? What is wrong with those ancient people? Can't they pick a name other than tableware or sandwiches, or my schoolmate whose boogers never stopped?"

Adonis eyed her with a mix of admiration and attraction. There was a person who just knew how to lighten up. Whether his point came across or not, it didn't really matter. He was already feeling better having said it out loud to someone.

"Sorry sorry. I promise I won't interrupt anymore. So tell me about all those other cities," Nyx said, trying hard to look serious but barely

fighting back laughter, "Tell me about the ancient city of beef jerky, would you please?"

"You spoiled little brat!" Adonis whispered, reaching out with his lips and gently biting her earlobe.

Then he grabbed her hands from behind his neck and brought them together behind her back, leaving her body fully exposed and at the mercy of his arms bearing her weight. He pulled her closer still until their bodies first touched, then squeezed into a tight embrace. Feeling blood rush into his skin at the feel of her body against his, he fumbled for the last bubble on the bracelet behind her back and went ahead and popped it, having realized in that instant how the final act must have been framed.

Adonis and Nyx were now on a hammock, wrapped under silk sheets. Still naked, they were TPed completely dry right out of the water. The hammock swayed with a gentle breeze, and soft rays of light wove in and out of view, broken by the foliage of several trees above. The hammock was hanging on top of a hill overlooking a lush green forest. The birds were chirping vividly all around them, atwitter with the prospect of a brand new day. It must have been half an hour or so into dawn.

"Well hello there, handsome," Nyx whispered, smiling in total content as her lover embraced her with the reclaimed passion of thousands of years of forgotten tales of love and desire.

**mu**

*“Truth is so rare that it is delightful to tell it.” —Emily Dickinson*

“That’s it, stay focused on it, you’re doing great.”

Adonis kept at it, even though it was already getting hard to stay focused. The giant curved screen in front of him was shining a static monochrome of cool, plain white. Once he got over the discomfort of having his entire field of vision saturated, it actually started to feel a little zen. The perception of white slowly sunk to the background, and a new, colorless feeling slowly floated to the front. It was a simple state of mind, clean of all the colorful details of a cluttered field of view. But no sooner than Adonis settled into this relaxing sensation, the letters would start again. Big bold black letters spanning the entire width of the screen would flash, just for a second, then disappear into shiny white, leaving the mind to hallucinate lingering contours of nonexistent lowercase letters. Then they’d flash again, and again. Always the same letters, in the same arrangement. Together spelling a word, almost incidentally, “Farmers” flashing, again and again, never staying on screen long enough for the eye to scan the full length of the word, yet never disappearing off screen long enough for the mind to disengage the task of reading. Then the sequence stopped, and Adonis sank into the fullness of white again.

“Try not to wander away in thought. Concentrate on the screen and purge your mind of all else,” the corrector whispered from behind him just as the cycle repeated. Adonis tried to focus as hard as he could, and just as he did, the word somehow disappeared. The flashing was still ongoing, but what he saw no longer registered as a word. It was now a collection of letters with no association to any semantics.

“Just a little longer now.”

What used to be the word “Farmers” had now lost all meaning, and Adonis found himself staring at the flashing sequence of shapes that no longer made any sense. The f felt like a branching tree and the r like a short shrub. The letter on the right was now a twisting snake, and the other symbols in between felt foreign, like markings left behind by an alien race from a distant planet. Adonis felt his muscles relax as he began to enjoy the experience. It was liberating to be able to look at something while no longer compelled to register the symbolism embedded within it.

"Excellent. I can see it's working. That's good for today," the corrector said as he clicked something that caused the screen to vanish from in front of Adonis, "We'll keep repeating this every session from now on. It's amazing how seemingly inconsequential exercises like this one can have a great effect on rerouting your brain's neural circuits."

Adonis swiveled his seat around to face the corrector's desk. Before he had a chance to ask what that experience was all about, the corrector had already commenced a voluntary explanation:

"This technique is called SST, short for Semantic Satiation Therapy. It had been well established for a very long time now that fixating on a word in such a way that the mind is compelled to read it too many times in a short timespan ultimately causes it to disengage. The brain circuitry sort of saturates, or fatigues if you will, causing the word to begin to lose meaning, and ultimately to seem like a strange arrangement of letters with no semantic associations. All is well you might ask, but what does that have to do with me?"

"Well," the corrector proceeded to answer his own question without as much as a pause, "the point of the exercise is to show you that disengaging is not an unpleasant experience. Quite the opposite actually, it can feel rather liberating, empowering even. That's why I chose to start with a word that has a big emotional content for you. What did you feel when you first read it on the screen?"

Farmers. Billions of innocent souls enslaved by a group of merciless masters whom they never even get to meet. Forever toiling away to provide for their overlords. It was a deep feeling of guilt, shame, maybe despair.

"Empathy."

"Exactly. But then the word started to flash at you twice per second for sixty seconds, then off for fifteen more seconds, then back on again. And just a few repetitions into the cycle, something odd started to happen, didn't it?"

"The word became nonsense."

"Exactly! And in becoming so, you were able to stare at it without the hold of empathy."

"So that's your new plan, to put me in a trance?" Adonis teased.

The corrector chuckled snobbishly at the false accusation.

"Quite the opposite. I'm showing you a way *out* of your permanent trance. For a few moments back there, you were truly free from the hold of your empathy. The whole point is to convince you of the possibility. You *can* control your frame of mind. It is possible to overpower those relentless emotional associations that have been crippling you for so long now."

"You just wait and see. Together we will find a way for you to master the art of skimming the surface of a thought without having to dive deep into any emotional connection unless you deliberately decide it is practical and helpful to do so."

Adonis nodded ok. In fact, most of the corrector's past techniques had proven to work. In the past few months since Adonis had started to cooperate, things were getting better. The depression had lifted off, and the withdrawal symptoms of ancient-book reading had all but subsided. Adonis was regular on his meds and developed a routine that worked. He had become more active, more socially engaged. And it wasn't just for show. He actually enjoyed spending time with friends now and often looked forward to it. To be sure, there were still moments when his obsessions took hold of him, but he had by now developed a habit of conscious awareness of his inner state of mind and had armed himself with several self-regulation techniques, deliberately counteracting those thought patterns that caused him to drift out of his ideal receptive state. He had found that, once he put it in his mind to make a serious effort to get better, it wasn't too hard.

"Well, that's all for today. I guess when I see you next time you're going to be a little older, young man!" the corrector said, glancing at his device.

"I guess so," Adonis confirmed. The sessions had gotten a lot shorter, sometimes as quick as twenty minutes now. And they were also a lot less uncomfortable and contentious, ever since Adonis had started to cooperate and stopped throwing fits and getting into arguments.

"And Adonis, I know you told me you're not big on birthdays, but twenty-five is a big milestone. Take time to celebrate tomorrow. You have earned it. Happy birthday!"

"Thanks," Adonis replied as he stood up and headed out, glancing over the corrector's big wide library while trying as he always did now to avoid reading the titles.

The rest of the afternoon was pleasant if routine. Adonis went on a long walk by the beach before clicking on for a quick coffee date with Nyx at their newly found favorite coffee shop. Next, he joined the boys for a communal workout session at Atlas's tile. They had started meeting there three times a week, despite repeated appeals from Solon to alternate tiles. After all, Atlas did have the largest and best-equipped gym out of all of them, and he wasn't shy to brag about it either.

"When you get a seven bench trainer cable machine like mine, maybe then we can go to your gym, little guy," Atlas would tease. The rest of

the group perhaps insisted on meeting at Atlas's gym because the resulting drama and ensuing trash talk between Atlas and Solon provided endless entertainment to help endure the workout. An hour later they all dispersed to freshen up then met back at a burger joint for a guys-only, protein-heavy dinner ritual. Whenever Atlas brought up Adonis's birthday, he was quick to remind him that for him it was just another day and that he has never been big on celebrating birthdays.

"I don't care, let's go drinking anyway. Maybe we'll hook you up with another blondie. You're due for a replacement anyway. How long have you been with this one?"

"Her name is Nyx, and I like her a lot. So why don't you do get yourself a blondie and leave me alone?" Adonis teased. Atlas, of course, would never bring that up whenever Katina was around. And in any case, they all knew that was just his way of getting a read on how serious one of them was in a relationship.

Later at night, Adonis sat back in his bed, tired but mostly content. He felt he had turned a corner, and was glad to be out of the woods. The serenity that came after his nightly pill started to set in, and he felt a sudden rush of sleepiness overtake him. He contemplated getting out of his clothes and under the sheets but felt too lazy to bother. Resting his device over his lap, he lied down, curled his arms behind his head and closed his eyes with ease. In a few minutes, it would be midnight, and a new day would start - his twenty-fifth birthday. If it hadn't already started, he wondered. It might have been already past midnight for all he cared. At any rate, it didn't matter. Birthdays always felt like contrived occasions to him. And he was still young, and now back on track to enjoy his long and happy life.

The silence of his bedroom allowed the purring sound of water streams from the freshroom to carry through, but Adonis made a conscious effort not to hear it. He didn't want his good mood perturbed by the usual thoughts of guilt and inadequacy that the sound of wasted water had come to symbolize in his mind. With a little mental prowess, his mind was already off the topic and he could barely hear the faint trickling at all.

Then it happened. The slightest feeling of extra weight in the lap combined with the tingling sensation of something a little colder than room temperature pressing against him. Adonis had all but drifted asleep, but his curiosity compelled him to lift one eyelid open if just slightly. His bedroom had automatically dimmed the lights a few

minutes ago, picking up on his lack of motion in bed. But there was still enough ambient light for him to notice the contours of an object on his lap that didn't belong there. Blurry as it appeared through his barely open eyelids, it was still clearly an object of marked straight-angle edges. It was dark grey and much larger than his device. Adonis closed his eyes again and took a sleepy breath. Maybe he had rested something on his lap and forgot about it. Who else could have placed it there? There was nobody else in the room, was there? The thought concerned him a bit, enough to get him to sit up and blink his blurry vision away. The room responded to his motion with a tapered increase in lighting. Now the object was shiny white. It was resting right there is his own lap, twice as large and as thick as a stack of papers. And although the side facing up was completely black, it was still clearly, undeniably, yet inexplicably, a book.

Adonis was startled. His surprise washed away his sleepiness and brought about a sudden rush of alertness, like a splash of icy cold water to the face. He looked around in the room but didn't see anybody. Nor should he have expected to, in retrospect, since he clearly remembered locking his tile to visitors a while back. He reached in with both hands, carefully lifted the book, and flipped it over to the title cover. His device was right under it in his lap where he had left it, displaying the time in big bold numerals: "12:00".

"Is there anybody in my tile?" Adonis asked.

"There is one person in your tile, Adonis," the device gracefully replied, "Nine little-n big-L little-n big-R."

Recognizing his own identifier, Adonis turned his attention to the book in his hands. "How to make the world a better place," the title read in curly red cursives, except for the word "world" which was printed in black using a whimsical chalk-mark font. It wasn't just *any* book. He recognized that particular book from the corrector's library. Yes, it was that book on the third shelf around the center. He had noticed it before, and was planning to get a hold on it back when he used to... It had been on his future reading list but had always fallen second to other, more intriguing titles. Until of course...

Adonis found himself slowly panicking. If nobody else had brought the book into the room, then there was only one remaining possibility. Somebody must have ported it here using his device as a location marker. But, who? And more importantly, why? Pretty soon though, his curiosity overpowered his sense of caution, and he found himself taking a peek inside the cover:

How to Make the World a Better Place

by Yorgen Etsbiomsen

### Introduction by the Author

In the beginning, there is the inkling. That voice, nagging in the back of your head, telling you that you have a big idea, and that in order for you to realize your big idea, you'd have first to become a bigger man.

Why would anyone send him an ancient book? Adonis, of all people, who's been struggling to curb his obsessive addiction to pre-Eventian books for months now, and to great success! Was it a prank by the boys? Atlas, maybe? But no, as annoying and insensitive as they can sometimes be, they had always been respectful of his condition and his treatment. Besides, they wouldn't even know to get a hold on this particular book from the corrector's library. Nyx? She was the only person he had ever told about the library. But she had also been the biggest help in getting his life back on track since Elysion, always ready with moral support to keep him on his routine whenever he felt like faltering. She even got into the habit of finding comically hyperbolic persistence quotes to share with him half-jokingly from time to time, like "He who believes receives" or her most recent favorite "Failure is the condiment that gives success its flavor." No, impossible. Nyx was way too serious about him getting better to do anything that might risk jeopardizing his recovery. But then, who?

Adonis slammed the book shut, and jumped out of bed in a knee-jerk movement as if struck by lightning. He had come too far to cave in to some silly prankster set to mess up with his hard-earned recovery. He had worked hard to purge his mind of all obsession, and his life had gotten more comfortable since. Pacing to his freshroom, he washed his face under the sink stream and changed to a fresh set of loungewear. He then zoomed past his bed and out into the hallway towards his music room. As unusual as it was for him to practice his guitar strums after midnight, he just needed any distraction to keep his mind off the book. But it didn't work. A full hour into the guitar practice routine, Adonis still found himself mulling over the book. "How to Make the World a Better Place," the title had read. What kind of person would invest the time to write a whole book on the subject? Someone with a wise message to say, most likely. Maybe somebody who had a reason to believe that the world they lived in *wasn't* such a good place? Or one who thought they knew a better

way? Maybe nobody sent that book. What if it was a simple glitch in the system? Hermes could have sent him that book by accident, simply because he was registered at the corrector's office. In any case, what harm could it do to read a little part of it - maybe just the preface to find out more about the author. The preface can't be harmful, can it? Adonis decided he's had enough guitar for one night and reassured himself that was the only reason he headed back to his bedroom. But he couldn't contain his surprise when, as he got there, he found that the book was gone. Just as inexplicably as it had appeared at the stroke of midnight, it had disappeared at the stroke of 1am. Must be a glitch, Adonis sighed in relief, trying hard not to acknowledge his own disappointment. Chucking his device onto the nightstand, he lied down in bed, pretending not to think about that author who, just like him, once wanted to make the world a better place.

The next day was packed with activities. The morning breakfast hangout extended till noon, and then the boys went for a swim at Ponos's much-hyped new indoor pool, featuring five diving platforms and a shallow section that can turn into a wave area. Later after a shower, quick nap and a freshening up break, Adonis went to grab a coffee with Nyx, only to find out that she had set him up to a full-blown surprise birthday party despite his multiple warnings against it. As balloons flew and party horns shrieked, and confetti rained down from everywhere, Nyx took him in her arms and planted a kiss on his cheek while whispering "sorry" in a sweet voice that made it all alright. The party went strong all night, and when everyone was gone, Nyx gave him a long and relaxing oily massage, all the while playfully reminding him that it was a one-time birthday perk and that he shouldn't "get used to it." Eventually, she admitted with a loud giggle that she had made a big mess of things, and invited him to wash down that sticky massage oil in her freshroom, promising another one-time birthday perk.

But his best birthday gift didn't show up till later at night when he was all alone back at his tile. At the exact stroke of midnight, his device once again disappeared behind the thickness of an unanticipated visitor. It was the same book, ported into his tile at the exact same time, two nights in a row. Definitely a glitch. A one-time prankster was possible, if unlikely. But there was simply nobody he knew who would put effort into a persistent prank two nights in a row. In any case, glitch or not, Adonis decided it didn't matter at the moment. Feeling the sense of urgency now that he knew in all likelihood he had one hour with the book before it vanished, he

wasted no time to flip it open and go where he had decided to start the night before:

How to Make the World a Better Place  
by Yorgen Etsbiomsen

Foreword

In this first book of its kind, American sensation Yorgen Etsbiomsen delivers his compelling thesis about the potential of a singular mind to change the entire world. Coming from him, it is an apt statement. Arguably the single most successful American genius of his generation, Etsbiomsen's name stands to live forever among those icons of past generations like Zuckerberg, Musk, Jobs, Ford, Rockefeller, and Einstein. Could yours be the next name on this list? If you believe so, this book may be for you.

Of those, Adonis only recognized the name Einstein from physics class. But never in his wildest dreams did he imagine the genius scientist might have lived *before* the Event. It was certainly implied in every class that scientists, all scientists, were past Citizens. The bastards never gave any credit to pre-Eventian societies, leaving people like Nyx to naturally assume that all of humanity was basically running around naked chasing rabbits for dinner up until the Event. Yorgen and the others, he had never even heard of.

From his humble beginnings as founder and sole-employee of a fleeting high tech startup housed inside of a tiny, poorly lit storage room at his father's modest tire shop in rural Pennsylvania, Yorgen single-handedly gave rise to the modern practice of AI implants and took the entire world by storm. Laying the groundwork towards a reality where the human cognitive function is constantly and seamlessly augmented by symbiotic AI technology, Yorgen's world-famous Plantai (which actually started under the formal web name, plant.ai) very rapidly became the most prominent

American success story in history, not to mention the world's most profitable business. As his peers might have eyed the stellar rise of this young man with a mixture of admiration and envy, little did they know that Yorgen was only warming up.

Quickly expanding his business empire with the founding of his now-ubiquitous Hova (formally known as Autonomous Hovercrafts Inc.), Yorgen quickly took everyone by surprise yet again. Virtually sidestepping the world's spiraling traffic congestion problem, he turned the entire global transportation industry on its head by introducing the first scalable, fully automated personal aerial transportation system. Thanks to his daring initiative, Americans could finally let go of their failing ground transportation networks and start taking to the skies en masse.

Turning to philanthropy in later years, Yorgen once again took us all by surprise. His brainchild and namesake clean-tech nonprofit Estbio quickly became an overnight sensation when it declared North Chad as the world's first solar-powered nation, achieving energy sufficiency through a super-efficient solar array the size of Manhattan. Riding on the momentum of clean energy, his research lab breakthroughs on marine solar installations and hyper-recycling technology helped the United States of Polynesia become the world's first island-nation to declare zero-waste status. It was only the beginning. At the time of the writing, a total of twenty-three third-world governments are on the path to energy sufficiency and/or supply sufficiency via partnerships with Estbio.

Behind the dazzling glamour of his celebrity stature, few know about the analytical, almost professor-like nature of Yorgen's mindset. He is a

man genuinely interested not just in doing, but formalizing a logical decision model to describe why one ought to do what they do in the first place. Which is why, of all things someone of his stature might decide to do next, he had chosen to present his life manifesto in this unique, deliciously engaging treat of a book.

Perhaps the best way to convey the sentiment of Yorgen's empowering thesis is to leave you with a quote from his legendary Stanford commencement ceremony speech for the class of '98:

"In this life, we each get to trot around for a few decades before we move on. Meanwhile, as most of our life decisions might be subject to pressures from the outside, one decision should be ours and ours alone: What are we to be remembered for?"

Nothing. He is to be remembered for nothing. In fact, he is soon to be wholly forgotten along with all the flying transports he built and all the ancient nations he helped. All these achievements, all that work, and it all amounted to null in the end. This man who had done so much so as to etch his name into the memory of generations to come, if he only knew the chiseled letters of his name would soon vanish, along with the very boulder that housed them, and everything else in between. Would he still have wanted to live that life? Would he still have struggled to make the world a better place, if only for a little while?

Adonis paused and looked again at the book in his hands. It still made no sense for it to be there in the first place. To the man who obsessed about changing the world to a pathological extent, here was a book by an ancient hero about how to do just that. And all because of a mindless glitch? No, randomness is merely incapable of such masterful irony. This must be the work of a cynical mind! Adonis flipped the book over, and then around. He examined the covers, then the insides. The table of contents, the hundreds of pages neatly stacked with no distinguishable marks. Then on the inside of the back cover, Adonis found something. It was a handwritten note, jotted elegantly towards the lower right corner in blue ink:

Never forget who you wanted to be

Who wrote this? Adonis wondered. Someone who read the book, to be sure. But was it a contemporary of the author though, or perhaps somebody from the present time? Could it be a Citizen? Could it be the corrector?

The who, of course, was only a reflection of the real question. The essence of every inquiry is and would always be a why. And in this case, all the same, the identity of the author of a note was only interesting to Adonis as a proxy for the reason behind it. Was it intended as a message to him in particular? But if the book arrived into his tile by a serendipitous glitch, then the note might have been jotted down by someone of the world long ago, maybe as a personal note, or possibly as a message to someone else of the world long ago. Both sender and recipient would be long dead by now, and the message, unintentionally fossilized inside the book for his curious mind to ponder over many many years later. Or, if the book was delivered to him intentionally, then the note inside it might be a personal message from the sender. Could it be the corrector messing with him? Testing him maybe? Unlikely. For one thing, the corrector would have known to write "Never forget *whom* you wanted to be" in order to be grammatically, well, correct. Unless of course, he was deliberately trying to cover his involvement.

Adonis decided to let it go for the moment. He had about ten minutes left before the top of the hour, and he really wanted to get a taste of what that Yorgen had to say. He flipped over the table of contents and landed on the introduction:

How to Make the World a Better Place  
by Yorgen Etsbiomsen

Introduction by the Author

In the beginning, there is the inkling. That voice, nagging in the back of your head, telling you that you have a big idea, and that in order for you to realize your big idea, you'd have first to become a bigger man.

If you hear that voice, then this book is for you. Because you deserve to hear it - if only from one other person - that everyone else who's been telling you what you cannot do can go to hell.

They told you you're only dreaming.  
They told you all the good ideas have already been conceived and realized.  
They told you you live in the age of little tweaks, that all the heroes have already lived and died.  
They told you - in so many different sugar-coated flavors - that you're not good enough, that you don't have what it takes to make it happen.  
They told you you couldn't do it. They said you can't. They said you can't. They said you can't.

But you can.

You already know it, deep inside. Behind all those layers of hesitation, of fear of failure, of second-guessing yourself, you do know better.

You know you have what it takes.

And all you have to show for it is that faint voice in the back of your head, telling you that the world is, essentially, broken. And that you are the one to fix it.

But a single voice is feeble. Two voices make a duet. And I am your second voice. I wrote this book for you. To help you get up and fight. To help you realize that, whoever you think you are, you are also a warrior.

If you value success, you have to battle your own complacency.

If you value justice, you have to battle your own greed.

If you value freedom, you have to battle your own fear.

If you value humility, you have to battle your own pride.

If you value people, you have to battle your own prejudices.

If you value virtue, you have to battle your own demons.

Whatever you value, you are already locked in constant battle against your inner self. There will be no peace for you in any case, so you might as well also take on the whole world in battle.

This reality trickles down to all of life's little choices. It is never just a question of what to say, or what to do. It is always also a question of who to be. So who are you going to be?

Adonis flipped the page or at least started to before the book suddenly vanished. Staring at his now empty palms, Adonis felt no disappointment. He was feeling good, hopeful even. It felt like having made an excellent new friend. Yorgen, perhaps, was a better friend to have than anybody alive today. But more importantly, he felt good about the prankster, whoever he or she was, who had sent him the book in the first place. The choice of reading was spot-on. It must have been someone who understood him at some level, which was an endearing thought.

Adonis rested his head back on the pillow. What a day it had been. He felt like so much had happened that he really needed to reboot. It was precisely 1am, and he suddenly realized just how exhausted he was. As he rested his eyes shut, he felt confident that he hadn't seen the last of his prankster's surprises. He could already feel a weird connection as if he knew that person already. He decided he liked the game they were playing, and he wanted to play some more. He let his body sink into his fluffy beddings and started daydreaming. He was an old man, with round spectacles and a white goatee, much better groomed than the corrector's. He imagined his old self writing a book about his achievements, and how as a young man he would have never believed that he would ever succeed at turning the world upside down. He was writing to a new generation of readers, born into a world free of tyranny and inequality. Some were children of Citizens, some children of Farmers. But it didn't matter, because they were equals now, all because of him, Adonis, the mastermind of the rise of the people. Because of him, there were no more slaves, because of him there were no more masters. Humanity worked *together*. The people of the world collaborated. The City was no longer an island.

The Farms were no longer prisons. And eventually, a short while later, he too, was no longer awake.

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*"On résiste à l'invasion des armées; on ne résiste pas à l'invasion des idées."* —Victor Hugo

The book kept coming. Every night at the stroke of midnight, without fail. And every night it would disappear exactly one hour later. Yorgen's manifesto was a delight to read, a great source of inspiration on how to follow through on one's dreams. It served as a daily dose of hope and motivation, the perfect antidote to all the crap Adonis had been conditioned with during months of sessions with the corrector. Conscious mind-sight exercises were a joke. And so were meta-cognition tools, semantic satiation therapy, and all the other mind control techniques he had been taught. Adonis felt alive again, like having been awoken from a trance or a vicious spell. But he stayed on his meds, and he kept his sessions with the corrector all the same. He didn't want to slip back into the hold of his chronic depression. The meds worked. His social life was eventful and on track, and he wanted to keep it that way. If he was going to change the world, he was going to do it while remaining in a positive, healthy frame of mind. He wasn't depressed or cynical, he now was rebellious in a cheerful, enthusiastic way. He now understood the difference between those two mindsets, with some help from an ancient hero named Yorgen Etsbiomsen.

But just as he was getting into the thick of it, on the tenth or eleventh night, a different book showed up instead. It was a slimmer, sleeker book, titled "Modern Subversion Systems." It was clearly published post-Event since its front cover bore the insignia of Demeter, the City department in charge of managing the Farms. It was packed with detailed descriptions of many systems presumably put in place after the Event to keep the Farmers subdued. Adonis was not at all surprised to learn how the City had safeguard systems in place to prevent the teleportation of any human from the City out to the Farms or vice versa. Nor was he how disturbed by reading how the City kept all essential power generation systems, all necessary technological machinery, and all critical operations confined within a geographical bubble comprising the City and neighboring islands, protected from the reach of any Farmers by oceans of separation. He was not even shocked to learn how the routine reshuffling of Farmers via random teleportation across vast geographies was employed at scale in order to prevent any meaningful social ties from ever forming among them. Familial relationships were apparently left undisturbed since they were essential for the breeding of future

generations of Farmers, but all larger social structures, whether tribal, political, ideological, or professional, were actively nipped in the bud. A forest Farmer on site in Argentina for a year might expect to be ported one sunny afternoon without warning to join the Farmers in any of the other forest farms in Bolivia or Brazil for an unspecified amount of time before being yanked again without warning to join a farm in Siberia or Paraguay, and so on. Always without warning. Always in the blink of an eye and without any apparent pattern to the madness. According to the author, this continuous shuffling effectively bred a population that expected to live day to day and learned not to seek out or bother nurturing any meaningful social connections.

Another chilling control system was apparently employed by Demeter to punish repeated disobedience or incompetence with the swift vanishing of the Farmer in question into oblivion without so much as a warning. One couldn't even call it a form of punishment, but more like a measure put in place to purge the population of unwanted, ineffective individuals.

As disturbing as all that was to read, Adonis wasn't at all surprised to learn about any of it. After all, he knew all too well how Demeter considered the Farmers to be just another natural resource available in the Farms in abundance for them to exploit. Yet he found one particular system of control truly shocking. Towards the end of the book in a chapter with the unassuming title "Artificial Selection Controls," Adonis learned about a system being explored at the time of the writing wherein Farmers would be bred for favorable traits just like cattle or crops. By selectively allowing or denying certain individuals in the Farmer population to procreate, the idea was to breed for qualities like obedience, strength, and durability and against any rebellious tendencies, ambition, or curiosity. Within a dozen generations or so, the book argued, the City would enjoy the benefit of a perfect resource: billions of Farmers who are submissive and servile not by necessity, but by instinct. Each perfectly bred to enjoy a life of servitude to the City from a distance. Each would yearn for serving, and love doing so.

Adonis had no way of knowing whether that plan was merely hypothetical, or had been put in place already by now. For all he knew, that book could have been a hundred years old, or it might just as well have been written last week. Either way, the prospect of irreversibly devolving the entire human population outside the City shot a chill down his spine. He sincerely wished that it was just an

outlandish idea, or that it wasn't attempted yet, or that it didn't work for some magical reason. Deep down, he knew there was only one way to find out... he had to find a way to get out to the Farms himself.

In all, the sleek book of modern subversion systems showed up for three nights in a row, then the books kept changing after that. A seemingly eclectic collection of reading material somehow coherently connected, like variations on a subtle theme. Now he was reading a tale about a love-stricken couple from two feuding families who ultimately resort to death as a final refuge from the unyielding hatred that had plagued their world. Now he was reading the memoirs of a lady who had started a social revolution in her city such that the factions from different races were to be treated equally. Always inspiring, always moving, always refreshingly different from anything he had encountered or would ever encounter within the confines of his City of vast geographies and narrow perspectives. Sometimes the same book would reappear for a few nights in a row, or even a week or two for bigger reads. Sometimes he would get a small booklet or magazine for a single night. Once he got a three-page letter from a servile peasant to the ruler of some ancient city by the name of Rome. One night all he got was a single sheet of paper about something called the illusory truth effect, apparently taken from a book with the peculiar title of Wikipedia.com. That reading, in particular, struck a chord with Adonis, illuminating a question that had always been on the back of his mind as to why the Citizens seemed eager to swallow what he clearly saw to be unpalatable falsehoods. "Repetition makes statements easier to process," the sheet said. Alone with a single-sheet reading for an hour, he ended up reading it over and over again. "In a 2015 study, researchers discovered that familiarity can overpower rationality and that repetitively hearing that a certain fact is wrong can affect the hearer's beliefs." Was that what had gone wrong with the City? "Researchers attributed the illusory truth effect's impact on participants who knew the correct answer to begin with, but were persuaded to believe otherwise through the repetition of a falsehood." Adonis couldn't help but picture Katina and Atlas, Nyx and Ponos, brainwashed as they were to the belief that they were somehow entitled to a life of mastery over just about every other miserable soul on the planet. "Persuaded through the repetition of a falsehood." But not him. Was he then immune to that illusory truth effect? Was that the real nature of his condition?

Throughout, he still had no clue where the books were coming from. At times, he would be convinced it had something to do with the corrector, mostly because of the notes: Now and then, there would be a few words handwritten here or there in blue ink. Always the same, beautiful penmanship. Always the jotted note would be concise, always to the point. Was the corrector playing games with him? Testing him? Was he maybe secretly sympathetic to his cause? Was he some sort of leader of a clandestine resistance movement? Every night Adonis's imagination would spin an even more intricate web of circumstances than the night before. The sender of the books became a convoluted character, with complicated motives and even more complicated plans. But whoever he was, the thought of another soul having read the same lines and left comments and remarks made Adonis feel like his reading was a social activity, as if (time-discontinuity notwithstanding), he was accompanied by a partner on his journey through the minds of ancient heroes. And though at times he got paranoid and almost clicked the books away, he always decided to read on. The temptation was simply irresistible, and the void room and void tile or even void City paled in comparison to the colorful journey that always started with the flip of a page on the stroke of midnight.

And tonight was no exception. It wasn't a book on Adonis's lap this time, but rather a stack of papers bound together by a large silver paperclip. It must have been a draft, an attempt to write a book that never became a reality for some reason. On the first page the title was in all caps:

ON THE LIFE AND DEATH OF IDEAS  
A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS & SHORT STORIES

Just as he was about to dive into it, Adonis couldn't help but notice one particular page in the middle of the stack was marked with a bright yellow paper flag sticking out. The sender of the books clearly wanted him to waste no time with the text leading to that particular page. Trustworthy as his companion was, Adonis heeded the advice and flipped over to the marked page. It was apparently the beginning of an essay:

ON THE LIFE AND DEATH OF IDEAS

An Essay on Parasitic Thoughts  
by Ariadna Arturo Romane

A thought, any thought, can be said to have a life of its own. Starting with inception in a human mind, it proceeds to procreate by compelling its bearer to communicate it into the minds of peers. So on it goes, spreading its area of existence, as measured in numbers of convinced thinkers, from geography to geography, and from age to age.

An idea can, therefore, be said to be subject to Darwinian selection pressures in as far as it is successful in self-propagation. Thus, differential rates of survival of the fittest can effectively create an apparatus of natural selection working upon ideas just like it has been shown to work on genetic traits, although on the accelerated time scale of conscious thought rather than geological times.

Fitness, in the context of the varied success of thought-propagation, is perhaps a reflection of how convincing a thought might be, or even how entertaining or controversial. In a general sense, fitness might refer to any aspect of an idea that might make it somehow more popular, more interesting, more resilient inside of a mind, and consequently more persistent in society.

The parallelism between genetic and cognitive natural selection had been proposed by multiple philosophers and free thinkers. Perhaps the earliest was in the late 1970s when evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term "meme" to mean a unit of cultural transmission, representing any idea capable of propagation from mind to mind.

It has been, of course, well established that the evolution of life via natural selection tends to progress in rare, opportunistic spurts that correspond to that tiny minority of genetic accident mutations which prove beneficial by way

of introducing new traits that are well suited to the environment the life form happens to inhabit. So too the story goes for the evolution of ideas. A thought that mutates inside an imaginative mind in such a way as to become more suitable to the environment where that person happens to live, such thought can take on a life of its own and is ultimately destined to prevail. Indeed, as the famous rewording of Victor Hugo's opening quote goes: "Nothing can stop an idea whose time has come." Translated to the terminology of the current narrative, this can be rephrased as: "An idea that best suits the context of its inception, be it the temporal, geographical, cultural, or geopolitical context, is likely to spread from mind to mind more successfully than other competing ideas."

Framed this way, a long-standing history of cultural revolutions can be better understood. Throughout the ages, the most massive of social upheavals have always been driven by fresh new ideologies. The inception of every religion the world has ever known squarely fits in this category, and so does the renaissance of Western Europe, the Communist revolutions in Eastern Europe and Asia, the American revolution, and the civil rights movements that followed in later centuries.

Adonis had no idea what any of these things were. This essay was clearly written before the Event, but so much was obvious just by considering the name of the author, odd and multi-worded as pre-Eventian names apparently always were. America, Adonis recognized, was that City dominating all others in the years and decades just before the Event, the one that had fostered global scientific collaboration such that it had hastened its own demise. But none of the revolutions mentioned sounded even vaguely familiar. At any rate, it mattered very little. As with many other texts he had been reading, he had gotten pretty good at arriving at the author's point even with so many contextual details obscured by the veil of modern time ignorance. He leaned back in his seat and reached for his device.

With a swipe and a click, he called a cup of vanilla latte into existence. He slowly savored a sip of warm frothy liquid, then slid his device into his pocket and went back to Ariadna's essay:

However, in the intricate balance of life on this planet, not all species have followed the rules of the game. Some species can be said to "cheat" natural selection. Rather than procreate and propagate their genes by making an honest effort to survive by their merit, or compete for resources using their bodily capacities on a level playing field, these cheater species proceed to hijack the bodies of other creatures and use them as means to their own goals. The term generally used to refer to this class of species is, of course, parasites.

While "honest" species might compete for food by securing a physical advantage over other species, such as faster legs or stronger jaws or more efficient digestive tracts, those other, "cheater" kinds will attempt to shortcut the system by exploiting weaknesses of other species and stealing resources such as food and water right out of the bodies of their hosts. The survival advantage of such species is therefore not a reflection of their ability to compete, but rather their ability to cheat their way out of the competition.

Nature, naturally, is indifferent to the moral validity of any survival strategy, and parasitic creatures, objectionable as they may be, are therefore free to thrive and harness the fruits of their indecent lifestyle. As a result, the world is and has always been rife with a plethora of successful parasites of all sorts and kinds thriving in every climate and on every possible choice of host species.

But is there perhaps a parallel to that bizarre zoological phenomenon in the context of "memes" competing on the stage of human cognition? Might there be out there, for example,

ideas that survive in the mind of a person not by their own logical or pragmatic merit, but rather by taking hold of the person's mind like a parasite takes hold of the body of an unassuming host?

In other words, are there thought patterns that persist in one's mind, not by being convincing, convenient, or useful, but by employing a set of mechanisms carefully adapted to arrest the host's capacity to use logic or employ analytical skills to reject them? Subsequently, could there be falsehoods that succeed in propagating from mind to mind not by being demonstrable or even plausible, but rather by exploiting backdoors and loopholes of the human mind?

Adonis felt a soft buzz on his device tickling his left thigh. It was most likely Nyx at that late hour of the night. Wholly consumed by what he was reading, he decided to ignore it for the moment. He took a big gulp of his now slightly lukewarm latte and kept going.

Before we dive into an attempt to answer such questions, let us begin by asserting that if such patterns of thought were to exist, they would indeed be very successful and therefore just as prevalent in some societies as you would expect of other "honest" ideas, i.e., the ones that are genuinely meritorious by their own right.

Let us also assert that, in order for an idea to establish a parasitical pattern of life, it would perhaps need to exhibit a similar life cycle to that commonly understood by zoologists to characterize biological parasites in nature. More specifically, a truly parasitical idea would have to succeed at each of its four major stages of life:

1. Infection Stage: Wherein it must compel the broadest and most diverse audience of prospective hosts to entertain it, possibly by appealing to universal emotions like fear of

consequences upon rejection, or desire for rewards upon acceptance, or perhaps a mixture of both.

2. Carrier Stage: Wherein it must persist in the mind of the host despite potentially compelling evidence of falsehood, perhaps by employing mechanisms that arrest the host's logical or analytical faculties that would otherwise reject the idea in the face of new evidence or hard-to-dismiss refutations.

3. Transmission Stage: Wherein it must compel the host to communicate it to as many peers as possible, perhaps by instating a sense of reward or self-worth tied to the successful transmission to other hosts.

4. Dormancy Stage: Wherein it must be able to survive in a suspended state outside the mind of a host for extended periods. For a parasitic idea, dormancy probably requires the development of a concise written form that is timeless in nature and easy to resurrect whenever the winds are favorable. This particular ability is especially important as it protects the parasitic idea from extinction during decades or even centuries of enlightenment when entire communities of living populous might become immune to infection so that the idea's chain of mind-propagation might come to a temporary halt. In that case, the parasitic idea might remain dormant in text form until able to resume infection in a different age, geography, or cultural context.

The device buzzed again, but Adonis was consumed entirely by the concept of ideas infecting minds like germs. "Illusory truth effect," he whispered to himself. The repetition of a falsehood creating the illusion of truth. The entire City is pretty much an idea, he thought. And if everybody else was convinced with an idea, does that make it true? Was he perhaps the one freak mutant who happened to be immune to the parasite?

In addition to those properties, or perhaps in support of number two specifically, a parasitic

thought would also have to be "antifragile" (to borrow a term coined by the late American philosopher Nassim Taleb in his eye-opening book of that title). To summarize the concept, unlike a fragile entity which is susceptible to damage by external stress, an antifragile entity thrives on the randomness of external stressors acting on it. Antifragility then is the exact opposite of vulnerability, going beyond sturdiness or resilience into actually benefiting from the presence of stress. Where Nietzsche would say "That which does not kill me can only make me stronger," Nassim Taleb would simply paraphrase as "I am antifragile."

An antifragile idea then is an idea that takes hold of a human mind, such that it would not only prevail over all attempts to refute it but get even stronger the more one attempts to challenge it. That is what it would take for a parasitic thought to cheat its way around the mind's intricate system of logic checks and balances and survive despite its deficiency of actual merit. A truly antifragile idea cannot be purged from the mind by acting upon it from the outside. The more evidence one accumulates against it, the more self-evident it becomes in the host's mind, twisting the very same counter-evidence to support its own validity. The more one tries to extinguish it, the more it thrives. The more vigorously one fights it, the deeper it roots itself. The more obstinate the attempts to eradicate it in a population, the more ubiquitous it becomes.

Are we then utterly defenseless against such formidable foes of the mind? Is there no hope for logic to prevail? How might one escape the grip of a deeply rooted parasitic idea? How can we as a society develop a collective immune system that might prevent the spread of the disease? How can we as individuals resist falling for a parasitic idea,

exceptionally well adapted as it may be to exploit our mental vulnerabilities? Or once infected, how can we even recognize a parasite as such? And how can we disabuse ourselves of it?

Far from claiming the answers to such grandiose questions, it is perhaps sensible to put forward the belief that a key to the answer might lie in one precious, uniquely human endowment: Doubt.

That wonderful gift of the mind, doubt can be an incredibly effective defense mechanism against all fallacies. In the case of highly adaptive parasitic thoughts, doubt could very well be a mind's last line of defense. Whenever it sparks inside of a mind like a fluttering beam of light amid darkness, doubt invokes an internal tribunal, calling into question the very axioms that might otherwise pile on forever unchecked. Given a little kindling, it can grow incredibly rapidly, blazing its flames into every derelict idea, purging our minds of the corpses of the past, and making space for a fresh new crop to take root. We must nurture it, develop it into an instinct. We must also guard and protect it. In a healthy mind, doubt should be the one and only irrevocable axiom.

If we are going to teach our children one virtue, let's teach them the virtue of doubt. If we only get to pass on a single unalienable truth, let it be that any ideology that stigmatizes doubt or casts it as an immoral or hazardous mental exercise, such ideology is to be deemed parasitic and must be fought like the plague that it is. Let's tell our children to be careful whom to invite into the privacy of their minds. Let's tell them that, if it feels when someone speaks as if they are flushing their minds down our ears, then that is our doubt mechanism telling us to stay away.

Perhaps immortalized in René Descartes's transcendent contribution to humanity: Cogito Ergo Sum. Doubt, oh precious doubt may ultimately prove to be humankind's only savior.

Doubt was missing, Adonis thought. Perhaps that was the root of the problem. Nobody in the City ever doubted the City. All were raised merely to be complacent, unquestioning. It is perhaps too inconvenient to dwell over big questions, to invoke that "internal tribunal" -as she had called it- when your life was so easy and comfortable. Adonis found himself tracing a circle that his mysterious friend had penned in black ink around "let's teach them the virtue of doubt." A line extending away towards the margin ended with a little note jotted in a cursive font that was becoming all too familiar to him. It simply said: "That's why I must do it. So he may grow up to doubt." Who was that man? And what prompted him to jot down that cryptic note at that particular spot of the essay? What was it that he felt he must do? As always, Adonis's nightly exercise left him with more questions than it answered. Yet it was still more satisfying than any other activity in his life. And over the last few weeks, he had become hooked on it, waiting impatiently for the stroke of midnight to get a chance to connect with that person, whoever he or she was, communicating through the language of ancient books.

As he reached to turn the page over, Adonis felt another soft buzz in his pocket. It was another ping from Nyx, apparently the third so far. Having finished what he gathered to be the gist of tonight's reading selection, he reached out to the button on the back of his device and casually let her through straight into the office, without bothering to hide the paper stack that lay open on the desk in front of him.

"Stop drinking coffee so late at night! More books from your secret admirer?" Nyx smirked playfully, wasting no time to jump into sarcasm as she materialized a few steps away from the desk. He had told her all about the mysterious books. In fact, he hadn't been hiding much from her. Not since he had opened up to her, that night back at Elysion.

"Fresh new reading today. I was right in the middle of it. What's up, baby?"

"What is it about?" Nyx paced around, carelessly looping a light brown lock of her hair through her index finger the way she often did when she was avoiding the real topic on her mind.

"It's about how some ideas are invaders of our minds, like germs spreading disease from one person to another."

"Ha. Then I suppose ignoring people's ideas is as good as taking a bubble soap bath!"

She took a few steps back and rested down on the single couch facing the desk. She was unusually dressed down, and it was unusually late for one of her impromptu visits. There was also something different in her voice. As if she was trying too hard to sound casual.

"Baby, why don't you tell me if something is on ..."

"Tell me a story!" she interrupted with an enthusiastic chime.

"Huh?"

"Come on, one more of those weird ancient tales of yours."

She bounced back up and in the air a few times on her tiptoes. Adonis only then realized that she was barefoot.

"Umm, I mean I don't know - I can't think of any right now."

"Pretty please!"

Pouty lips and dreamy eyes pulled together in a pause meant to be cute, but which he actually found pretty sexy. Even in her lounging slacks and puffy hoodie with no makeup on, Nyx could still pull off a decisively attractive pose like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. "Ok. Sit down then. Have I told you how the people of long ago used to dream up the City, and even the Farms?"

"No!" she whispered with a content smile, apparently already satisfied by Adonis having started telling her a story, regardless of how the story might turn out.

"Sit down then. They used to call them heaven and hell."

"Good heavens! What the hell?" Nyx shot back in fake astonishment, sinking back into the couch in a loud giggle at her own wit that sent her feet kicking up in the air.

"You make fun as much as you like, but that's where I think these phrases come from in the first place! People long ago, they used these words to talk about actual places. They used to believe that after someone dies, his soul would go out of ..."

"Or *her* soul!" Nyx pointed out in an authoritative tone, trying her best to sound like Adonis when he told a serious story.

"Sure. His soul or her soul would go out of this world and land either in a place called heaven or in a place called hell. Now get this. Heaven was a place for good souls, those elite few who somehow managed to live life without doing much wrong. A second life of endless luxuries and no chores of any kind awaited them there, just like the City. Most souls though, they would go to hell, a horrible place full of misery and hardship ..."

"Just like the Farms," Nyx finished his sentence for him having already caught on to the connection between the history lesson and her lover's chronic obsession.

"Exactly. But it gets even more interesting. Check this out: So apparently the souls in hell had no way to get in touch with those in heaven, and vice versa. The two groups had to spend eternity in mutual isolation, never allowed to mix up or exchange information of any kind. So a soul in heaven would live a life of, well, heavenly graces all the while fully aware that millions upon millions of souls are toiling in horrible misery in hell, forever out of reach. Apparently, that knowledge wouldn't bother the people in heaven at all... It's as if people were already ready for the City, mentally, hundreds of years before the Event finally came."

Adonis was looking away at that point, talking slowly to himself as if thinking aloud.

"What a bunch of idiots," Nyx spoke with the tone of a final judgment, "actually expecting some miracle to animate their dead corpses and send them away to imaginary places."

"Well, what do you think happens after you die?" Adonis decided to playfully challenge her axioms.

"Um, hello? Thanatos recycles my body. That's the end of it."

"That's it? A City department processes your death? What about your soul?"

"It... dies," she said, as if too absentminded to elaborate the point. Coming from Nyx, the cynicism was unusually dry. Adonis decided something was definitely off about her tonight.

"You're hopeless."

"What? Do you want me to believe I'll go to heaven? I'm *already* in heaven. I'm in the City! You said that. I mean those ancient cavemen had to dream up a perfect place to feel good about their future, but I already live in it for real, so there's nothing left for me to hallucinate. Heaven! Pfft. There's nowhere better than here. Dork!"

Nyx started laughing but stopped short abruptly as if it took effort for her to register a genuine laugh. It was obvious that she was trying hard to hide a look of grave concern, and she wasn't good at that at all.

"Why are you still up baby?"

"Can't sleep."

"What's wrong?"

"I dunno. I'm Sick. Nauseous. Throwing up every morning."

She met his eyes briefly then looked away, and paused for an unusually long while. Her index was back to looping her hair some more, and her expression was now unmistakably solemn.

"Listen, there's no way to sugar coat this, so... I'm pregnant."

The room fell awfully silent - as if the entire atmosphere somehow felt the need to pause and reflect on the news.

"I'm not sure how it happened," Nyx finally said, "I mean I'm pretty careful with these things. But somehow..."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know what?"

"That you're pregnant."

Nyx giggled nervously, almost out of habit.

"Well, aren't *you* bright today. Tell you what, if somehow you got through life this far without knowing how a girl could tell she's pregnant, I see no need for you to..."

"I mean of course I know, but, well, I just don't know how it could be..."

He stopped short, realizing that whatever he wanted to ask didn't really matter in the big picture. The stack of papers suddenly vanished from the desktop between them. Adonis knew it must be exactly one in the morning, yet it felt as if the essay had made a conscious decision to make an exit, leaving the couple to discuss serious matters in private. Adonis found himself analyzing how his girlfriend's toenails were artfully painted, with two toes on each foot chosen at random to bear a contrasting color to the remaining ones. Her baggy sweatpants were rugged, with thick, wide elastics at the bottom, a stark contrast to her delicate ankles and girly toenails.

"Well, aren't you at least going to *pretend* to be excited?" Nyx shot at him.

But he wasn't feeling excited. If anything, Adonis was feeling an overwhelming rush of guilt at being so placid in the face of such news. The idea was too abstract to evoke any real emotion. Had she clicked into the room with an actual infant in her arms, then maybe. But it was hard to be excited about an invisible, untouchable, microscopic lump of cells brewing deep inside someone else's internals.

"I know what you're thinking. You're waiting for me to hold up my device and say let's click that button together. One click and it will be like it never happened," Nyx finally said in a soft voice fighting back the tears.

"And you know what, it's totally understandable. That's what you *should* expect from someone like me. I had even grabbed my device and started the Paieon protocol myself. But I couldn't get myself to do it! I feel like I'm already a different person. I feel things more, deeply, I can't live with myself if I let go of that baby. My *own*..."

Nyx broke out weeping loudly like a little child. Adonis froze. He had never seen his girlfriend's walls come crashing down so perceptibly before. There she was, so delicate and vulnerable. The mother of his child. He felt that rush of guilt again, this time for not knowing what to do to restore whatever it was that just shattered in

her. He felt like she was so fragile at the moment, that if he were to stand up and hold her, she might physically break into pieces.

"My mom said she'll take care of him," Nyx eventually started again, her weeping having quieted down, "She said she'd be delighted to raise another child. You won't have to change anything about the way you..."

"We'll take care of him. *We*. He's *our* child. You, and I."

Adonis found himself saying those words out loud before he had even registered a conscious thought, let alone a final decision about the matter. It was as if the voice was coming from a different place within him than his foreground self. Yet it was still, somehow, all him, all Adonis speaking.

It must have been a *part* of Adonis, anyway. In as much as there is in everybody a part that enjoys all of life, the bad times just as well as the good times. That part doesn't judge, doesn't expect, and is just glad to be alive. That part is merely eager for the story of life to unravel, with all the plot twists and turns. That part doesn't hate anyone or anything, except maybe monotony. That ought to be the part that receives with interest and acceptance the news about a few microscopic cells that are going to turn a man into a father.

Nyx was now somehow in his arms, curled up into a ball with her bare feet sticking out of the armrest of his desk seat. Still tearful, she was no longer trying to hold back. Moments ago she had thought Adonis wouldn't allow or even entertain the possibility, not in a world where undoing pregnancy was as effortless as clicking a button. Moments ago, he had thought the same about himself, as well as about his all-fun-and-no-responsibilities girlfriend. But when it actually happened, they had both witnessed a singular voice from deep inside force itself onto their consciousness: This is *your* child. You owe him *everything*.

## xi

*"We ask questions that we hope will give us the truth we want to hear. The problem is, you can't choose your truths. Truth has a habit of simply being the truth. The only real choice you have it whether to believe it or not."*

—C.J. Tudor, *The Chalk Man*

"I think it's time we talked about Abas, you and I."

Adonis's visage immediately shifted. The topic of his father was too personal. Too taboo to discuss with anybody. His buddies had always acknowledged and respected that as unspoken law. Even coming from the corrector, that proposal was unexpected. He tried to remain calm, but he could hardly mask the defensive tone in his words:

"There's nothing to talk about really. I don't remember much from that time."

The corrector leaned back against his seat, put two palms together and rubbed slowly.

"You might not remember much of your father's life, but surely you must remember about his passing. As you know, it was a suicide. The first and only case in the City in more than a century, and the last case since. That alone would make it a remarkable incident, but to me what's more remarkable is the... *imaginative* manner in which your father chose to take his own life. Would you like to know what I know about..."

"I don't want to talk about it!" Adonis shot back in open hostility.

"I can understand and respect that, Adonis. And I didn't think to bring that up before, wouldn't have brought it up really, except that - with the news of your expected son on the way, and especially the way you just told me you're having mixed feelings about it. I can't help but wonder whether what's really going on here is a... I can't help but wonder if all those unaddressed feelings from the past are coming to the forefront and standing in the way of your progress with therapy. I have noticed that you have been regressing quite a bit. I wouldn't want anything to jeopardize your therapeutic progress."

In reality, it wasn't that, and Adonis knew it, but he decided to keep his mouth shut. Better for the corrector to think he was having repressed father issues than figure out the truth. In reality, the nightly books from his anonymous ally had been working magic on Adonis, reversing the spell of countless hours of therapeutic crap. The last few months had been refreshing, eye-opening even. As an unavoidable consequence, he was noticeably different during the sessions, and the corrector was no idiot. Adonis was no longer docile, no longer as cooperative. At times he couldn't help but act

oppositional and defiant. He often found himself arguing with the corrector again.

"Adonis, you can't deny the fact that your family history has a lot to do with your mental condition. After all, your father *did* commit the one and only suicide the City had seen in several generations. You must wonder why he did it. Don't you?"

"Not really, no. I barely knew my father. He passed away when I was too young. I never really developed any real attachment to the man. I totally understand why you might think it's important, but really, him and I were never close."

Avoiding eye contact and playing it cool, Adonis wondered whether the corrector could possibly believe his lies. He found himself remembering Atlas's words, once before in a rare moment of bullshit-free honesty: "I know he's dead, but your father isn't really gone, man. He lives precariously through you - your life is an extension of his. But when you sell out, when you stop being who you are, that's when he is *truly* gone, forever." As full of shit as he was sometimes, Atlas was the only person Adonis had ever talked with about his dad since the ...

"Tell you what, let me tell you a little tale from before the Event since you're so interested to learn about that era," the corrector started in a tone that was meant to convincingly signal a change of topic, even though Adonis didn't believe for a second that he would actually get off the subject.

"Once upon a time in a world long since gone, and in a tiny primitive City very different than our own, a team of scientists devised a simple little test to qualify the nature of the attachment of one-year-olds to their parents. They called it the Strange Situation Procedure, and it consisted of measuring the child's stress indicators while subjected to an unusual situation. The child would be seated with the parent in a room full of toys, and once comfortable, the parent would stand up and walk out of the room, shutting the door behind them. The child would be left alone with the toys for a while, then the parent would come back into the room.

"The scientists found that children could be classified into four different categories according to their reaction to this test, and two of those categories are interesting: Some children would stop playing as soon as their parents left, and show signs of discomfort, sadness, confusion, and distress. When the parents came back, those children

would run towards them and show signs of relief. They'd tend to be close to the parent for a while longer before moving back to the toys. But some other children showed almost no reaction when the parents left, and simply continued to play as if nothing happened. When the parents came back, those children totally ignored them and kept playing with the toys. My question to you is: Which of these two types of children would you say is more secure?"

"Um, the ones that showed independence and didn't cling to their parents?"

"Ah! And why would you say you think those are more secure?"

"Because... they didn't freak out when their parents stepped out?"

"Bingo. Here is where it gets interesting. As it turns out, the children who showed insecurity, actually showed little indication of stress as far as the vital measurements could tell. But those who showed no attachments, those who played it cool, their stress vitals were actually through the roof. Their avoidant display was merely a defense mechanism to mask their feelings. And not a healthy one at that. Do you know why?"

"Why?" Adonis whispered, realizing that he was in effect setting the corrector up for his punch line.

The corrector perched forward and honed his icy gaze at Adonis from behind his spectacles.

"Because there is no such thing as a son who does not feel attached to his parent, Adonis. We are simply hardwired with that feeling deeply inborn. We can't help it! When it comes to one's relationship with their parents, the variety is pretty much as numerous as I can count on my thumbs. You have the secure attachment and the insecure attachment. That's it. Non-attachment is never a possibility. We're all forever attached to our parents. We can't control it. We can't turn it off or even dial it down. All we can do is control how we react to it. Whether to embrace it or live in denial to it at the expense of our own mental health."

An awkward silence followed as the corrector let the words linger for a moment longer.

"So let me now ask you again: Would you like to know what I know about how your father passed away?"

Adonis took a long pause. The corrector no doubt knew every detail about it. Adonis knew next to nothing, he had made an *effort* not to know much. Made sure never to ask, never to look into what had really happened. What little he did know, he had worked hard to block over the years. His memories were scattered and fragmented, as if by a mental effort to avoid making inferences or connections

between the little bits and pieces. He remembered the funeral, how the formal pants and buttoned shirt had felt uncomfortable. The feelings of anger, and betrayal. The horror over walking on his mother weeping uncontrollably in the bedroom when she thought he wasn't watching. Never before in his life was he faced point-blank with the question of whether he wanted to know how it really happened. Eventually, his answer came faintly, between breaths so as to not give away the tears he was fighting.

"Yes."

"Very well then!"

The corrector wasted no time to pull his device out and order the file on "Abas 8wPxT." With an alternating voice between report-reading and authoritative commentary, he began telling the story from long ago:

"Patient presented with a chronic case of PA." - "No surprise there since we already know you have it, and it is well established in the literature that Pathological Altruism has a significant hereditary disposition factor."

"Presentation of X-altruistic pathology was modulated with the presence of a congenital deficiency in interoception that led to a chronic overcompensation in the non-physical counterpart sense of empathy. Severity and frequency of patient's condition posed significant interference with daily activity and social and familial obligations. Patient's spousal partner eventually left him, further exacerbating his emotional well being ... *blah blah blah.*" - "In short, your father wasn't well, Adonis. The years preceding his suicide were very strenuous on him."

"Eventually, the patient spiraled into a depressive state which fed more into his mental delusions of grandeur and sustained his PA despite therapeutic and medicinal interventions." - "This bit here is saying that he wasn't responding well to treatment."

Adonis decided that the corrector's device was different than any other he had seen before. It was bigger and less oblong. Almost square in dimensions actually. Perhaps it was some sort of a special issue. The "corrector edition" maybe. Unlike Adonis's device, it was apparently able to pull the cover off the private life of any Citizen with a mere command from its white-haired master. Even more curiously, it had no port button on the backside. How would this old man port from spot to spot if he couldn't click his way around?

"Adonis? Are you with me?" He wasn't. He had dazed into something like a trance staring at the corrector's unusual device and

tuning out the message as he looked askance at the lips moving in silence and voicing lie after vicious lie.

"He wasn't depressed. He was a cheerful man," Adonis said defiantly.

"I thought you said you didn't remember much?"

"I would have remembered *that*. My dad was no sad loser."

"Well, have you considered the possibility that what your dad is like now is not the same as what he used to be like, back in his life?"

"That's absurd. That's like saying the present can somehow influence the past. That's just impossible."

The corrector smirked snobbishly.

"Actually retrocausality is an established fact, albeit mostly confined to the quantum world. But no, that's not what I meant. I meant to say that the present can influence our *memory* of the past. Your memory of your father is largely shaped by, well, so many things that have a lot to do with who you are now, and everything that has happened to you or around you in the many years since your father had left this world. You simply don't remember him as he really was, but rather as you have come to imagine him through the eyes of your adult self. In reality, he was a distraught man - a small man. The corrector's report is right here in front of us, Adonis."

"Well, then the report is a lie!" Adonis shot back, "That corrector was a liar, just like you! Just like every corrector who ever lived in this miserable City. The only truth is in these books behind you. Maybe *that's* why you keep them off limits! So you don't have to openly condone the horrible injustice this whole sham is built on. Starting with the Event itself, and everything that came after it, it was all cruel, all one huge never-ending nightmare, and you know it just as well as I do!"

At this point, he was shaking uncontrollably. Adonis stopped to catch his breath, realizing only then that he was outright yelling. The dampness on his cheeks was the only clue that he had let go of tears. The corrector kept a straight face, eyeing Adonis and allowing for a long contemplative pause as if waiting for his patient's episode to pass before he broke the silence:

"You know, sometime in the last couple of centuries before the Event, new weapons were developed that people ended up calling hydrogen bombs. They were pretty primitive, to be sure, nothing more than mere projectiles capable of creating very localized explosions here and there on the globe, along with clouds of radioactive material to spice up the long-term damage effect. A nation would have had to deliver tens or even hundreds of such bombs in order to create what would amount to an existential threat on a rival nation. Yet even with such primitive arsenal, humanity

almost brought itself to the brink of extinction multiple times, with superpowers amassing thousands of hydrogen warheads and pointing them at each other with one reckless leader on either side holding the trigger."

"Yeah? Well, at least they respected the courtesy of coexisting with the enemy on the same plane of combat. At least you'd know *who* was firing the weapon at you."

"In theory, maybe. But not in practice. In an open battlefield, the bullet of a machine gun usually came whizzing at supersonic speed, Adonis. You wouldn't get to *see* the bullet that was shot at you. And as it sliced through your ribcage and pierced your heart, you wouldn't even get to hear it! And if you were a high ranking officer, death usually came in the form of a weaponized insectoid drone. One moment you'd hear the buzz of a fly, and the very next moment, right after the weapon established a positive id, a targeted explosion would blow a hole in your skull bringing your life to an abrupt, discourteous end. Worse still, if you happened to be a citizen of some underdeveloped part of the world, well, there death most probably came from above, shot in the darkness of the night from a drone aircraft fighter high above. One second you'd be there, the next you'd already be incinerated in a flash before you knew what hit you. It wasn't an honorable face-to-face struggle like you're imagining. The world order was as unfair and indirect as it is now, only a lot more gruesome. It was a world of savages, Adonis! Even during the rare episodes of peace, people used to get busy making fictitious depictions of people hunting and killing each other for the masses to enjoy watching in their free time as a form of *entertainment*. Kids the world over used to busy themselves with pretend games of shooting each other with toy weapons. An entire industry was built about creating computer simulations of gruesome war-zones for teenagers to enjoy virtually killing and blowing up each other. *That's* what the world was like before."

"What's the point of all this?" Adonis whispered, having calmed down barely enough to feel his own level of exhaustion.

"The point is, societies have always been inherently violent, even recklessly so. And ancient nations never failed to resort to using whatever arsenal was at their disposal to engage in horizontal games of push and pull against each other. Now *you* tell me, can you imagine what pre-Eventian humanity would have done with a technological advancement like teleportation?"

The corrector, of course, wasn't interested in Adonis actually considering the hypothetical, and so he proceeded without pause:

"I'll tell you what - they would have surely weaponized it, just like the architects of the Event did. But instead of one group gaining the upper hand, each one of those petty fragment-nations of the pre-Eventian world would have simultaneously developed teleport-powered weapons and pointed them at each other. Can you imagine what such a world would have been like? Utter chaos! That's what. Do you know why?"

The corrector allowed for the question to linger as he quickly adjusted his spectacles, then taking Adonis's silence for a no, he proceeded to answer his own question:

"Because TP, unlike any other weapon ever conceived before, simply has no corresponding defense mechanism. You see, against swords there were shields. Against catapults there were city walls, against guns there were kevlar bodysuits, against drones, energy disruption arrays, and against missiles, reinforced building frames and anti-missile defense arrays. But with a teleportation-capable enemy, it is simply impossible to detect, let alone prevent any combatant from showing up right at your doorstep. Hell, right inside your freshroom even! You see, the world right before the Event was a convoluted web of fragmented nations with conflicting goals and interests. It was all kept stable by one superpower forcefully persisting the uneasy peace. Enter teleportation, and every one of those tiny fragment nations would have immediately gained the capability to wreak havoc anywhere on the globe with nobody able to stop it. China would have mobilized against Taiwan, and Tibet against China, North Korea against South Korea, Ukraine against Russia, and Iraq against Iran. Mexico would have taken over California, Jordan would have taken over Israel, as would India Pakistan, Romania Serbia and Bosnia, and Morocco Gibraltar, to mention just a few. Worse still, each of the above could have landed a soldier right in the middle of the Oval Office in Washington within the blink of an eye. It would have become a world of sheer and utter anarchy, with every player capable of causing damage disproportionate to its own size and proportionate only to its own reckless ambitions. A world where everybody is holding a gun to somebody else's head, and unable to protect his own head from a gun pointed right at it. Eventually, somebody would have pulled the trigger. Who first, it wouldn't have mattered, and then it would have all gone down in rapid succession."

The corrector paused for a moment to eye Adonis, looking for signs of confusion, and seemingly taking pleasure at his ignorance of most of the names of the nations mentioned.

"In a world where TP had been figured out, it would have been only a matter of time before all of humanity imploded, and the entire

planet quite possibly destroyed in the process. There could have been no international stability once teleportation became a reality - not with fanatics in every nation bent on dominating all others. The Event provided the world with its last hope for stability in a post-teleport age. The architects of the Event weren't evil criminals, Adonis. They literally *rescued* this planet from certain doom."

"So you keep telling me, over and over again. Well, I'm sorry but I'm not gonna fall for this..."

Adonis stopped himself mid-sentence, realizing how close he had come to tripping. He shouldn't mention the illusory truth effect, not to the corrector, lest he gets wind of his nightly book secret. There are concepts that Citizens are simply never taught, that now belong firmly in the wiped-out past. And so he decided to speak carefully, not to reveal just how much he now knew about the secrets from the past:

"You just can't know that for certain. The world would have adapted. A new world order would have emerged, better than ours. A world of international *peers*. No Citizens and no Farmers, but a world of equals!"

"Stability by equality, that's a naïve premise even in the hypothetical, Adonis. One might as well call a spinning coin stable. Even though it might remain upright for a little while as it spins fast, natural law dictates that it will slow down, and then start to wobble, until it finally tips on one side and *only then* would it come to be in true equilibrium. You see, stability for a coin *means* one side up and the other down beneath. It is a naturally unequal setup. And the world, our world, is ultimately a coin as well. We, the Citizens, our defining property is that we were the people who happened to be on top when the coin finally fell onto its side. The Farmers, they're the ones facing bottom. And that's just the way it is. Don't try to fight it, Adonis. In the end, the Event wasn't really one of many viable options. It could have been a world as it is today, or it would have been a short period of chaos ending in the extinction of the species via the mutually assured destruction of nations. The architects of the Event were wise enough to see it coming, and they did us all a favor and gifted the world a much-needed lifeline."

"They might have done *you* a favor, but they knowingly started all this... horror. That makes them evil criminals. I doubt that even you can possibly believe they were good people."

"Well, I'm not going to delve into a philosophical argument about good and evil, but let's talk about benevolence instead. Do you think when you consider someone to be truly benevolent, that you really

know what goes on inside their own mind? I'm talking about that private monologue deep inside, the one that is never shared with anybody. Do you think you have any understanding of the true nature of all the thoughts of power and dominance that cross someone's mind, that they might then dismiss not because they're genuinely benevolent, but because they don't have the physical means to exercise those dreams in the real world?

"No. The only real test of benevolence is to hand someone ultimate power and *then* see what they do with it. How many people you know would you say have passed such test? How many people throughout the entire history of mankind? Benevolence is a *myth*, Adonis. Nobody who ever lived would have freely pass on an offer of ultimate power. And neither did the architects of the Event. Had they done that, one might argue that their benevolence wouldn't have been 'good' but rather naïve. And in any case, it wouldn't have mattered. No matter how many truly angelic souls might have passed on the opportunity to mastermind the Event, ultimately someone would have done it. And the City would have risen anyway. Maybe it might have ended up somewhere else on the planet, home to some other group of people. But matters would have ended up as they are now all the same. So I say, better us than somebody else, somewhere else."

Adonis had no come-back to that. Even if he did, he was feeling too tired, too shaken to bother with the argument. And even if he was feeling up to it, he had come to realize by experience that there was no way to outwit that old man who knew everything about everything and had a counterargument for every thought Adonis could muster. Yet even though there was no way to demonstrate it, Adonis knew that the corrector was still, clearly wrong about it all. Often as the corrector would deliver his theses, Adonis would keep reminding himself to exercise doubt. "Cogito Ergo Sum" Ariadne's essay had read. "Doubt, oh precious doubt may ultimately prove to be mankind's only savior." The words somehow made an impression on him, such that he had come to remember them, months after that single reading, on the very same night when Nyx had told him about the baby. "Cogito Ergo Sum." He, of course, had no clue what that phrase meant but had figured it must somehow sum up the central point of that essay. It had a sacred ring to it, and Adonis had gotten into the habit of repeating it in his mind like a mantra, a reminder of the virtue of doubt to keep his sanity in the face of the corrector's relentless onslaughts on his innermost sensibilities.

The corrector held his device back up as if to read some more. Adonis found himself blurting a question on an impulse: "Why do you keep trying to convince me? I mean, why do you even care what I think? Why bother to change my mind?"

Without taking his eyes off the report, the corrector fired a ready answer:

"Because you're one of us, Adonis. You're a Citizen. You were born into the side of the coin that had landed up. The distinction is as permanent as it is absolutely arbitrary. So we can't allow the boundary to be blurred. Every Citizen must be proud of the City, and disdainful of the Farms. That is the way it must be. Now, how about you stop deflecting and ask me what you really want to know."

"What was the Event?" Adonis whispered shyly, gazing at the lush carpet underneath the enormous mahogany desk between them.

"It was the metamorphosis of this world into its current order. It was..."

"No, but what was it, actually? What happened back then, specifically?"

The corrector smirked back as Adonis contemplated whether even that last remaining man of knowledge actually had a clue what had happened to the world back then. Still, it felt satisfying to ask the question point-blank. In theory, the answer was likely to be inside one particular book staring back at him from the upper shelf of the corrector's library. A certain leather-bound "The World before this World" that he had stolen on many occasions but never had the foresight to read it through before he got caught. If only he had a chance to get to Chapter 5! "The Event," it was titled. What a shame!

"Adonis, I think you're trying to convince yourself that you're more interested in something else other than what you truly want to know, deep inside. The only event that is relevant to your feelings towards your future child is your *father's* final event. It is the question you can't seem to get yourself to admit you want to ask. Right now, the answer happens to be right here in between my hands. So how about we stop running away from it?"

With that, the corrector proceeded to read the report right from where he had been interrupted: "Sometime during the fourth year of corrective treatment, subject procured a rogue, self-powered teleportation device outside the control of Hermes."

"Why won't you tell me about the Event? Why won't you people tell anybody? We the Citizens, how can we live this life and not know what brought it about in the first place?"

"At 11:15am on January 3rd, 154 - the subject committed suicide by..."

"What was THE EVENT?!"

"...by teleporting himself directly upward, an estimated distance of a thousand feet vertically into the sky, thereby..."

"Enough."

"...thereby free falling to his death. Subject left no material explaining the motives behind his suicide or the peculiar manner in which it was carried..."

"ENOUGH!" Adonis exclaimed, curling into his seat and sobbing uncontrollably.

The corrector allowed for a moment of silence, perhaps out of pity.

"He died instantly upon hitting the ground below, Adonis. But one would imagine he must have had quite the ride falling down. No Citizen had ever soared that high up in the sky before or since."

"Enough," Adonis whispered, his voice broken with silenced whimpers.

"It says here there was no suicide note. Nothing of any kind to explain why he did it. One would think he owed his only son some sort of an explanation. You were barely twelve back then. But of course, we know why he did it. Don't we?"

Adonis remembered how the question had burned his mind for many years until he taught himself how not to think about it anymore. There was of course never going to be an answer. Abas had left without a goodbye, and nothing in the whole wide City could ever bring him back, if for a mere moment to answer the question: Why dad? What was so horrible about our family that you had to end your own life just to get away from it?

"Because he wasn't himself anymore," the corrector stated in answer to his own question as a fresh silent tear rolled down Adonis's cheek, "He was sick, and the sickness had taken hold of him, and ate away at him from the inside out. Turned him into an empty shell of a man. Broken, weak, confused, and chronically depressed."

"It wasn't like that," Adonis whispered on a tired breath, "That's not how I remember him at all. He was sensitive and funny. You don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course. It's the sensitive side that lingers in memory ultimately when all other memories had faded away.

"You know Adonis, it might surprise you, but sometimes I actually envy him. Despite his predicament, or perhaps because of it, what Abas had was a very rare gift. His extremely heightened sense of empathy enabled him not just to be aware of those around him, but to dive into their very heart and live their presence at a level unattainable to the rest of us. Perhaps his condition, *your* condition, is just a bad side effect of an extraordinary ability. If only he learned to keep his feelings in check, to hone them, train himself to use them in the right context and towards the right subjects, he could have turned his curse into a blessing.

"Well, it's too late for him. But *you* still have time. You can do just that. And I'm not going to give up on you. Deep inside, your excitement about your future son is tainted by your rooted fear that you might fail at fatherhood and end up abandoning your son like your old man did. And since you know first-hand how that felt, how deep the wound goes, you won't wish it upon anyone, let alone your own child. But don't worry, you and I, we're going to unravel those fears and get you back on track in time for the arrival of your bundle of joy."

Adonis met that prospect with a cynical smirk. Numb with the pain of the memory, he found no reason to go along with the corrector's false account of reality, past or future.

"Maybe I'm not excited about having a baby because I *know* what kind of world I would be bringing him into. A world of unfairness and horrible cruelty. A world where men would enslave others for life, not out of necessity, but sheer greed. A world where the Farmers not only toil their lives away in service of the Citizens but even in death their bodies are reclaimed for service. Where the fat extract of dead human beings is used to make soap and candles, the hair fluffed down pillows and jackets or fashioned into luxury brushes and fine violin bows, and even the skeletons put on display in the hundreds for others to enjoy as fine *art!* So you say whatever you want about my dad, but we both know who are the real sickos here and no amount of gasli..."

Adonis stopped himself again, pretending to catch his breath and secretly hoping the corrector missed that last bit by some sort of a miracle.

"No amount of *gaslighting* can convince you," the corrector finished Adonis's thought for him with the sly smirk of a teacher who just caught a student cheating on a test.

"Interesting choice of words. Well, I guess that possibly makes you and me the only Citizens familiar with the term. I presume you came upon it while reading one of those ancient books you had stolen from my library. But regardless, have you considered the simple fact that the mere existence of the term '*gaslighting*' in those books is by itself compelling evidence that the *practice* of gaslighting was common in the ancient world, long before any of us correctors were even born?"

"Let me ask you in turn though, do you know just how many other ancient-world terms refer to hardships you never even heard of, let alone had to endure? You come here complaining about everything in this world, but the reality is you take everything you have for granted. You don't even know the names of countless kinds of hardship we have successfully abolished. You don't know what a traffic jam is, or a noisy roommate, or a wrong address, or a bee sting, or a public bathroom, or an interrogation, or a mortgage, or a car accident, or a torn grocery bag, or a broken elevator, or a bomb shelter, or a bus stop, or a scar, or a passport, or a lineup, or a foreign language, or a bank account, or a laundry night. You never had to go through a security gate, or fill up gas, or take out the trash, or hold on to a coat check tag, or wait for a subway, or shovel snow, or suffer through a trans Atlantic flight in a middle seat, or look for your lost keys, or charge a device, or turn on a faucet, or do the dishes, or draft a patent, or mop the floor, or do a chore of any kind. You never had to worry about politics or currency exchange rates or auto insurance or jury duty or anything else in the impossibly long list of minutia that defined life for all those sorry souls who lived and died in the decades before the City finally came to being. No, you take for granted this lavish life in a vast, lush heaven of unfathomable proportions. How do you think we keep this giant landmass *green*? Did you think the City is naturally lush? Let me tell you something: This giant landmass we call home was once an almost uninterrupted stretch of arid desert with red sands extending as far as the eye can see! Do you know how much fresh water it took, still takes every day, to sustain a transformation of this magnitude? Do you imagine it would be even possible to pull such an undertaking in a world where every human being had equal claim on fresh water to keep clean and enjoy summer fun? Do you ever stop to think about the volume of fresh water that runs through your freshroom streams every second of every day, just so that you don't have to bother to start and stop the stream for every use? And multiply that by the same for every

single freshroom in every single tile in the City; hundreds of millions of continuous streams. Do you think there's enough fresh water on the planet to sustain *this* kind of luxury for the masses of savages outside the City? And that's just the basic matter of water economy. Do you have any idea how much work goes into farming the cotton, making the textiles, stitching together the pieces of those fresh sets of clothes you put on every single day and throw away at night never to use again? Or that fresh set of bed linens and pillows that you curl into every single night only to throw away the next morning? And how about the fresh set of dinnerware and cutlery on your table every single meal? Or would you rather have to literally scrub the dirt off your worn clothes and off your used plates to *reuse* them the next day like a savage? Would you like to reuse the same soiled toilet seat every day for months, even years at a time like people everywhere actually used to do before the Event? Do you think your level of basic hygiene, let alone your lifestyle, could have been sustainable if we were to extend it to every single human being out there on the planet? Billions of them? The current world order means we get to live in an artificial paradise, a life of endless comfort the like of which not a single soul could dream of before the Event. But it is all built upon the continued labor of billions of servants toiling away out in the Farms in order for us to thrive. Do you know how lucky you are? To have that privilege? And instead of counting your blessings, you somehow find a way to feel miserable about it? Your feelings of sadness, of depression, of anything other than ecstatic joy, are an insult that flies in the face of everything we've been working for since the Event! Would you really, sincerely, have it any other way?"

"Yes, I would. I would rather split the work with everybody else, and split the luxury as well."

The corrector could barely mask the expression of utter contempt on his face in reaction to that last proposal.

"*Split* the work? Do you really think you know what 'work' even means? On any given day, no more than one in a hundred Citizens are actually on work. And being 'on work' usually means nothing more than spending three or four hours a day on a task that is primarily fun and interesting, more so than actually necessary. What we call work, the past generations would have called pursuing a hobby! Yet even with such little social commitment, we have achieved unprecedented breakthroughs. We have restored ecological balance to the planet. We have reversed massive eco disasters that were once deemed inevitable, like the death of the world's largest coral reefs

including the one right here at the border of the City. We have explored most of our galaxy, established TP import streams of luxury resources like gold and diamonds from extraterrestrial mines. We're about to inaugurate our first batch of extra-solar residential tiles on impossibly distant planets. The freedom to experiment on sapien subjects allowed us to abolish most diseases in record time, and all that would pale in comparison with what we're on the verge of doing. Did you know we're about to crack the riddle of human intuition itself? Our experiments with human cognition on sapien subjects out in the Farms are showing great promise. We are very close to harnessing the power of human innovation on-demand. That 'aha' moment that only the most creative geniuses would be lucky enough to experience once or twice throughout their entire professional careers, we're about to harness and turn into a predictable resource available for all Citizens at all times. Imagine an entire society of eidetikers, each able to apply the best quality of human psyche all the time. A continuous stream of strokes of genius applied to every discipline systemically without fail. It would transform humanity even more radically than the advent of writing had done! And all that is possible because our Citizens are free to innovate, free to pursue their sheer interests to whatever depth or breadth they choose to, unburdened by the mundane necessities of daily life. Because our Citizens never suffered, never had to struggle, they simply remained children. Compared to the hardened souls of ancient societies, we're an entire society of irresponsible babies, free-thinking and nonchalantly curious to explore and innovate out of pure interest, not of necessity. Do you really think we could get away with that arrangement if everybody on the globe had to share an equal load of responsibilities? Definitely not! We would all be slaves to our own sustenance. We would effectively have to be reduced to Farmers, the lot of us! There would be no space left for civilization to thrive - no place for art, philosophy, or the pursuit of anything refined or exquisite outside the narrow focus of daily needs. Luxury for the masses is nothing more than a naïve dream. It always was. What you're suggesting would amount to the annihilation of the human endeavor, the degeneration of our species back to the primal origins where we started. It's a call to turn around and head back, instead of keeping forward.

"Now, more than ever, Adonis, you need to open your eyes and get out of your own monologue. What little you think you know about things, you had learned secondhand from dilettantes. I am in fact the only source of true knowledge in your entire world. And I'm telling you, you have never needed therapy like you do now. An expecting

father. Soon that abstract concept of a future son will be a concrete reality crawling on the bedroom carpet right in front of your eyes. Soon after, he'll be cruising from table to chair to couch and then taking his first unaided steps and uttering his first words. Then the what and why questions start to trickle down and sooner than you think, the floodgates open and *swoosh!* You're a parent to a real human being, inquisitive, intelligent, and oh so very fragile. You need to ask yourself, how good of a job would you do helping him integrate into his world if you yourself couldn't figure out how to fit in. How would you answer his incessant questions about life if you yourself haven't figured out the answers? You need to get back on your feet Adonis, and soon."

Adonis let out a whimper despite his best effort. The old man pounding him with argument after invincible argument was obviously smarter, more articulate, more eloquent of a man than he could ever be. And he, as always, was the confused, clueless party who could only navigate by instinctive conviction, baseless as it might be in reality or even in logical grounding. Maybe he really did need an urgent change of heart. The corrector softened his voice as he gave the device one last glance before putting it away. He eyed Adonis's pitiful expression and must have decided he went a bit too far this time.

"Son, your insistence to stand in solidarity with the Farmers, as noble as it might seem to you deep inside, is in fact based in moral confusion. Your empathy towards them is irrational, misdirected. These are creatures you never saw, and who for all practical purposes are indistinguishable from cattle. If they really are worthy of empathy, how could the entire society of civilized human beings fail to see that? And if they *are* worthy of compassion, then why stop there? Why not empathize with sheep, cows, fish in the sea, or earthworms, or any of the countless other living things subjected continuously to the unfairness of natural law?

"It's true, the Farmers don't have it fair. But they're surely not alone in that regard. We don't exactly live in a world of fairness to begin with. Do you think it is fair for a glorious tulip plant to spend every second of every day for a whole year sucking on sunshine and meticulously and painstakingly growing its stem and leaves and flower, only to have it all grazed away in a split second by a leaping rabbit without even a momentary pause of gratitude or appreciation?

"Every second of every day or night, millions upon millions of miserable creatures are being subjected to unimaginable pain and agony by the merciless hold of nature. Hunger, thirst, disease, and fear are all too familiar as to be the de facto state of affairs. Yet those are not even the worst of it. The wild is rife with endless examples of misery delivered deliberately to living things by the boundless cruelty of their peers.

"Here, a ferocious lion devours a young gazelle alive, slicing into its bloody flesh and ignoring its final whimpers of pain. There, a cuckoo bird throws its foster siblings off the nest to their sure death. Now an Ichneumon wasp larva feeds on the body of a paralyzed caterpillar from the inside out, while a pact of slave-making ants raids the peaceful nest of a neighboring colony, stealing their babies to raise as slaves for life. Suffering is definitely the natural order of things, and all we Citizens can do is create an artificial bubble within which we absolve ourselves from what is otherwise omnipresent misery."

Yet it isn't all like that, Adonis reminded himself silently. In one nightly read a couple of weeks earlier he had found an article on the merciful acts of wild creatures. It had a big banner on top showing the massive size of the Pacific Giant Octopus. Stretching four meters long, it was a magnificent creature. The female would carefully choose a secluded nesting spot and turn it into a nursery for her tens of thousands of eggs, standing guard for them for many months without a break. She'd gently brush them now and then with her tentacles to keep algae and fish away. She'd keep rocking the waters in the den incessantly to supply them with a refreshing flow of oxygen. And as they finally hatch, many months later, she would have starved herself to death, standing guard and nursing them into life with her last ounce of energy. Pure, undeniable act of self-sacrifice. Not that the Corrector would know anything about that.

The corrector leaned all the way back in his seat, feeling perhaps satisfied in having delivered his central argument so elegantly. When he started again, he had taken on a fresh, authoritative tone, like a professor transitioning into a new topic of discussion in class.

"And we do that because no human being can be empathetic towards all living things and still maintain sanity. I can't do it, and neither can you. Neither could your father! Sanity is a condition granted by imposing limits on empathy. Empathy is a useful tool in as far as it helps build and maintain societal order. In the case of a PA patient such as yourself, empathy had misfired, going beyond its basic utility and becoming a harmful sense, much like an overgrowth of anything

becomes harmful. Therapy is the process by which one learns to trim back empathy to useful levels, learning to direct it where it is constructive, and preventing it from overpowering the cognitive process in harmful ways."

If the goal of that session was to motivate Adonis to make an effort to shake away his obsessive attachments in anticipation of his future role as a father, then it was decidedly a failure. Later that night, Adonis found himself obsessing again over his plan to break away from the confines of the City and find his way somehow to the Farms. Now more than ever, it was necessary. Now that he was going to bequeath the world to an heir, it was imperative to put effort into making the world if only a tiny bit less miserable - or at least gain some understanding of its current state.

But no matter how hard he racked his brains, he just couldn't think of a way to click himself out of the City. Hermes controlled all TP activity of all Citizens at all times, and it no-doubt had measures in place to make it so nobody ever crossed into or out of the City. If the corrector's report had any truth to it, Abas apparently had gotten his hands on a rogue TP device, something he was able to use to teleport himself up into the sky, but still inside the City. Even if such a thing as a rogue TP device existed -he certainly had no clue where to begin to look for one- still it couldn't possibly be used to TP anyone or anything across the Styx boundary, or else Hermes would surely detect the TP action and reverse it immediately. It was simply impossible, yet it had to be done.

Adonis almost drifted to sleep before the nightly book hour, such an exhausting day it had been. Yet the stroke of midnight jolted him back up, probably out of habit. A magazine materialized on his desk this time. Compared to the juicy readings he'd been getting in the past, it was something of a disappointment. It has photos of men and women in dressy clothes that looked very uncomfortable and articles that seemed to go on about nothing at all. Towards the end, there was a blank page where someone -was it his secret friend?- had penned a few lines freehand:

I close my eyes and dream of a perfect bullet. An unstoppable bullet. It is slightly slimmer than a regular bullet, and much, much faster. I alone have the power to watch it move in slow motion. My vantage point dances around it as it speeds down

its path. It moves in an absolute-straight line, straighter even than the curvature of the ground below it.

Its small size, silent motion, and incredible speed make it entirely undetectable for everybody else. It zooms through everything in its path, digging clean circular tunnels as it burrows through anything and everything.

It hits the glass of a fancy store vetrina, slices through it without any shatters. It zooms through the manikins, one by one, then the clothes, the shelves, desks, and out through a brick wall, all while the shoppers are frozen in time, going about their shopping business.

Then it heads towards a coffee shop, with tables sprinkled outdoors by the street. Nobody seems to mind. Only I know... I wake up.

Adonis had never seen bullets before, but he knew what they were from references in ancient books. He imagined them to be little metallic balls, finding it hard to believe that such primitive projectiles could have once been the weapon of choice for any people. What dreadful times they must have been, with people resorting to hurling tiny objects at each other super fast, blood spilling and pooling all over the ground and limbs flying out from dying subjects screaming in excruciating pain.

As he surrendered to sleep, Adonis dreamt of bullets penetrating his body. Yet there was no sense of danger, just peaceful serenity as he watched those shiny metallic pellets slowly approach in batches of five, six, and pierce into his torso in slow motion. He felt no pain, no sense of loss, only a somewhat long-awaited sense of freedom. With the liberation of death, he could finally rotate around himself and watch –from a third-person vantage point– bullets emerge out of his own back with exploding force. He was free. He let his departed body fall. For a moment it was dark and silent, but one could still sense how vast and vacuous the space around him really was. He fell, slowly at first then quicker and quicker. He could feel himself racing downwards, yet nothing around him in that void, dark expanse

could sustain his feeling of motion. It felt like forever. Eventually, he lost all sense of time passing, and he could only feel the fall, the freedom that came with it, further and further down. There was no bottom to that pit. It felt like he was going to keep on falling forever.

Then suddenly a splash came. He had plunged into a body of water. He could only feel, but not hear it or see it. He must have fallen into the bottom of the abyss. The water was cold and still, sucking him down deeper into it. The plunge had lessened his speed, but he was still sinking, deeper and deeper into the depths of an ocean. An ocean with no end. It was mind-bugling how far down he must have come compared to where he must have been before he started falling. And even still, this seemed to be minuscule relative to how much further down this ocean was swallowing him. Eventually, he lost all sense of space, and his senses converged on the currents moving through his hair, peaceful, cold and dark.

The bottom of the ocean hit him like a slap. But instead of slamming onto solid ground, he penetrated right through it. And beneath it, there was yet another void expanse of nothing. Nothing, except for Abas, floating in the weightlessness of the surreal world beneath the bottom on an entire ocean. In the darkness, the voice of his father echoed into the distance as he stated matter-of-factly and without an introduction: "Allow me to set some expectations straight. It's *not* going to be how you imagine it to be. You're *not* going to be the kind of father you want to be. Your son is *not* going to be how you think he will be."

The grumpy words coming from behind the thick mustache were in sharp contrast to the serenity of the moment. Always casual, down-to-earth, straight-to-the-point Abas. Even when resurrected from the dead to appear in spirit and bestow wisdom upon the living. "Stop trying to force the world to match your imagination, son. Try instead to sit back, take it in, and let things take their natural course. Give the world a chance to surprise you, to guide you, to take you on an amazingly unexpected ride."

"You wouldn't know," Adonis said, "You're just a big loser." He felt his body float, he wasn't sinking anymore. He was now hopelessly adrift in the abyss. He closed his eyes, he was at peace.

## omicron

*"History suggests that there is neither a belief too bizarre nor an action too appalling for humans to embrace, given the necessary cultural influences."*  
—Raoul Martinez

"I think a toast is in order ladies and gentlemen!" Atlas proclaimed joyously, raising a gold-embroidered crystal glass half-filled with champagne still freshly bubbling, "You immature bastards all know we're here to celebrate our good friend Adonis's ascension to fatherhood tonight, and it goes without saying that a little speech is in order. So I think we should get it out of the way early before I guzzle a few more drinks and wind up giving away some highly classified information about our good man here in front of the future mother of his child. Like one or two incidents that I happen to recall when..."

"Oh shut up Atlas!" Katina yelled with a big grin on her face.

"Yeah, shut up dude!" Ponos concurred, "We've already been through this - no classified information leaks to the Mrs.! If you can't keep your mouth shut when you drink then just stop drinking!"

"It's ok Atlas, you and I will have a little private chat about it later tonight when everybody's distracted with their food," Nyx said with a wink. It was amazing how quickly and easily she integrated into the group. She had practically become one of the boys already, only a couple of months since Adonis introduced her. Nyx and Atlas got along exceptionally well, her always giving him a chance to go through with his theatrics, and him admiring how she knew how to take a joke.

"Yeah, over my dead body you will!" Adonis interjected with pretend-worry. Then eyeing his good friend he waved a warning finger: "Actually, you shouldn't even be allowed within twenty feet of my lady as long as she's pregnant with my boy."

"Oh, come on guys, I'm not that bad," Atlas said with a sly smile, still holding his glass up and apparently enjoying the moment a little too much. "You know I kid. I wouldn't say anything to embarrass our buddy Adonis here, not while I'm sober anyway. Speaking of which, are we getting some hard liquor or what?"

Nyx burst out laughing effortlessly. She looked pretty even more than usual, having put half an effort into getting out of her casual baggy outfits and into a dress to meet the special occasion. She had a silky, strappy dress on that was elegant and simple. It served as a plain backdrop for the glamorous jewelry adorning her slender neck and her toned shoulders and arms. Her hair, she had let down over the bare width of her upper back between the dress's shoulder straps.

Across the entire length of her hair, she had braided in a silver jewelry vine with little branches holding diamonds of different shapes and sizes, and tiny silver leaves weaving in and out of her hair, accentuating the natural highlights of her honey brown hair. Easily the most glamorous hairdo out of all the ladies at the restaurant if it wasn't for Katina. Sitting opposite to her, the bubbly blonde was wearing her hair up into a bouquet of blond roses, each made of a single strand of hair looped into a spiral perfectly mimicking the petals of a rose, and held impossibly in shape by a force unknown to Adonis. Between the roses, little ornamental stems were painstakingly arranged, each carrying a few natural pearls of all sizes and colors. Katina had apparently spared no effort to style up to match the glamour of the unique venue.

The gang was seated around a dinner table at the City's newest and most upscale restaurant. A dining experience never to be forgotten - Katina had promised - to celebrate the best news she'd ever heard. Her excitement was mixed with great pride to have been the one who made the match in the first place. And she did find three occasions already to remind everybody of her vital role in setting up the future father and future mother on their first blind date. Apparently, in her mind, the pregnancy somehow served to validate her matchmaking skills. She had even tried to go as far as calling the baby her "brainchild" except she got immediately told to get over herself by the rest of the group. But she did get compliments on her choice of venue. Atlas and Solon were very impressed with the ambiance, and Ponos pointed out that the menu selection was outstanding. But it was Nyx who was truly in awe of the dining hall itself. She had good reason to be impressed with the chamber, with a gold-laden ceiling towering some fifty feet above, and some two hundred real-candle-light chandeliers each overflowing with Neptunian diamonds more massive than the ones she has in her own tile. The whole experience was clearly designed to amaze even the hardest-to-impress, no easy feat given a clientele born and raised into uninterrupted luxury. The dining hall was one large circular expanse of about ten thousand square feet. The outer border was entirely made of glass enclosures full of racks displaying fine meat cutlets apparently at different stages of the aging process, interleaved with wine racks also on display for the curious connoisseurs who frequent the place. In the center of the circular hall, a string octet was playing a soft classical tune on a marble podium raised some fifty feet above the main floor. Scattered evenly around the rest of the hall, every dining table was sitting on a separate round platform of a different elevation above the main level. The shaft of every dinner podium was made entirely of smoked glass

with silver and gold streaks branching haphazardly all over its surface in organic patterns like veins on living tissue. On top of all that, the glass podiums were adorned with random arrangements of large diamonds sprinkled all over. This gave an overall sensation of dining on top of a pillar inside of a giant cavern full of naturally sparkling crystals.

The table where Adonis and his gang were seated sat on a pillar some twenty feet high, and the nearby tables were at heights ranging from ten to thirty or forty feet. The separate dining platforms at random heights also served to drown the noise from other groups and amplify the live music funneling down from the highest podium in the center, making every group feel like they're on the only table in the restaurant. An impossible arrangement, Adonis thought, if it wasn't for TP. Unless of course, one would resort to using long ladders to get people and food up to every individual table. The table itself wasn't too large for comfort, but it was still breathtaking, covered head to toe in genuine leather and holding an exquisite set of all-crystal dinnerware, and a ten-foot crystal centerpiece statue to match. Every part of the crystal set, every dish, every glass, and every utensil had the same word etched on it in subtle cursive script: "schadenfreude." It was apparently the restaurant's word of the day, according to Katina at least. Every day a different word would be etched onto the dinnerware, just because. It made for a good conversational piece, Katina said, although in practice the group didn't bother to look up the word let alone have a conversation about it.

The seats around the table were wide and high, more like sofas than dinner tables, with legs fashioned out of whole tree trunks and an outer fabric that looked like cowhide. Designed to amaze every Citizen, Adonis thought, except one. He for one actually had to put extra effort to shake off the conscious awareness that he was sitting on the body of a dead cow, staring at a table made of the shaved skin of yet another dead cow, inside of a hall that functioned more like a catacomb housing the bodies of countless animals of all sorts, sliced into pieces and put on display for the Citizens' delight.

"Oh, and how can I forget, today is actually a blessed day for more a reason than one!" Atlas went on, apparently still in toast mode standing upright, glass in hand. "Let's not forget that today also marks the occasion of Eos's birthday. We're lucky to have her here with us," he added, motioning with his eyes and torso to a spot on the floor beside the table where Eos was stationed, fully absorbed

chewing on a doggie toy. Katina's dog was virtually part of the group, never to miss a gathering of any kind let alone her own birthday celebration. Amazingly, the restaurant had prepared a dog mat of the same cowhide material as the rest of the furniture and even provided a crystal bowl for Eos to partake in the unparalleled dining experience just like the rest of them.

"Oh, and did I mention already that Adonis is going to be a Daaaaaad!" Atlas exclaimed, bringing his toast to a quick end before everybody started complaining.

"Here here! Congrats buddy!" Ponos raised his glass in genuine happiness for his troubled friend who had finally turned a corner, found himself an awesome lady (admittedly with some help from Katina), and now was going to have a proper family to keep him grounded and on track.

"Yeah and not just any dad!" Katina quickly chimed in before anybody had a chance to cheer, "I have it on good authority that his is going to be the first child in the whole wide City to ever be conceived on Elysion! Now, how cool is *that*?"

"Yay! sex on Elysion! I'll drink to that!" Atlas yelled. Everybody raised their glasses. Adonis and Nyx clanged their crystal goblets lightly, eyeing each other with mutual admiration. The brave decision to keep the baby had made each of them proud of the other. In the short few months that followed, their relationship had dropped deep roots. It had by now metamorphosed from a fun phase to a lifetime commitment. She was no longer just his girlfriend. She was now his fearless accomplice, soon to be the mother of his only son. And that had made all the difference. Shortly after the news, Adonis came to realize that he couldn't have found a better mother for his son had he actively tried to look for one. Of all the Citizens he ever met, she stood out as the least conforming, the least worried about fitting in. And though she was as absorbed in the heedless pleasures of life as everybody else in the City, she had this quality about her that inspired admiration. She gave the impression that she could do without anything, as enjoyable as it might be if she deemed it necessary. Only she was able to enjoy the good life without taking it for granted, to indulge but without losing herself to the indulgence. She was the closest thing to a free thinker one could ever hope to meet in the whole wide City.

Adonis awoke to a loud round of laughs. "Oh yeah, I remember that time!" Ponos chuckled.

"And then we could tell Adonis was trying to keep a straight face, but he was too scared to breathe that his cheeks were turning blue of

lack of oxygen! Then people at the tables around us started dropping like flies. It was like a *wave* of nausea emanating from Solon's table!" Atlas said, laughing so hard he was practically in tears.

"And I'm like, long dead already. Oh my god, I wanted to laugh, but I was terrified I might breathe in the poison!" Katina whispered between giggles.

Nyx was laughing so hard as if she was there for the incident. Adonis remembered clearly it was from the time before he met her.

"Yup, Solon can fart with the best of them," Adonis nodded in fake admiration.

"Did they like kick you guys out of the place?"

"There were no survivors left to kick us out Nyx! The epicenter of the disaster zone was rendered uninhabitable for decades to come! Oh, fucking Solon."

"Well come to think of it, it's a good thing he couldn't make it tonight. Imagine if he pulled another fart in this place," Katina remarked, bringing the laughs up to a new bang.

"Oh my god, imagine the poor people jumping out of the podiums for dear life!" Nyx said with a cute smirk. She was five months pregnant by now. Or maybe six months, Adonis never got the hang of the week counting system. But one could barely tell at all from looking at her. She looked absolutely stunning. Her hair as well groomed as ever, full of tiny little decorative jewels and bands weaving in and out of her auburn locks and curls. She had gained a cup size since the pregnancy, and her appetite for afternoon sex had grown insatiable but was otherwise the same Nyx as before. She had the same rugged beauty, diamond-in-the-rough look to her as ever.

A few funny stories later, as the entrées materialized onto the table, the podium rose up slowly and gently, but still it was sudden enough of a change to startle Eos, who started growling and barking at the void around them, as if trying to pinpoint a single agent responsible for their peculiar ascent higher above ground. Adonis couldn't decide on whether he or Eos was more out of place. The poor little Samoyed had a thick, double-layer coat to protect it from the harsh climates of its natural habitat up near the Arctic. And there it was, circling a smoked glass podium up some thirty feet above the ground inside a cavernous enclosure furnished with fine aged meats and shiny diamonds. No wonder it always felt on edge, even though it was born into this life and never saw its natural home, never knew what it felt like to be somewhere where it actually fit in.

"Relax, little girl," Atlas said, assuring the dog with a gentle pat, "That's just what happens in fancy restaurants these days."

Not all restaurants, Katina was quick to point out. Only that particular one. It was designed so that once a while a podium holding a table would gently move up or sink down about ten feet. It made for a good wow factor, while also giving every table a chance to experience the full spectrum of being higher or lower than the surrounding tables.

"Well, enjoy your food everybody! This is the best menu selection you'll ever try," Katina announced matter-of-factly.

"Lady Fingers anyone?" She said, passing her plate around offering everybody a piece of whatever fancy dish she was having. Hers was, in fact, the least amount of food. It consisted of a smear of mash potatoes and a sprinkle or two of some garnish surrounding five or six ultra slim looking chicken wings, complete with skin and bone. Or maybe those were quail wings, Adonis thought, because they didn't look like any chicken wings he had seen before.

Adonis politely passed on the Lady Fingers, whatever bird they actually came from, and tried a bite of his baby back ribs instead. Those were also smaller than any he had before, and not as good. They were too chewy, and a little too gamy for his taste. But he wouldn't dare tell Katina of course. The best ribs he'll ever taste, she had promised. Tonight was a big deal to her, and she took care to handpick everybody's orders. She promised the best dining experience in the whole wide City, and she wasn't going to leave the matter up to the gang and their pedestrian taste. The only exception was Nyx, who had taken care of her own order. She wanted to try the butcher's cut top sirloin cap sous vide. The fact that she knew such a thing existed was enough to convince Katina that she knew what she was doing. Atlas, on the other hand, asked for "some big ass steak" and so Katina ordered the open flame Vacio steak for him, which apparently came with seared pineapple cubes and some tropical flower garnish. Atlas simply nodded to the order, showing no curiosity or desire to know what the hell it was he was about to eat, but judging by the way he was sinking his teeth into the fire grilled meat after having made a few obvious jokes about the use of flower petals as food garnish, Adonis could tell he was satisfied.

During the meal, a round of jokes about how each of them other than Adonis would have sucked at being a parent quickly evolved into some kind of contest. Everyone seemed to have a personal story of incorrigible irresponsibility to rival the others'. Katina quickly lost though, her stories being relatively mild and with Ponos pointing out that she was already a very responsible parent to such a high-maintenance dog as Eos. Ponos pulled a good fight, but it was Atlas

who ultimately prevailed as the group's insurmountably irresponsible member. It was hard to beat his story of when he was entrusted by a former girlfriend to look after her young sister and winded up taking the toddler to an after-hours party. Apparently that night he got drunk and lost track of time, and ultimately found the poor child sleeping on the cold floor when he came to his senses the next morning.

"Ok, I give up," Ponos said laughing loudly, "You're by far the worst of all of us man."

"Wow. Yeah, whatever you do just make sure you never have any kids Atlas!" Nyx chimed in with a wink, "Hey Ponos, by the way, how's your new arp treating you?"

"Pretty good. I like it a lot actually. I mean it took some getting used to, having to click around at home from room to room all the time, but now I never look back."

"Copycat!" Atlas teased. Ponos had decided to buy into the new archipelago tile concept after having heard Nyx describe her own arp. Ever since then, Atlas wouldn't miss an opportunity to tease him about it.

"Cost him two full days of work. Did he tell you guys that?"

"But totally worth the price, honestly," Ponos reaffirmed.

"Well yeah, easy for *you* to say. You're on work, like, every other week. What's two days of work pay for you to get a new arp?"

"It's not my fault you're a lazy ass Atlas!" Ponos said, munching on whatever fine meat Katina had ordered for him, "This stuff is really good, by the way."

"Yeah, I think I'm gonna get me another steak even," Atlas said, his twenty-ounce steak almost entirely gone already. Adonis wasn't even halfway through his gamy chewy serving of ultra fancy baby back ribs.

"Hey, speaking of tiles, have you guys heard the news from the Demiurge?" Katina said.

"What, about the rearrange you mean?" Ponos asked.

"Yeah, what's up with that anyway?" said Atlas. "I kinda heard something the other day but I was out with a hot blondie at the time, so I didn't pay attention."

Ponos wasted no time diving into a detailed explanation. Apparently, the tropical cyclone season was about to start with a bang this year. A powerful cyclone was expected to pummel the northeastern coast of the City, whipping a vast area with calamitous wind gusts and drenching thousands of tiles in torrential rain as it made landfall and plowed inland for hundreds of miles. Typically in such circumstances, the Demiurge would TP the inhabitants of the risk

area to temporary tiles away from the disaster zone until the weather passes and all damage is restored, which could take up to a whole week. But this year, a clever new idea was being tested. Instead of moving the inhabitants away from the tiles, the Demiurge was going to TP the tiles themselves, complete with the gardens, pools, and all amenities, into temporary land lots far away from the path of the cyclone.

"I guess this way, a lot less damage would have to be restored after the storm," Adonis added, genuinely impressed with the concept.

"Who cares! It would all be fixed with the click of a button anyway," Katina muttered, unconvinced.

"Yes, damage control isn't that much of a gain, actually," Ponos concurred, "But the real value is that nobody would have to stay away from their tiles for the duration. You get to take your tile everything in it with you. It would basically feel like nothing changed at all, except that you'd be living somewhere else in the City for a little while."

Ponos's face had lit up as it often did whenever he got a chance to explain one of his work projects. Katina gave him an endearing nod and Nyx a polite smile. Adonis wondered how anyone could possibly fail to feel the glamorous nature of such undertaking. The ultimate triumph over nature's most destructive forces. An entire society not just surviving a cyclone unscathed, but doing so without giving up the least bit of comfort.

"I don't get it," Atlas finally spoke, his mouth still full with an oversized bite of juicy steak, "Why don't they just TP the cyclone away from the City and get it over with? This whole rearrange sounds pretty stupid if you ask me."

"Stop being such a smart ass Atlas," Katina exclaimed, more in defense of Ponos's feelings than the actual rearrange.

"I wish we could," Ponos started, treating Atlas's sly remark as if it was a serious suggestion, "But if you were to TP an entire low-pressure front away and replace with some other atmospheric volume, you'd actually wind up with a weather pattern that is even more problematic than what you started with."

"Then just don't replace it with anything."

"If we do that then the vacuum in its place would act as an ultra low-pressure front, we'd basically be creating a super cyclone that..."

"Blah blah blah, just admit you guys don't know what the hell you're doing," Atlas interrupted, more interested in teasing than indulging an actual discussion.

"You're such an ass Atlas!" Katina said in defense of Ponos who was too deep into the scientific details to realize how Atlas was just yanking his chain. "Hey, Ponos. Why don't you get your friends at

Demiurge to leave Atlas to suffer right in the middle of the cyclone so maybe he'll realize how valuable your work is."

"I like that plan, what's a little rain and some wind anyway," Atlas shrugged.

Adonis found himself staring at his glamorous lady and tuning out the conversation. She wasn't merely attractive, he decided. Nyx had some sort of a majestic quality, like those royalty types of the old times that he had been reading about. With a few cosmetic touches, she could probably pass as a princess of a nation. Of perhaps no makeover was even necessary, Adonis reflected. Her hair, neck, and wrists probably already contained more jewelry than your average royalty of any era. She would probably need to undergo some etiquette training though, in order to pass as a delicate lady princess, rugged and earthly as she was. Adonis eyed how the bold pouty lips chewed on a morsel of sous vide steak with the tact of a ferocious lioness. Maybe not a delicate princess, then. Maybe a majestic queen. Strong and determined, like Bilqis, the queen of Sheba.

With half an ear Adonis kept scanning the conversation at the table. It consisted of a lengthy anecdote punctuated by rounds of laughter and other brief interruptions of some sort or another. Like Eos demanding some affection, or the platform shifting into a new position higher or lower at seemingly random intervals, or Katina clicking more champagne or condiments into the table, or Ponos going on a tangent about some allegedly exciting project he was working or planning to start working on. At one point Atlas went on a stretch about how if he were in Adonis's shoes he'd be excited about teaching his son the slickest flirting skills at a very early age, raising him to be the most menacing playboy in the whole wide City. To that, Nyx expressed disappointment, pointing out that she might have expected Atlas to raise an excellent athlete instead since he was so adamant about sport all the time. A sudden burst of silence and faces turned towards him alerted Adonis that it was apparently his turn to answer the question.

"I don't know," he chocked, "I really don't know what I would teach him."

"That's ok man, if you just pass on your cute looks and your hunky ass body to him, he wouldn't be needing any skills," Katina mused.

"Katina!" Nyx berated, half-smiling at the compliment by association.

But Adonis was already too lost in thought to take a compliment. What could a father teach his son? He considered it, not in the sense

of teaching skills, to talk or walk or do arithmetic, and not even in the sense of teaching concepts, or passing information about what happened in the past or what things were like before his time, but more in the broader context of divulging timeless wisdom. What might one tell his son about life that would hold true across generations, and from age to age?

Surprisingly, he hadn't considered the matter in that way before. Might one tell his son that most of the things that seem to matter, or the things that tend to cause stress with their pressing urgency, most of these things tend to not matter much in the end? That in life there are only a few crucial things, and that those tend to be buried in a pile of things that seem important at the moment, but are really not in essence? How about telling him how names don't constitute real knowledge? How, if you learned the names of everything, you still wouldn't know anything about anything? How what people tend to consider as knowledge is typically not much more than a superficial awareness of things? How to truly know something, is to be able to talk about it for hours without the need to appeal to elitist nomenclature?

How about telling him that, though sometimes your gut feeling will be right and sometimes it will be wrong, on the very few things that really matter in life, the way you feel deep inside, as wrong as it might seem at the time, that intuition, is going to be almost always eventually right. Maybe he can tell him that the worst thing one can do to oneself is to allow an idea to metastasize inside their mind so as to become part of their own identity. That those ideas that have become part of the inner "me" are the hardest for one to disabuse oneself of. Perhaps even impossible to let go of, unless one is willing to shed their own identity and reinvent it anew.

No, no. Whatever a father might teach a son, the son would probably learn on his own just as well. Perhaps he might enjoy it more if left to learn by experience rather than by second-hand account. It seemed to him that he might as well not say anything, and give the boy a chance to experience the pleasure of learning his own lessons, acquiring his own skills by trial and error, and coming to his own conclusions about everything and everyone.

"Don't worry dear, she's a custom hypoallergenic breed. I made sure of it because otherwise, my mom wouldn't be able to visit me anymore," Katina assured Nyx as Eos apparently decided it was time to greet the mother to be in person.

"It's ok, my allergies are pretty mild anyway," Nyx assured her friend.

"Custom-ordering a hypoallergenic breed turned out to be a hassle though. She's always in and out of the dermatology clinic, poor little thing! Her skin is apparently super sensitive to temperature and humidity. And I can only use the finest sapien hairbrushes on her coat otherwise it irritates her skin."

Adonis cringed as he always did at the mention of using hair from humans to make a hairbrush for a pet, but he made an effort not to let out any signs of discomfort.

"She looks pretty healthy though, and her coat seems not to shed that much," Nyx said, running her fingers through Eos's thick white outer coat. "Hey what's wrong with her eye?"

"Oh don't remind me. Poor thing had an eye correction operation last month. She's still sore. Worse still, I guess the sudden sharp vision was too overwhelming for her. She got really disoriented after, and very confused. I even had to restart dog-owner bonding classes with her all over again."

"Awww poor little Eos! I'm sure it will pass. I heard it takes about six weeks then they're back to normal. Takes their mind a while to process the visual overload," Ponos assured the ladies.

"And if not, we can always repurpose her as a meal for Solon's pet!" Atlas declared, eager to have found an opportunity to retell his age-old joke. Then turning to Nyx, he explained: "The man has a six-foot Burmese python snake in his tile. The thing is so huge that he couldn't keep it in any of his rooms. He has like a five thousand square foot habitat especially made for it in his garden. Anyway, I bet it would swallow Eos in one gulp and then ask for dessert!"

"Shut up Atlas!" Katina said, genuinely disturbed at the thought, "How many times have you told that stupid joke already?"

"Not as many times as you told me to shut up tonight," Atlas grinned.

"Hey speaking of dessert, I bet they have the best stuff here right Katina?" said Ponos.

"Oh, you have no idea. You just wait."

"Now you tell me? You should have warned me to leave some space for dessert. I'm like halfway done with my second big ass steak for the night," Atlas complained despite being clearly not even half sorry to have ordered a second helping.

"Really good food Katina, thanks again for picking this place," said Ponos.

"Yeah not to mention the amazing setup. I don't think I've ever dined in such a glamorous hall before," said Nyx, before quickly correcting with a wink at her man "except for that one awesome dinner date

with Mr. Handsome back at Elysion, but then again you recommended that one too - so double points for you Katina!"

Katina smiled eagerly at the stream of compliments. "You're welcome, guys. I'm so very happy for you and Adonis. Only the best venue to celebrate with my best friends. This hall was designed by seven different artists, by the way, each focused on one part or another. No detail was overlooked. I mean just look around. Did you guys know even the candles on those chandeliers are genuine sapien candles? Each and every last one of them!"

"No way!" Atlas exclaimed.

"Yeah, I'm telling you," Katina said nonchalantly, nibbling on a last remaining bit of chicken wing off her plate, "These tables are all dressed in genuine sapien leather too, and the seats are high-quality sapien-hide. Every little detail has been designed with great care to pair the surroundings with the original all-sapien menu."

Adonis's heart skipped a beat as his friend's casual remark hit him like a powerful punch in the gut. He felt a rush of blood invade his face as he struggled to remember the names of the items on the menu. His vision already blurry with dizziness, he started scanning the plates around him in a rush nearing on panic. Katina had the *lady fingers*. He dreadfully eyed her plate, empty now except for few remaining bones. They were long and slender, unlike any bird bones he'd ever seen. The others had steaks. Different cuts.

Different *body* cuts.

With a heavy heart, he slowly lowered his gaze down onto his half-empty plate.

The ribs on his plate were small. *Too* small. And more gamy than any he'd ever tasted. He heard the words echo in his mind louder and louder until they rang in his ears like sirens as he felt the weight of the entire world slide squarely onto his shoulders.

All. Sapien. Menu.

Baby. Back. Ribs.

What did he just eat?!

He let out a loud retch that sent his friends up on their feet with sudden alarm. Then without any deliberation, he found himself springing up on his feet. He took a few steps back, away from the table, shaking his head in disbelief. His seat made a loud squeak as it got caught and dragged behind his footsteps. He took another step back, then another. After a few more steps the squeaking stopped, and his feet were free from the burden of the dragged seat. But it wasn't enough. He felt compelled by an instinctive urge to get farther away still from the table. With the corner of his eye, he could glimpse the gang staring at him. They looked confused, concerned,

dumbfounded. Even scared. He took a few more steps back, and he could see them starting to mouth something loudly at him, but whatever it was they were shouting got drowned in his mind to the sirens blaring louder and louder:

Baby. Back. Ribs.

Sapien. Back. Ribs.

Human. Ribs.

Human. Baby. Ribs?

Could it really, be ...?!

With one more step back he felt his weight unravel, and his field of vision saturate with vertical streaks of sparkles. He was falling off the podium. The alarming sensation of free fall was a welcome relief from the thoughts he was having. Yet it was ultimately short-lived, as Hermes' automatic safety measures duly intercepted the fall and ported him back to the restaurant's front hall. His feet suddenly back on firm ground, he felt a fresh wave of nausea overtake him, and he retched until his eyes were overflowing with tears. He was suddenly aware that he had the taste of a bite still fresh in his mouth, and so he spat out as hard as he can, then drove his index and ring fingers as deep down his throat as he could. He fell down to his knees and felt a sharp stab to his stomach. But nothing came out.

He frantically tried again and again, until finally he felt a contraction deep down and let out all that he could.

"There he is!"

"Baby! Are you okay?"

"He keeled over?"

"Oh my god, I think he's sick!"

The voices were closing in on him fast. In desperate need to get away, he attempted to get back on his feet but became aware of just how badly his strength was failing him. Dizzy, disoriented, and completely drained of all energy, he was at a total loss of ideas. He was practically in a heap on the floor drowning in his own vomit and desperately needed for the ground to open up and swallow him away from all of it. He wished he could just vanish.

Vanish! The device! It finally dawned on him. He quickly reached into his pocket and clicked himself out of the view of the gang, back to the reclusive refuge of his tile.

Hours later, the panic episode finally began to subside. Adonis was alone in his bedroom, an uninterrupted stream of pings playing on the screen of his device that lay flat on the floor in front of him. It was mostly Nyx in all likelihood, but all the others probably pinged a few times each perhaps. He had shut them all out and locked his tile for

visitors. He was entirely alone now, and that brought about a tiny bit of much-needed comfort. He slipped off his clothes and walked across the frosty glass barrier to his freshroom, and under the main water stream. He dialed the temperature all the way down and stood there, motionless. As the water traveled down his body, he tried to pretend it would somehow cleanse him of the culpability for the transgressions of the night.

It was a setback, that much was for certain. He had put a lot of effort in the last few months into selling everybody on an all-new, fully recovered Adonis. The irony wasn't lost on him that if it weren't for that, Katina wouldn't have dared to take him out to that kind of restaurant, to begin with. Perhaps he had done a bit too well fitting in. Maybe tonight was just the world reminding him that he didn't, and never ought to fit into that City of madness.

He closed his eyes, and immediately found himself thinking of the baby Farmer, what actual sequence of events in exact detail might have transpired to render him motionless, dismembered, aging to perfection in several glass containers here and there, at the City's latest and greatest fine-dining hall. He dialed the temperature up, all the way up. The cold water turned lukewarm, then warm, then hot, then scalding, then blistering. Something inside him was hoping the feeling of his own body burn would get his mind off of the body of the baby. He tried hard to push away the images, but they kept flashing back in his mind. The thought then struck him that it was only by mere happenstance that the plated baby wasn't his own son. Had he been born into the Farms, it could have just as easily been that... He started retching uncontrollably again. By the time he stopped, he was on his arms and knees with his head facing the floor under the blazing hot stream. The sting of the water on his neck and shoulders was a fitting punishment for having failed to figure out a way to stop the wasteful rush of water in every freshroom of every tile in the whole wide City. The streams will run forever, and the masses out there in the Farms will not only go thirsty but will wither away and die, only to have their dead bodies aged to perfection and varnished in shiny crystal bowls, to be fed pampered little *dogs* so that their perfectly groomed coats may stay fresh and healthy looking.

He had no vomit left to give, and so he started to weep. At first, he cried gracefully, but then it quickly got louder, until he was whaling out of control for a long while. Eventually, he ran out of tears to give too.

How did it get to this? How can the world possibly be so fucked up?! He let it go. There was nothing he could do after the fact. He was too small. Too powerless. Yet he had to leave the City. That much, he might just be able to do.

Still naked and wet all over, his neck, back and shoulders stinging red, he reluctantly got up on his feet and dragged himself back to his bedroom. As he dove onto his bed, he glimpsed an object with the corner of his eye resting on the floor where his device ought to be. It was a book, his secret friend's nightly reading selection. So it must be past midnight already, he thought. He felt too exhausted to get up and grab it, let alone start reading a new book tonight. Yet out of curiosity he couldn't help but examine its cover from his resting spot. It was old and rugged looking, with a thick leather binding. Despite his beaten soul, Adonis let out a faint yet heartfelt smile. He had immediately recognized the book of course. It was as if his secret friend was aware of his exceptional burden of sorrow tonight, and decided to treat him to something special to help take his mind off things. Without hesitation he started towards the book, reaching out to lift it carefully with both hands. It was hard to believe the title was finally within sight once again. He slowly scanned it, savoring the moment of anticipation of what he was surely about to dive into:

The World before this World

# pi

*"There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen." —Lenin*

## The World before this World A Brief Summary of Pre-Eventian History by Ashley Ortiz

### Chapter 5: The Event

The Event transformed the world fundamentally and at scale, in a manner that had only become possible by the advent of teleportation. The only other remotely comparable instance in history of a social upheaval driven by technological advancement was when home electricity, the automobile, flight, and telecommunications were invented in rapid succession, all within the space of five decades. By comparison, TP was a hundred times more transformative than all of those combined, and its development leaped from inception to mastery within just a few short years.

For the single broadest and most radical social transformation in recorded history, planning for the Event was remarkably straightforward and took surprisingly few people and little time. So much so in fact, that the entire plan was hashed out and executed in full secrecy, without any outsiders anywhere in the world getting wind of it before too late, if ever. The date and time of action were chosen to coincide with the United States "State of the Union" speech. That occasion was the only time of the year when almost all of the decision makers of the most powerful nation in the world would predictably congregate in one particular physical location. The "National Mall," as it used to be called, was a stretch of land of about a

couple of hundred acres, home to both the executive and legislative functions in the United States. It was naturally chosen as a primary point of interest.

Very quietly, a comprehensive list of all other points of interest was compiled with precise locations. On the list was every governmental building on the planet, as well as every military base, every airport, every seaport, every power plant, every factory, every communication center, every rocket silo, every naval destroyer, every aircraft carrier, every satellite, every digital data center, every media building, and most importantly, every museum, cultural landmark and library. Altogether, the list contained tens of thousands of points of interest in the United States and several million globally. Ironically, such a list was rather easy to compile due to prior advances in information technology, and an overall atmosphere of data openness in the spirit of instant connectivity. Supposedly, before the age of teleportation, sharing information across distant communities was regarded as the ultimate form of connectivity.

In any case, as the chosen date approached, DST operatives secretly programmed TP sequences corresponding to every item on the list. Every building, every tower, every machine, every vehicle, and every vessel was to be teleported away in its entirety. The scheme, clandestine as it was, would not have been a contingency on the mind of anybody else outside of a small circle of DST agents. During the pre-Eventian age, the assumption that moving larger objects required more considerable effort was practically axiomatic, and so the prospect of moving millions of massive buildings remotely and instantaneously was simply unthinkable. Entirely out of the realm of possibility,

the nations of the world were unprepared for and indefensible against the Event.

When the time came though, executing the Event was literally a push of a button. Every point of interest on the list, every last one, simply vanished off the face of the earth along with everything and everyone inside it. Where they were TPed to is and shall forever remain a mystery. The TP sequences were deleted, and the people who executed them held their secret for the rest of their lives. We are left with the educated guess that they were likely TPed to the bottom of one of the world's oceans, or perhaps spread around all of them. This assumption is reasonable because teleporting objects closer to the planet's core wouldn't require any energy. In fact, an amount of energy would be released corresponding to the difference in potential energy states from the initial to the final elevation.

At any rate, the location where the objects were ported is irrelevant. What matters is that the collective physical embodiment of the pinnacle of pre-Eventian power, order, knowledge, and culture was rendered forever out of reach. Once the TP sequences were complete, all that was left of the modern world outside the City were those extrinsic technological devices that were intractable to the DST team during the planning of the Event. There were billions of personal mobile computing and telecommunications devices in use, as well as computational bio-implants that had just started to catch on. However, those were of little use with no power infrastructure to recharge them and no communication infrastructure to connect them. There were also several tens of millions of personal hovercrafts and commercial aircraft in mid-flight, left with no airports to land in, no power to recharge, and no control towers with which to

consult. There were perhaps hundreds of military submarines and other secret-mission naval and terrestrial units whose locations were classified top secret at the time, and therefore could not be located by the DST. Those were simply left alone, spared from the instant wave of annihilation by the clandestine (and perhaps sinister) nature of their assignments. However, the survival of such military units did not jeopardize or even hinder the overall plan in the slightest.

With their central commands gone, each of those units was rendered as harmless as a limb severed from a body. To be sure, the naval units did come equipped with weapons and staffed by highly trained professionals, but those professionals hadn't the first clue whom to point those weapons at, and more importantly, they had no autonomous processes in place following a scenario where they had been completely and permanently disconnected from central command. Furthermore, those remaining vessels did not have a way to organize among each other. They mostly did not know how to locate, much less communicate with one another. In many cases, doubtless, the commanders of one ship were not even aware of the mere existence of some of the other ships, clandestine as they all were.

Similarly isolated and uninformed, whatever other pockets of technology were left in place in the aftermath of the Event did not, indeed could not piece together a workable understanding of the situation or mount any sustained form of resistance.

Therefore, as the leader of every nation, as well as every decision maker on the planet, perished simultaneously, presumably by imploding deep in the bellows of a dark, chilly ocean, the rest of the

world population was left to wonder what had just happened. There would have been no civil defense sirens, no emergency broadcasts, no breaking news flashes, no warnings of any kind. From the perspective of everyday people everywhere, the immediately noticeable changes would have been a sudden power outage for wire powered devices and loss of connectivity for all battery powered devices. Internet and phone networks would have gone immediately and permanently offline. Likely, all that might have been attributed to local network failures, at least at first. In all likelihood, excepting points of interest and their immediate surroundings, no public panic would have broken in the hours immediately following the Event.

Soon after that, however, essential life support infrastructure would have started to fail. Utilities like heating, water supply, and cooking gas would have gone out in rapid succession. With all emergency response infrastructure gone, the people were effectively left without any of the primary means they had come to depend on for survival. One would imagine that panic must have simmered, and then perhaps erupted in full force that very first night when dark set in and people started to realize they were on their own. Crippling traffic jams would have blocked major highways as people tried to venture out of what they must have thought was a local calamity. Rumors would have sparked everywhere, traveling back and forth by word of mouth like fire in an open hayfield. All we can do is speculate since no account of the Event from the perspectives of the first Farmers survived. No footage, no journals, no writing of any kind persists today about what took place in the world on that modern day of reckoning.

One might presume that local pockets of emergency response might have sprung up organically in wealthy suburbs and rural areas here and there all over the world. There, neighborhood watch groups and make-shift safety patrols might have played a stabilizing role in the days and weeks that followed. In the slums and ghettos of big cities, however, looting and rioting would have sparked almost immediately, avalanching into utter chaos within days. Within weeks, gangs and mobs would have sprung up, some resurrected by the refreshing absence of law enforcement, some freshly created by the suddenly inviting power vacuum. Here, a crime lord would have laid claim on an entire neighborhood, complete with a strip mall full of stocked food and supplies. There, a kingpin would have unleashed his henchmen to racketeer several blocks in a residential suburb, extorting them for protection in the form of water and canned food. Soon enough, petty territorial fights would have broken out. At first, they would have featured light handguns, but soon enough automatic weapons would debut as those small street gangs hardened into armed mafias and those trophy supplies dwindled even further. Whatever the case might be, it couldn't have been long before the majority of what used to be the civilized world descended into total anarchy.

In parts of the world that were troubled to begin with, the Event would have had the effect of fuel on a fire. The fragile peace in areas like Jerusalem, Pyongyang, Kars, Golan, Kashmir, and Kosovo would have most probably shattered into open warfare as soon as international patronage was effectively lifted. There, makeshift armed militias would have clashed, turning streets and buildings, parks and squares into battlefields, using whatever light weapons they might have had access to in guerrilla-style street fights. There, the loud booms

of mortar shells and RPGs, and the scattered clacking of machine-gun fire would have punctured the darkness of total-power-outage nights. In the weeks that followed, however, as armored vehicles used up the last of the fuel supplies, and as militias fired away their last remaining ammunition, things would have unwillingly quieted down again.

In other regions of the world like Scandinavia or Canada, where supply reserves were too plentiful to fight over and the people too sophisticated to descend into open hostility right away, *there, there* might have been organized efforts to counteract the Event, or at least make heads or tails of it. Small groups of thinkers, perhaps academics or journalists, might have pulled together to compare notes and formulate emergency action plans. Faced with the inexplicable meltdown of all social structure, they might have entertained conspiracy theories of all sorts, spending long hours, perhaps, deliberating hypothesis after hypothesis in a hopeless effort to apply rational thought to what was, in reality, an impossible puzzle to solve. At any rate, whatever they might have made out of the Event, and whatever they might have tried to do to counteract it, it was already too late. The tables had turned, the music had stopped, and the new world order was already cemented in place. It could not have been undone. The pendulum of power had swung again, and this time, the entire human race was pushed back to pre-industrial means, except for the DST alone which still possessed cutting edge technology, along with the power to TP anything, anywhere, at any time.

For the people in the City, then known as the country of Australia, the experience must have been very different. Just like everywhere else in the world, the Event caused all political and executive leadership in Australia to vanish into thin air.

However, most other infrastructure was left intact, the only exceptions being naval and air travel. Power and communications, manufacturing and ground transportation systems were spared the fate of instant annihilation. Nonetheless, the people of Australia couldn't have failed to notice the sudden blackout of all global communications and broadcasts, as well as the disruption of all international trade and commerce activities. As people started to worry about their friends and relatives abroad, the world's last remaining organized agency swiftly stepped in to take control of the situation. Announcing a global catastrophe, the DST declared a national state of emergency and promptly proclaimed itself in charge of all national interests, keeping order and navigating the country out of imminent danger.

No immediate explanations were made. Instead, the people were kept intentionally in the dark. In what perhaps was a page out the standard playbook of every tyranny that ever transitioned into power, the DST opted to give the news to the Citizens in little drips throughout many years. Throughout it all, care was always taken to refer to the global disaster using a neutral and deliberately vague term: "the event." Predictably, the term stuck with sufficient repetition. Inquiries into the nature and extent of the Event peaked about a year into it, then started to die down slowly as the DST met them with prolonged stalling and overly vague statements.

In practice, the population had no choice but rely on whatever information the DST chose to divulge since the global communication blackout meant that nobody had access to an alternative source of information and since all modes of transportation out of the City were banned following the state of emergency declaration.

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## Chapter 6: Post-Eventian Developments

In the months shortly following the Event, another mass-teleportation was carried out in which everyone and everything in the vast geography of islands surrounding the City was purged off the face of the Earth. The affected region comprised zones commonly known as Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia, and contained strategic pre-Eventian nations like New Zealand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Papa New Guinea. The initiative practically rendered the City secluded from all human presence by vast oceans in all directions. That distant separation of the City from the rest of the populated world, combined with the absence of all telecommunication and aerial transport technology meant that no Farmer could possibly make contact with a Citizen except by setting on a long and onerous journey by sea. To eliminate even that possibility, the DST went to work in the year following the Event, putting together a system that ultimately became known as Styx. Styx is a virtual border in the shape of a giant oblong ring that surrounds the City and neighboring islands, a geographical zone formally known as Australasia. Should any vessel attempt to cross the Styx invisible line, it would be automatically TPed to the bottom of the ocean. Simple as it may sound, this arrangement rendered the City the most impenetrable fort in history. This assurance meant that the people inside need not bother with defenses or fortifications of any kind. No army was needed any longer, no air force or navy or coast guard either. The City was safe because the rest of humanity was rendered too primitive to set foot on it, let alone mount an attack of any kind.

The rest, as they say, is history. Humanity outside the City, now referred to simply as the Farms, underwent a rapid implosion in the few years following the Event. By the end of the first decade, the Farms had effectively regressed all the way back to the equivalent of the pre-industrial era. However, it was a different kind of pre-industrial era, one that came with an important twist: This new era was characterized by the presence of a distant group of overlords that could interfere at any time. This group was capable of exercising the seemingly magical power to make objects appear or disappear instantly, and consequently to deny any soul existence by making them vanish off the face of the earth in the blink of an eye.

Via a systematic effort, those overlords effectively halted the progress of humanity within the Farms, always nipping in the bud every non-trivial initiative for social or technological advancement. Undoubtedly, there were countless such lost initiatives, at least during the lifespan of the first generation of Farmers, those sophisticated, highly skilled people who remembered a time when things were much better. Here, a charismatic entrepreneur would rise and gather a following around him to manage team-work and organize rebuilding efforts. There, a think tank would grow organically and devise a plan to construct a makeshift wind-power station and restore energy to a small community. In every case, the City would spot the progress using its comprehensive array of aerial drones and swiftly intercept by plucking away the material project along with all of its contributors.

One can easily imagine the significant social impact this destructive presence might have had, playing perhaps the dominant role in shaping the

cultural and social structures of Farmers as those started to amalgamate in the decades that followed. As the collective memory of pre-Eventian history evaporated generation after non-schooled generation, rumors relating the nature, motives, and expectations of the invisible overlords would have evolved to urban myths, then to legends and perhaps eventually to full-blown sacred ideologies.

Over in the City, the decades that followed the Event were delicate, yet not turbulent by any means. By the time the Citizens could piece together an understanding of what had happened, it was already too late for anybody to do anything about it. Though the details were permanently obscured, it eventually became known to the public that some form of transgression had taken place and that it was Australia that had instigated it. The victim nations were destroyed, as it happened, such that any attempt to restore order in or vest power to those nations would have no doubt triggered global retaliatory action against Australia. Lost for options, many everyday people met the new reality with newfound resignation. Might it be enough to count one's blessings to have ended up on the right side of the Event and not attempt to cheat fate anymore? It was a surprisingly easy argument to sell, provided that the people it was being sold to were the same people who had benefited from its proliferation.

To be sure, many sensible people raised their voices against the DST. Moreover, those voices would have had numerous powerful arguments in their arsenal. Whatever the Event had been, it constituted a direct violation of the ANZUS treaty, it was said. What about the United Nations resolution #3314? Easily a hundred more international treaties, pacts, resolutions, charters, and agreements would have been cited. None of it

would have mattered. What the protests had in merit couldn't account for what they lacked in practicality. You don't demolish someone's home then expect them to spare you their retaliation if they ever had a chance to. Thusly, the first decades passed uneventfully for the Citizens, with some facing the new world order with cautious acceptance, and others reluctantly dragging their feet into it, but nobody actively opposing it.

Then at some time during the third decade following the Event, it was deliberately and calculatingly decided that a new calendar system was to be adopted and made to replace all other archaic systems. The new global calendar system was based on the date of the Event, further cementing the permanent status of the new world order, eroding the collective memory of all pre-Eventian civilization and depriving the last remaining diehards of any hope to restore the previous state of affairs.

In the ultimate aftermath of what must have been the cleanest, swiftest, coldest, most audacious, and most flawlessly executed social upheaval in history, the world contained one landmass, the City, which housed all power, all wealth, all civilization, all culture, and all other aspects of human transcendence. The rest of the globe was reduced to the Farms, endlessly vast geographies where an unlimited pool of underlings toiled away to accomplish the menial tasks needed to supply the City with all that its inhabitants might ever desire, while themselves remaining ever so primitive, uninformed, uneducated, unorganized and lacking any leadership structure.

When the dust had settled, the power imbalance between the two groups was more substantial than had ever been established throughout the ages. In

fact, the situation had no analog at all in history. The imbalance was not just greater in magnitude; it was of a different quality altogether. For in the case of the rich and the poor, rulers and subjects, aristocrats and peasants, overlords and vassals, or even owners and their slaves, there had always been at least a single plane of existence which the haves and have-nots had to share. In all of those cases, one class exerted power upon another class, while at the same time having to acknowledge to be partners of one overarching social system. Unequal partners to be sure, yet partners nonetheless. So when an owner gave orders to his slave, threatening with punishment to compel him to carry them out, he at least acknowledged that his slave possessed a mind capable of feeling fear and able to apply cognitive function in order to decipher audible orders as well as rational thought in order to carry them out in fear of punishment. The slaves might have been considered as chattel, but at least that implied a certain one-to-one relationship between slave and owner, namely the relationship of personal ownership. Even the relationship of a rancher to his cattle included a medium of physical sensory or contact and a rudimentary form of communication that required the rancher to occupy some of his awareness with the matter of the cattle - maybe monitor their health and be aware of individual differences between them. Some even would end up giving them individual names to facilitate the need to manage their individual affairs.

In contrast, there is almost no relationship of any kind connecting the people in the City and those in the Farms. No threat of punishment or promise of reward is ever exchanged. Indeed, no communication of any kind, neither direct or indirect, ever takes place between them.

The architects of the Event had reinvented the class imbalance such that the people in the Farms do not even occur onto the minds of those in the City, except in the abstract as an impersonal group that exists somewhere so far as to be irrelevant for all intents and purposes. If one were pressed to make an analogy, it would perhaps be as follows. The relationship is closest to that of a sophisticated person using an electronic device, to individual drops of water falling down a waterfall somewhere far away, turning a water turbine as they speeded down, and setting in motion a sequence of steps needed to generate the power needed to charge the man's device.

Except that in reality, it wasn't a collection of objects that served the needs of the Citizens, but real human beings. Farmers all over the globe were constantly slaving away to provide the raw materials needed to support the endless luxuries of the City. They served in the wood farms of Siberia and Argentina, in the gold and salt mines of Africa, in the ice mines of the Arctic, or the marble and granite quarries of Europe, in the sandstone quarries of Brazil, in the crop farms of India and China, in the cattle farms of North America, and in the fish farms of Japan and Alaska. Demeter, the City department in charge of managing the Farms, perfected a system over the decades following the Event such as to ensure the compliance of the Farmers. Objects were routinely transported in the Farms, and people and facilities were forcibly arranged as needed such that it would be impossible for Farmers not to do as they're expected to. Should a Farmer choose to disobey orders, no threats would be given, and no punishment would ensue. Nobody in the City bothers to deal with the insubordination of the Farmers. It is not even viewed as *insubordination*, but rather as an inconsequential anomaly among

inferior beings, insignificant as it were to be worthy of the corrective effort. If disobedience escalates or spreads, an automated system merely teleports the faulty group of Farmers out. Out where nobody knows, and nobody cares to know - it is much like one never stops to think where the waste is going as one flushes a toilet. They are just purged, quietly, routinely, and systematically. No words are spoken, no thought is wasted on the matter. The system doesn't skip a beat.

In addition to Demeter, several other departments were inaugurated in rapid succession during the 1st century, in order to better serve the Citizens. In every case, a Greek name was chosen, a trend that quickly caught on in the City. Perhaps the intuition was that, as every derivative culture on the planet had perished, it was apt to fall back to the earliest purest human culture for inspiration. The Greek culture, of course, wasn't the earliest or the purest by any account, but it might have seemed so to the architects of the Event, themselves being children of the Western European heritage that had cradled the nation of Australia since the very beginning.

Hermes, the earliest of those, is the City department servicing all TP requests among the Citizens. For safety reasons, no Citizen has access to an independent TP device. Instead, they must all request TP services from Hermes which would grant them so long as they wouldn't cause harm or invade the privacy of other Citizens. That is how tiles can be "locked" to visitors and how Citizens cannot accidentally TP themselves off a cliff or into the middle of the ocean. Of course, Hermes put multiple fail-safe systems in place to make it so no Citizen can possibly conduct a TP operation across the Styx boundary, further assuring nothing and

nobody can be TPed from or to the Farms, whether intentionally or by accident.

Then there was Demiurge, which started as an initiative to apply teleportation technology to convert the vast Australian desert into a lush green haven for the Citizens to inhabit and enjoy. Having succeeded at that task in record time, Demiurge had since become the City department in charge urban zoning, terraforming, mountain flattening, landscaping, and all other management of the layout of the City, including tile placement and allocation.

Paieon, the department in charge of medical research and operations, was established next. Then there was Planetes, in charge of space exploration at first but later on in charge of space mining operations. Thanatos, the department in charge of the elderly and funeral services, was...

The book suddenly vanished from between Adonis' hands. It had been an hour. He closed his eyes. It was a lot to take in, yet he wanted to know more, a lot more. As eerily satisfying as it was to have been finally given an explanation to how humanity regressed from the age of global equality to an era where one can order seared human flesh for dinner in a hall lit by candles made of human body fat, he still felt a wave of hopelessness overcome him. He felt like a prisoner, although as a Citizen of a city without correctional imprisonment he wasn't at all familiar with the concept or the term. It was more like a vague feeling of captivity, of being trapped in a golden cage set in place by the confines of Styx. As he closed his tired eyes, he imagined Styx as a noose wrapped around his neck, chocking his frail breaths as it squeezed his throat ever so tightly. It "rendered the City the most impenetrable fort in history," the book read. The author might as well had taken a hatchet to his dreams. Apparently, there had been brilliant minds busy at work for many years to put together multiple redundant countermeasures ensuring someone like him couldn't possibly succeed at crossing the boundary between City and Farms, ever. No wonder he had failed at finding a way as hard as he had tried in the countless hours he spent considering idea after futile idea. "I must escape to the Farms," he would whisper in his own mind,

over and over again, to keep himself from falling into despair after hitting solid walls in every direction. Maybe it was simply impossible. Perhaps nobody could ever cross the boundary. The City and the Farms, forever isolated. They might as well be two impossibly distant planets whizzing around their respective stars in different corners of the universe!

From where he was crouching on the floor he saw his device blink again. It can only be Nyx at this late hour. Only she would care enough not to give up on pinging him despite him having ignored her pings perhaps a hundred times already. The boys are probably fast asleep by now unless they decided to catch some party somewhere. Not Nyx though, she must be worried at a maximum for him right now. Yet if he were to let her through she'd probably pretend to be all casual about it. She wouldn't freak out, she wouldn't preach. She'd even throw in a couple of dorky jokes to lighten up the atmosphere. She always did, lighten up his atmosphere. She was his anchor, always giving him peace of mind. Always giving him hope. And now, she was also giving him a son. His *only* hope, perhaps. Someone to carry the torch, to keep on trying with new determination where he had failed and lost all desire. Who knows, maybe someday the son might find a way... but no. It was just a fantasy, and he knew it. Born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he'd probably grow up to feel entitled to all the endless luxuries just like everybody else in this damned City. He'll probably grow up admiring aunt Katina and uncle Atlas, looking up to them, aspiring to be just like them. And at some level, perhaps he'll always be embarrassed about the inexplicable quirkiness of his old man, just like Adonis had always been about Abas. The first child ever to be conceived on Elysion, Katina had announced. What a great honor, to have an elitist claim over even the world's most supreme elite. Perhaps it was fitting - the ultimate luxury child to be conceived on the ultimate luxury date. Elysion, the symbol of all that had gone wrong in the world. A heavenly experience that starts on a private beach big enough to house a thousand families of Farmers, and magically follows the hour of sunset by teleporting the lovebirds from timezone to timezone across what must be the most expansive...

Adonis stopped for a second, a bolt of lightning grinding his train of thought in its tracks. His eyes scurried as if jolted by a flash of electricity. A moment later, he hopped up onto his feet and dashed towards his device. He swiped nervously and found Nyx's missed pings. Still naked and in too much of a hurry to put on some clothes, he opted to open up a voice channel with her rather than click her in.

"Oh my god baby are you ok?"

"Yes. Elysion. How long were the chapters? Do you remem..."

"Baby let me in please, you were throwing up I'm really worried!"

"It's ok I'm fine, really. I really need to know though. The chapters. Do you remember how long they were? Ballpark?"

"What? What chapters? Baby, you don't sound fine. Can you please let me in I wanna see you."

"Elysion! The chapters!" Adonis caught himself practically yelling at his device. Realizing he needed to slow down and play it cool if he was going to get any answers, he took a deep breath and tried again, as slowly as calmly as he could:

"Sorry baby, I realize I made you worry. I just didn't feel well suddenly after dinner and didn't want to throw up on the fancy table and ruin the whole experience for everyone. After that, I guess I felt a little embarrassed and didn't want to talk about it with anybody. I feel really fine now, I promise. It was just a quick episode, but I'm going to check with Paieon tomorrow just to be sure. I'd let you in except I'm really exhausted and wanted to get some sleep. I'll grab breakfast with you tomorrow how does that sound?"

"That's fine baby, get some rest. I'm just glad you're okay."

Adonis breathed out as silently as he could, practically surprised that his attempt to sound composed worked at all.

"One last thing though before I sleep. For some reason, it's on my mind, and it's bothering me that I can't remember. That night at Elysion. Do you remember how long each part was? A friend had asked me, and it's been bugging me."

He could practically hear her smirking over the voice channel.

"Yes I remember, you dork! It hadn't been that long ago. The first act was like two hours, and then the beach walk was at least three hours. Then the skinny dip was about an hour. But as for the last act, it was too much fun to keep track of time," Nyx said with a sly giggle.

Adonis was already doing the math in his head - or trying to. It was too complicated. He might have to work it on his device. Or no, better use pen and paper. There should be no traceable record of him doing those calculations.

"Baby?"

"Yes. Sorry. Thank... you... baby. See you tomorrow," he said as he hung up before she could say anything else. The math was going to take a while, but for the most part, he was reasonably confident it would work. His expression shifted progressively from preoccupied to calm to relieved, and then finally to positively resolved. He now had a *plan*.

## PART THREE

## rho

*“Everything you can imagine is real.” —Pablo Picasso*

“You know guys, for the longest time, everybody used to think the dinosaurs were wiped out by the fallout from the impact of a giant asteroid,” Ponos reflected slowly, staring intently at the mammoth T-Rex skeleton touring majestically in full view just a few feet away from where the group was standing.

“It all started when geologists found evidence of the asteroid impact in the form of a global layer of iridium in ancient rock, and since it dated back to around the same time as when the dinosaurs went extinct, everybody was happy to make the causal link and call it a day. Bad science, of course. It’s unbelievable how they were actually convinced that such a little, localized event had a major impact on life all over the planet!”

Classic case of “Post hoc ergo propter hoc,” Adonis thought to himself. That’s what those pre-Eventian logicians would have called it. Too bad they *too* were wiped off the face of the earth, along with their entire discipline, just like the dinosaurs.

“It wasn’t until just a few decades ago when we finally figured out what had really happened to the dinosaurs. A little insect killed them all! A teeny weeny flying thing that had evolved an incredible rate of reproduction and a highly specialized appetite for dinosaur flesh. Those massive giants stood no chance. In a few short years, it had wiped them all, except a few species of flying dinosaur that could soar high enough to where the insects couldn’t survive. The insect species, of course, went extinct soon after the deed. No more food left for it to eat, I guess...”

A twentieth-century cop with a good sense of humor might have called it the world’s first case of murder-suicide, Adonis absentmindedly mused.

“But because it didn’t have a hard body shell, it left no fossils behind for the early paleontologists to trace. Back then, of course, there was no other evidence to key on for ancient life than to hunt for fossilized bodies sandwiched in ancient slabs of rock. Imagine that!”

What Ponos didn’t realize, “of course,” is that this had happened in the pre-teleportation world. So not only did scientists have to hunt for evidence in solid rock, but they also had to dust away at the rock one delicate brush stroke at a time. Imagine *that*, Ponos!

"Anyway, it was because of that discovery that Demeter and Hermes started on the joint project to track and control all insects in the City. I actually worked on that project a few years ago."

"Yes, Ponos, we all know you worked on it," Atlas said with an eye-roll that was as audible as it was visible.

"You told us that story like a million times already."

"It's a big deal though! All harmful insects are now purged automatically, and if any species of insect were to mutate to become harmful to us, poof! It would only take a click of a button!"

"And we can't thank you enough for that," Katina chimed in, "When I was little, spiders used to keep me up at night. Those horrible little things!"

The gang was out at the Skeletons, which for Adonis was the City's least palatable amusement park. Something about parading the skeletons of dead animals for art and entertainment just didn't sit well for him. And as for the newest, highly trumpeted Sapien Parade attraction, now that was just despicable. Still, it made it all the more necessary for him to make a point of going. It was actually he who had proposed the activity and planned for the group to meet up this sunny afternoon. In the weeks that followed the episode at the restaurant, he had worked very hard to recover his social standing and avoid all suspicion. Chalking up what happened to a somatic incident turned out to be easier than he had anticipated. Still, he had to put quite a lot of effort into convincing everybody that his mental condition hadn't relapsed. Surprisingly, even the corrector eventually bought it. All it took was two precautionary sessions, and then he was cleared again. He still had to take his meds regularly, but other than that he was home free. No more meetings, meaning no more opportunities for the corrector to outsmart him into slipping up and giving away a hint at his new plan. As for Atlas and Katina and the others, they were all completely sold on the new and entirely-sane Adonis. In their naïve minds, his condition was a thing of the past.

Nyx though, she needed more convincing. Of all of those around him, she was the aptest at reading between his lines. With her piercing eyes and disarming smile, it was hard at times not to open up. Nyx, she was the closest to his heart, and therefore the hardest to hide his true self from. She was the reason behind why he had to insist on today's outing to the Skeletons. It had to be his idea. Surely nobody who still suffered from pathological altruism towards lower sapiens could possibly propose a meet up at an amusement park that recently advertised the addition of a new attraction featuring the

animated corpses of hundreds of dead sapiens. It was his best option to make sure there was no doubt left in her mind about his recovery. Or in anybody else's mind for that matter. Nobody should suspect a thing. That condition was crucial, now more than ever, if he was going to succeed at what was coming.

The gang eventually made its way past the main T-Rex attraction despite Ponos's objections. It was an unusually warm afternoon for June. So much so, that Atlas and Katina had already taken off and trashed their jackets. If it got chilly or rainy later in the day, they'd just get new ones. Adonis and Ponos had kept their jackets on though, more out of winter habit than of necessity. A short walk past the T-Rex square was the split-path, a long and narrow open-air pathway between two extended glass panes. The path featured a lineup of animals, each sliced in half through the median plane, with the two halves spaced apart so that the pathway took the visitor on a journey through the two halves of each animal one at a time. The transparent panes on either side provided the curious visitor with an unobstructed view of the internals of each of the animals in turn. The animals were ordered single-file from smallest to largest, and consequently from least to most interesting. Towards the beginning of the split-path, there was a gecko, a pigeon, some sort of large fish, a long snake made to extend straight from head to tail, and a land turtle, split in half along with its shell. All of those were raised above ground so that the internals were at eye level for most visitors as they trotted through. Then the animals started to get larger and more familiar. A rabbit, a pig, a Perentie lizard, a dolphin, and a wolf or fox, Adonis couldn't really tell the difference. Getting bigger still, next there was a lion, a horse, a cow, a red kangaroo standing upright with the tail extended to full length behind it, a hippo, an elephant, then finally a massive marine mammal that could only be a whale, Adonis thought. It was a ten-minute walkway all in all, but it took more like thirty minutes with Ponos stopping at every so often to admire the intricate anatomy of this animal or the other, and Katina asking questions to which nobody knew the answers. Do Kangaroos have livers? Or if not, what was that brown lump towards the top of what must be the abdominal cavity? And the colors, were they natural or did they color the body parts during whatever it is they do to prepare them for the exhibit? As for Nyx, she was most interested in the reptiles. She practically zoomed past the mammals but stopped at the turtle and snake for a while eyeing them with one raised eyebrow like an adorably cute crime-scene investigator. She was clearly showing by now, and not the least bit bothered by it. A few more months and I'll be all back to normal, she'd always shrug it off.

As if being the mother of a noisy, hungry, weepy, sleepless mini-human-being was somehow within normalcy. Still, Adonis let her have her naïve expectations. She was going to be the perfect mother to his child, of that he was sure.

Yet he, he was destined for something entirely different. And if he was going to stand a chance in succeeding at it, he had to take his time to perfect a flawless plan, then take the utmost care to carry it out without arousing any suspicion. Just like the architects of the Event itself, his success had depended on his ability to execute a most clandestine research mission. That part of the challenge, he had already accomplished successfully. A few weeks after the restaurant incident, he had managed to get some alone time with Ponos, and after several drinks, smoothly lure him into a conversation about the technology behind Elysion. Eager to share all the information as Ponos predictably was, Adonis finally confirmed what he had long suspected: Elysion achieves its magical time-travel effect by teleporting visitors across multiple time zones. The first, sunset-dinner act takes place on an artificial island just off the East coast of the City. A few hours later, as the sun fully sets on the East, the transition to the second act takes the unassuming couple all the way to a private beach on an island just off the far West coast of the City, where the sun is still about to set. And since the third act is scripted to take place in the middle of the night, the only way to achieve that is to teleport the couple further West still, far away from the City, past the Styx boundary. It is that part that had gotten Ponos really lit up to explain. Hermes, of course, secured multiple redundant systems in place to prevent all TP activity across the Styx. But for every rule, there are exceptions, no matter how rare. And the Elysion protocol apparently was granted such rare exemption, given the benign nature of the TP activity on a choreographed journey of two lovers who have no interest in leaving the City and no knowledge that they are in fact doing just that for a few hours. Besides, Elysion visitors are not allowed to bring their devices along, and therefore have no TP control beyond popping Elysion bracelet bubbles to initiate only the preprogrammed TP sequences starting inside the City for the first act and ending back inside the City after the final act.

It was deemed safe, therefore, to allow the Elysion protocol limited TP privileges outside the City. As soon as Adonis realized that, he knew he had found his way out. All he had to do is hack into the Elysion protocol, and had a pretty good idea how to do that.

"Look, they're over there!" Katina yelled joyously.

Adonis followed her extended arm and index finger across the open field beyond the split-path, and his heart immediately sunk.

"Oh, the parade!" Nyx said with curious interest as a group of some forty or fifty animated sapien skeletons marched towards the gang in a slow procession. Adonis tried to look away at first, but as they got closer and more and more visitors flocked around to watch and cheer for them, it became progressively harder for Adonis to inconspicuously avoid the sight. Even though the poor bunch had been reduced to bare skeletons, Adonis could still tell males and females apart. The hips and torsos were different, as well as the length of bodies and limbs. The sapiens were arranged into families, with a man and woman and some children in each group. Their bones were joined by barely visible hinges and somehow motorized so that they could walk about in convincingly natural gaits, and even twirl and wave like real people. Vivacious music was playing in the background, getting louder as the parade approached. It sounded like live music somehow, and as they got closer, it became apparent why. Evidently, a few skeletons were made to wear parade drums and use drumsticks to provide the live beat to the music.

"Good call Adonis. How cool is that!" Katina exclaimed, "Look at that adorable little one!"

She was pointing at the skeleton of a little girl who was holding a leash to a fake puppy that tracked in front of her, wiggling its tail as it stopped to take a breath every once in a while.

The sight of the children's skeletons was the hardest to endure. Some were holding cotton candy and ice cream cones. Some were adorned with cute bows and hair clips affixed to their bare skulls. To Adonis, the abstract notion had always felt grotesque, but to see it in real life was just gut-wrenching. He closed his eyes for a second and took a silent breath, then resolved to open them again and put on the most convincing smile he could muster. Just a little while longer. The plan was working. If he could hold it together just for a few more minutes, even Nyx wouldn't suspect a thing after that. He had already secured a couple of Elysion bracelets without arousing suspicion. He spun it as a surprise treat for his expecting girlfriend before she gets busy with the baby for a while. Over Katina's objections that he should have come up with something more original than a repeat date, Atlas was quick to have his back, promising to "call in some favors" and "hook him up" with rush reservations. Of course, since it was supposed to be a surprise, everyone was sure to keep Nyx in the

dark. Now all he had to do was hack into the programming of one of the bracelets and reroute the first-act destination into somewhere in the Farms.

Where in the Farms, it made no difference. Or if it did make a difference, Adonis had no way to tell which location would be better than which. The entire globe beyond the City was a single unknown expanse to him, so one random spot was going to be just as good as any other. And just in case he winded up somewhere inhospitable, like in the middle of the ocean or on top a dangerous cliff by some programming error, or in the middle of an elephant stampede or a pack of hungry wolves by mere bad luck, the second-act, third, and fourth act bubbles were going to be his lifelines. He must program each of them to take him to some other random location, to better his odds in case he found himself in trouble wherever the previous bubble took him. The last Elysion bubble, he will program to bring him back to his tile, but only as a last resort failsafe. His plan still is as it has always been, to leave the City forever. Atlas and Katina, Ponos and Solon, they can all continue to live their banal lives day in and day out. But he, he wanted to invest his ephemeral existence into a cause worth living for. He wasn't going to come and go as just another serendipitous soul who enjoyed the life of the haves at the expense of the have-nots. His was going to be an entirely different life story. No more wearing the mask of Citizenry to live up to the expectations of others. He was Adonis, son of Abas, and he was set to reboot human civilization.

Not that anybody would really mind it terribly when he is gone. The gang in all likelihood would hardly skip a beat. They might act concerned for a week or so, but deep inside they all realize he never actually fit in. And even Nyx, who might be the only one to be genuinely distraught by his sudden disappearance, she would also quickly move on, distracted from his memory by the grounding reality of child-rearing. There she was, shedding tears in confusion and disbelief over the news of what he did. Now she's turning numb, trying not to think about it anymore, lest her negative state of mind affects the fetus's final stage of development. Now she's with her healthy baby, relieved and comforted by his consoling presence in her life. Now she is utterly exhausted, baby keeping her up all day and night, taking quick naps whenever she can and feeling way too tired to even think of her gone-rogue ex. Now she is... blowing him a kiss from far, apparently, the sight of whatever it was she was pointing at had reminded her of him.

"Catch up Adonis!" Katina yelled in his direction. Apparently, the parade had passed, and the group had already moved on to the next thing some one-hundred-feet away.

"Come check it out, baby!" Nyx called, waving both arms at him from far.

"Coming!" he waved back, pacing forward slightly faster than normal so as to be polite but not uncomfortable. She was definitely showing now, with only a couple more months to go. The sight of her from such a distance somehow made it all the more visible. Adonis realized that he hadn't actually laid eyes on her from that far away in a long while. Whenever she was in sight, she was always just a few feet away. Up close, her inimitably beautiful visage and refreshingly unorthodox gaze delivered a hypnotic combo, stealing all attention and deflecting away from the rest of her body. But from a hundred feet away, that round bulging belly was her most visible feature. Adonis was suddenly curious why it was that he hadn't eyed her from this far in such a long time. It's not like he had made any special effort to stay close to her, and so it must have been her who put in all the effort. She was a wonderful person, he decided. Out of everybody, he'll miss her the most. During the past few months as he was diligently working on his escape plan, she had been his rock. His anchor. He had leaned on her uplifting presence and cheerful attitude whenever he felt himself growing weak with an overwhelming sense of solitude. If it weren't for her, he would have been wholly consumed with that tiring, ineluctable, life-long game of pretense with everybody else in this forsaken City.

As he got closer, Adonis could see what the gang was huddled around. Just behind a high row of interlocking ferns, there was a colossal statue. It caught Adonis by surprise since he had never seen it or heard of it before. It must have been a new addition, he decided. From far away it looked like a plaster sculpture of a giant horse, frozen in mid-air in an extended posture as if galloping at full speed. Only it was way too large to be made of plaster. It stood some fifty feet high and must have measured more than a hundred feet horizontally from hoof to galloping hoof.

"Get your ass over here already!" Atlas hollered in his endearing way.

"Coming, coming!" Adonis picked up the pace a notch. Atlas had always been a good friend, despite all the irreconcilable differences between them. For one thing, he always had his back when he needed him. And even though Adonis was, without doubt, difficult

to understand at times, Atlas never judged. He was a force of nature, that man. Ever eager to steal the spotlight, constantly full of energy. The life of every party, he will be missed too.

As he got closer, it finally became apparent what the horse was made of. And of course, it made perfect sense. Bones. What else could it be? After all, it *was* the Skeletons. Lots and lots of bones stripped out of dead animals and rearranged into a giant art creation for him and his friends to admire and enjoy. It never ceased to amaze him just what the mind of a carefree Citizen might come up with next. Unable to look away, Adonis eyed the curious creation intently. Every pace he took towards it made some detail a little more discernible. First the tail, it was made out of interwoven spines like the braids of a little girl's ponytail. The body and the legs, those were apparently made of limb bones, juxtaposed into spirals with fifteen or twenty bones jointed together in anatomically impossible arrangements. There were also some torsos protruding out, with interlocking ribs weaving in and out of the main surface of the sculpture like knots in an eerie tapestry. The hooves were bundles of hip bones. The head, he could only see last. It was, as Adonis had secretly feared, made entirely out of skulls. Sapien skulls. His heart sank as he realized what he was actually looking at. There must have been a thousand people scrambled up in that work of art. Poor souls, objectified in life and in death, and for all eternity.

"What do you think?"

"It looks... breathtaking" was the literal truth.

It was an apt metaphor, Adonis reflected on second thought, to make a horse out of bodies of Farmers. The horse, after all, is a born-free animal that had been historically reduced to serve as a vessel, a means to an end. The whole scene reminded him with something he once read in one of the ancient books he had stolen from the Corrector. It was a tale about a time when warriors hid inside the body of a giant wooden horse and used it as a decoy to penetrate enemy defenses, destroy their city and kill everyone inside it. He couldn't remember anymore if it had been a real historical account or just a work of fiction. But either way, it wouldn't have made any practical difference. The story was a symbol of man's potential to deceive, to be cruel to his fellow man. And here he was, standing under the modern edition of the exact same symbol.

"Let's get some food. I'm getting kinda hungry."

"I could eat."

"You *always* could eat, dude! Were you even full like, ever?"

"Yeah, so what? what's it to you, fat-ass?"

"Boys! No swearing in front of baby please."

"What baby? Oh, relax it's not even born yet!"

"..."

No, not the same symbol. This one didn't involve deception. It symbolized something much more sinister. It symbolized...

"Hey guys, wasn't Lyra supposed to meet us up around here?"

"Yeah she was just here, but she clicked for a quick freshroom break. She said she'll catch up with us at the new reptile exhibit."

"There we go again!"

"What?"

"It's just weird how she'd always click out and in like a hundred times in every outing. It's like she always has to click into her tile every ten minutes for some reason."

"Lighten up she's just on a freshroom break you dork!"

"Remember the time when she clicked out on me in mid-conversation? Back at that dinner spot whatever it was called?"

"Yeah, dude. And the funny part is you didn't even notice! By the time you were done telling your story she had clicked out and back in twice already."

"And then you were like, 'so what do you think?' and she was like, 'huh?'"

It symbolized callousness. Adonis let the conversation fade out as Nyx broke in with a loud giggle and he ripped his eyes off the massacre-turned-statue and gazed around the loop. He silently said his goodbye to each and every one of them, putting his parting words into silent sentences like he was always in the habit of doing. Despite everything they stand for, he knew he was going to miss them all. Including, curiously, his unborn baby.

## sigma

*"The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." —Milan Kundera*

Back at his tile, Adonis let himself dissolve into another session of Elysion-bracelet hacking. It was something that was beginning to resemble a ritual, late into the night until just before the midnight reading ritual. When he got hungry, he clicked for a turkey sandwich and some pineapple juice and ate right at his hacking station. Eventually, his eyes started to itch, and his brain went numb, so he reluctantly peeled himself off the station and paced into the freshroom, absentmindedly shedding off his clothes as if drawn by the gentle purring sound of the water. He planted his feet on the marble floor right under the stream. As the soothing feeling of hot soapy water trickled down his body, he couldn't help but mull over the symbolism of it. The streams too, they were a symbol of callousness just like the horse statue. It would have been no trouble at all to make it so that the streams turned on for his arrival and back off whenever he left the freshroom. Someone like Ponos could probably engineer that change in as little a day or two. But no, the City being what it is, that sort of arrangement wouldn't fit in. The streams had to run down continuously, without stop. It was the *simpler* state of affairs, provided that you don't care about wasting water. And indeed you wouldn't care about water if you were born a Citizen of a city of endless supplies of water. There, you'd grow up free of the burden of empathy with those billions of souls locked outside the graces of the City, who might be going thirsty in that very moment when your streams spewed water to waste for absolutely no need at all.

Adonis had a sudden feeling that the soapy water was actually making him feel dirty. He stepped out of the stream and started staring at it for a while, as if in a daze. It trickled down effortlessly, as pristine as ever, in little vertical streaks from where it magically appeared from thin air at a point high up near the ceiling, all the way down to where it magically disappeared as it traveled down the shallow decline of the marble floor. Adonis couldn't help but feel *offended* by the realization that it was actually not in his power to stop that stream if he wanted to. It wasn't just the whole system's proclivity for wasting water that annoyed him, it was more the fact that, if he were to try to explain the issue to anybody he knew, he would likely fail to convey the sentiment altogether. Just like the streams were uncontrollably switched on, the capacity of his peers to

grasp the basic sensibilities of not putting useful things to waste was just switched off. He slowly found himself struggling with an emerging feeling of... contempt. Contempt towards this hellish place and everybody in it. He felt more than ever the need to get away. But also, in the meanwhile, he wished if he could somehow hack that stream shut just like he was hacking the Elysion bracelet.

A while later he stepped out of the freshroom, letting go of his frivolous thoughts in favor of more exciting prospects. It was already past midnight, and he was curious about what tonight's read might be about. The books had been coming without fail for many months now, and whoever it might be who was sending them had not come forward, was apparently not coming forward ever. Whoever the sender might be, the delivery was consistent, and Adonis was satisfied and grateful. But tonight, to his surprise as he walked back to his bedroom where he had left his device, it wasn't a single book or magazine that was lying there waiting for him. It was instead a big pile. There were books of all kinds and shapes, as well as magazines and single papers, all stacked together haphazardly on the bed right over his device. That was the first time that he had gotten more than one item at a time, and his first thought was that the usual time window won't allow him time to even skim through all that material. It was exciting though, the unexpected allowance of choice. But as he got to the bed, he noticed that he recognized one, two, at least three of the books. There was Yorgen's all-familiar book about changing the world - the first of the mysterious nightly book appearances - with its sleek cover and red cursive title. And there was the rugged leather binding of "The World before this World." He also noticed upon closer inspection of the pile that he recognized many of the magazines. In fact, suspiciously too many were items he had already gotten and read before. He sat on the bed and started to unstack the pile diligently, one piece at a time. They were all there, every single nightly read since the beginning. Right there on the bed was the full embodiment of his nightly reading routine. The source of his newfound knowledge and resolve. It was a relatively small pile even though it had kept him busy for the better part of a year. But it was precisely what he had needed in order to save his sanity and muster the spirit to put together an escape plan. And now that the escape plan was in full force, there was the pile. It all made sense in a way that wasn't entirely explicable. Adonis kept burrowing through the collection, book by familiar book until right at the very bottom the one unfamiliar object was finally uncovered. It was an envelope, sealed and addressed in careful penmanship in blue ink:

## to Adonis

It was the very same beautiful penmanship as before, unmistakably the same person who had been leaving notes for him here and there, on the inside of one book cover and along the margins of another. It was, without doubt, a letter from his secret friend. And evidently, he knew him by name. Without hesitation, Adonis ripped open the envelope, pulled out the letter, and let himself dive right into it. The handwriting was fresh, the ink still crisp as if it was written just a few minutes ago. Adonis fixated his eyes on the text and fell silent for a long while. His expression shifted from curious to skeptical, then somber. As he read on some more, his eyes tightened, and his lips squeezed as if fighting tears. He let himself slide off the bed and onto the floor, letter still in hand. Then finally he closed his eyes and rested his palms on the floor, letting go of the paper. "It was you," he whispered to thin air in disbelief. He had so many questions, not the least of which was "how"? How was it even *possible*? Jumping back onto his feet and pacing back and forth around the room for a while, he mulled over the question to no satisfactory resolution. As the minutes passed by, the mystery of what he had read deepened in his mind to the point where he began to second-guess his own memory of it. Did that really just happen? Could it really be him? On the face of it, it seemed impossible. Yet there it lay, right on the floor where he had left it. Consumed by an inexplicable wave of self-doubt, Adonis grabbed the letter and began reading it all over again, this time slowly and self consciously, in an attempt to reassure himself that he wasn't dreaming.

My Dear Son,

You are all that survives me, the embodiment of my hopes, dreams, and of my yearning for a second chance at life. You are the center of my life, the apex, the august personage, and the anecdote to my chronic ellipsis. You are the mecca of my wandering thoughts, the climax of my story, and the inflection point of my journey through life.

You are at once the fruit and the pillar of my entire existence.

Yet for all that you are to me, you and I are now, and forever will be out of sync. For as I write this letter you are not your adult self just yet. And by the time you come to being, I will no longer be existent. Even if I were to remain alive, I wouldn't be my current self anymore. Time will have molded me into someone else altogether. And so the story goes, of two soul mates forever kept apart by the merciless hold of nature, and time.

It was a letter from Abas. Somehow he must have hacked it a long time ago to port into this present moment, like a traveler in time. The penmanship, in retrospect, was clearly his dad's. As he started reading, it brought back a clear memory of his dad writing something, using his retro ink pen. He had his unmistakable style of writing. How did he not recognize it all the while? Maybe the obvious realization was muted in his mind by the practical impossibility of receiving a freshly inked letter from a man who had passed more than a decade ago. But once the consideration of unlikelihood was lifted, as soon as he read "My dear son," things immediately clicked, and it all made perfect sense all along. The man who had hacked a rogue teleport device to port himself up to the sky must have also somehow hacked a device to port books into the future for his son to read long after he had passed away.

His mind took him back to the time when... He was only ten back then. He was lounging on a sofa trying to read something. A comic book, probably, although he couldn't remember exactly. All he recalled was that he was really into his reading, and Abas, he came in and sat next to him. He was trying to strike a conversation with him, but Adonis just ignored him. Eventually, Abas gave him a pat on the back and said "I love you, son," to which Adonis rolled his eyes and said "Whatever, dad!"

That was it. The last memory. The final exchange of words. The next morning he woke up to the men in uniforms, the correctors, and all kinds of solemn-looking men and women he hadn't met before. But dad wasn't there. Adonis let the memory slip away, and a stray tear roll down.

Son, for one who had lived in darkness for most of their life, darkness will have become the expected norm. Over the decades, the eyes will have adjusted to it. And so when the light of day finally

shines on, it would feel incredibly uncomfortable, intense, and unwelcome. It might even feel like torture. One might feel every inclination to recoil back to the comfort of the dark familiar. Yet one must resist the urge. Cower away too soon, and you will have missed your chance to break away from your petty life in darkness. Yet if you were to endure, just for a bit longer, the suffering would subside, and you would finally get to feel what it is like to be immersed in the colorful shades of day. Change is always hard, and painful. Daunting even. It can pull us out of where we had stuck roots and anchors. It is safer to be a tree with sturdy roots than a bird with frail wings.

Be the bird, Adonis.

When I think of you, I remember the little things the most. I remember the sound of your two barely-budding teeth as they scrape against the soft pulp of a pear that I hold right against your mouth for you to taste for the first time, the warmth of your four tiny fingers clasped against my extended index as you hold it and walk next to me down a path, and the pitch of your midnight whimpers, whenever your fever kept you and me up all night. I remember the weight of your little feet on my torso whenever you decided to climb over me and execute a daring jump down to the floor, and the carefully muffled rustle of your uninvited crawling into my bed for comfort in the early morning. I remember fondly back when I could make you laugh: You'd come to me with tearful eyes after having stumbled onto the ground and scraped a knee or dropped a piece of candy on the floor, and all I had to do is make a goofy face and your pout would immediately melt into a grin, and then disappear behind a loud giggle. It always made me feel proud of myself to be able to make you laugh. Thank you for that. I remember how you used to copy my every move, locking

your little hands behind your back and pacing behind me as I did whenever I had something big to ponder. I hope you still do that.

He *did* still do that. He never realized where he got the habit from, but whenever he was lost in thought, he'd lock his hands behind his back and pace around his tile or garden. Adonis set the letter aside and stared up at the ceiling. He could almost feel the memory of his dad pacing around with his hands behind his back, but it slipped away before he could lock on it. Still, he felt vaguely aware of the presence of a relevant memory somewhere in the back of his head. He closed his eyes and tried to latch on to it. For a fleeting moment it was almost in full view, but then it vanished. He tried harder, squeezed his eyes shut and attempted to be there again. All he could remember at first was the two of them in a room, but then little by little details started to fill in, like colors on a pencil drawing. It was a remarkably small room, but it was warm and homely. They were sitting together on a fluffy sofa, the kind that rocks gently back and forth. Adonis's legs were too short for the sofa's deep seat, and so they were extended out in the air with his knees too short to bend down. Abas's feet were firmly on the floor, and he was doing the rocking for the two of them, gently and to the rhythm of some music playing. Yes, there was music, playing from Abas's device which he had placed on his lap for the two of them to listen to. The music wasn't just there, no. It was the point of the whole setup. Something slow, elegant, and soulful. Classical music? Yes, it was. Adonis remembered not recognizing the piece back then, but as the memory of the melody came back to him, it registered in his mind as a piano piece. A sonata or nocturne of some kind. He distinctly remembered his fascination with the harmony of it, and how he felt like it was taking him, taking them both and lifting them up and away into the night sky. It was night, it must have been. A nocturne, maybe? Yes, definitely a nocturne. Abas had closed his eyes and reclined back. Adonis was right by his side staring back and forth between the device and his father's facial expression of utter content. He could remember now, it was the first time he was introduced to classical music. Of the many joys in life that a child is going to discover, the discovery that there is such a thing as classical music is perhaps one of the most fascinating. Abas had laid a hand around Adonis's back, which wrapped and rested on his little right shoulder. He had felt loved and understood.

Adonis opened his eyes to an empty room. Funny how, out of all the little things that come and go, it is memories of the seemingly most

unremarkable moments that ultimately abide. I miss you, dad. I miss you. It doesn't fade away with the passing of the years, it gets worse. The more bites I take out of life, the more it eats at me. It *eats* at me... the growing need to spend if only five more minutes with you. To tell you that I *get* it. I get it now, dad. To ask you... No, I wouldn't ask you anything. There would be no conversation. Maybe not even eye contact. Just to sit together, listen to a nocturne together, or even in silence, for five minutes, knowing you're in the company of somebody who really knows you, of whom you are just a little piece. Somebody who truly understands where you're coming from because he *is* that very same place. Somebody who knows what you're yearning for deep inside, because deep inside, the two of you are one and the same.

"Dad, I forgive you!" It came out aloud, echoing around the bedroom, escalating the internal monologue into the realm of physical reality. Adonis was suddenly aware that he hadn't finished reading the letter:

My dear Adonis, in order for a man to leave his mark on this world, in order for him to deliver his masterwork, he must first stop living out of obligation to make those who had raised him proud, and start instead living out of commitment to inspire the next generation to follow in his footsteps. Only then can a man become free to shine his true light onto the world. This untethering from the past, it's what you need to do before you can ascend towards the future. This is why I am writing to you. I want you to promise me, here and now, I want you to say it out loud: You don't owe me anything, least of all loyalty to live by my ways. You don't need to do or refrain from doing anything merely to make me proud. I already am and will forever be proud of you, for merely being yourself. You don't owe me anything, son. All that you owe, you owe to your own future children. Stop living for me, and start living for them. Live to break down the rules, my rules, and all other old-world rules, and listen only to your own inner voice. Live so that your children may be born into

a better life, live so that they may have an inspiration to follow.

Son, our world is and has always been much like a giant rock that we all are tasked to roll forward. But the path forward is, as always, a steep journey uphill. For the world to move forward, it takes a lot of people resolved to push in the right direction. For the world to tumble backward, all we have to do is let go. Alas, it doesn't take any deliberate effort from anybody. All it takes for our world to regress is for enough people to stop fighting for what's right, and instead to do nothing at all.

I am writing you this in the hope that you may decide to keep your sleeves rolled, and push uphill with all your strength, even against all odds, and in the face of certain defeat. Always keep in mind, you don't do it to taste the pleasure of success - this you may never get. You do it because it is right. You do it for me. And above all, you do it for your own inner child.

Son, don't you ever dare to disappoint your inner child.

Your father is immensely proud of you, but his strength is failing him, and having gifted you to the world, he barely has enough energy left for one last act of defiance. I understand that you might have come to remember me as a coward, as someone who took his own life, but I am confident that history will ultimately absolve me. People will forgive me because I raised a hero. I raised you. And you are going to raise the world back up. And so, though I will soon perish, I am content with the fact that I will continue to strive toward glory vicariously through you.

With all my love,  
Abas

January 3rd, 154

Funny how one piece of paper can be made to hold so much perspective. Tearful and weak in the knees, Adonis felt empowered with the understanding. He *understood* why Abas did it. Why he left him. It was so he may grow up to be a man who could make a difference. It was an act of love, pure and simple. And love was always going to be an appendage of loss and suffering. Adonis felt that he realized at that moment how it is impossible to love what is and has always been within reach. He understood how the City, where everything and everyone is forever within reach, can only be barren of love. What Abas did, it had to be done in order to show him the way. Sometimes, he now found himself realizing, it was necessary to do something, anything no matter how farfetched, in order to break the lethargy. For the first time, he found himself thinking of his father's suicide as a proactive deed, not a reactive one. It might have been an attempt to slap and shake the City out of its catatonic state.

Abas had to die, he reflected furthermore, so that *he* Adonis may grow up to take on his role. It was like how a giant forest tree must crumble down and fall so that the rays of sunlight may find in the void a new path to reach the little underlings and guide them up, up, up. If nothing was forever, then at least how you choose to go could be your final statement to the world, or at least to your son.

Adonis squeezed his eyes shut some more, hoping for another memory to surface out of some hiding place. But as he got nothing other than total darkness he felt guilty, as if he somehow owed it to Abas to remember more. The cruellest thing about life is that we don't get to remember those precious early memories with our parents when our feelings were at their purest, and their sacrifice was at its highest. All those lazy afternoons as infants playing together, learning from them, laughing with them, imitating their every move, repeating our first words after them, taking our first steps with them, running playfully away from them, and then running back to show them the latest of our silly little achievements. Those are life's best moments, yet after the children are grown up, and the parents are gone, no memory of it remains.

Or perhaps it is not cruel at all. Maybe it is merciful that we don't remember. Had we remembered, we'd forever be arrested in debt, always trying and never succeeding in repaying our parents our debt of gratitude. Perhaps it is best that we don't get to remember all that

they did for us, so that we may live our lives forward, instead of being forever tied to the past with guilt and gratitude.

Gratitude. That was it. Adonis felt overwhelmed with gratitude. His dad had gifted him exactly the right books, at exactly the right times. He had been generous to him, and not just throughout his life with all the toys and candy and everything else he got him back when these things used to mean the whole world to him. He was even generous to him beyond his lifetime, with the gift of books he desperately needed in his adulthood. And this last surge of gifts had made all the difference. The early books got him out of the corrector's spell and educated him about the world beyond the confines of the City. The later books inspired him, jolted him into action until he developed a plan. The books set him on the right path. It was a *rescue* mission, Abas's time-traveling books. And one that he desperately needed.

Well, mission successful, Abas! Adonis rose up to his feet, paced towards the hacking station and snatched the Elysion bracelet. He now had in his hand, literally and figuratively, the gateway to his escape into the Farms. All thanks to Abas, Adonis was going to be the first Citizen to break away.

Adonis brushed his thumb lightly over the numbered bubbles protruding out of the brushed silver bracelet, careful not to pop them prematurely. He glanced at the pile of books in front of him and whispered: "Dad, I will do this for you."

## tau

*"Nullius in verba."* —motto of the Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge

It was time.

Finally after one contemplates long enough, procrastinates long enough, and deliberates long enough, the moment of action can no longer be postponed. Adonis strolled casually in the early morning twilight across the overly simple flower garden extending around the perimeter surrounding his residence. At this time of the year, the garden wasn't exactly bustling with colorful or fragrant roses. Still, the mild winter of the City allowed for quite a variety, of which Adonis had including Daphnes and Lavenders, Snow Drops and Snowflakes, and even some Lilies. Adonis had the Elysion bracelet on his left arm, sleek and stylish as ever, only now complete with fully reprogrammed bubbles. A one-way ticket, if all goes well, out of this whole wide City.

Adonis had been up since midnight, waiting out the darkness second by sluggish second. It was still a good hour or more before sunrise, but by now it was getting just bright enough to stroll outside so Adonis couldn't wait any longer. It was an old habit, he reflected, dating back to when he was only a little kid. He found himself thinking about that day back when his early morning hike had furnished him an encounter with the body of a dead Farmer. He could still vividly remember the contours of his face, and the dark gaping opening of his mouth absent his tongue. That had happened ages ago it seemed. And today he was finally going to set out to find some more Farmers. Living, breathing ones to befriend and enlighten.

Pleasantly, it was shaping up to be one of those sporadic, rainless late-July mornings. Well, lacking *heavy* rain anyway, although it did drizzle lightly every now and then. The overcast had also rendered it unusually warm for mid-winter. Adonis was wearing a heavy jacket, nonetheless. He had no idea how cold it might be wherever the randomness of his hack program might land him. He could wind up in the middle of a full-blown rainstorm or even hail or snowstorm for all he knew. The thought of it sent a psychogenic chill down his spine. That had been one of the many issues he had considered in the last few days as he was contemplating whether or not to go ahead with his adventure. It took deliberate effort to continue to persuade

himself that he should, given that his mind was hard at work second-guessing every aspect of the plan, as well as his motives and objectives.

As a result, he had enumerated the ramifications of his departure in his mind a thousand times over, considering each of them carefully and self-consciously. Leaving the safety of the familiar and leaping into the wild, perilous unknown. Leaving behind everyone whom he ever knew, if he can be said to have genuinely known anyone at all. Never getting to lay eyes on his own son, who would no doubt grow to resent him as a quitter, much like he felt about his own father growing up. All of these concerns, however, were decidedly narrow and petty given the grandiose goals he had in mind. He was set out to right a global wrong. To make a dent in the eternal fabric of history.

But above all, it was the prospect of effectively bidding farewell to Nyx that got him to hesitate the most, even given what's at stake. One doesn't abandon his lover lightly, of course, and Nyx, in particular, was a hard companion to let go of. Her presence in his life has had some sort of a magnetic appeal. So much so, that he genuinely dreaded the prospect of having to live the rest of his life in her absence. And even though no words of commitment had ever been spoken between them, and no vows exchanged, still it felt like an act of betrayal of trust to arrange to father a child together with an expecting mother, and then to vanish suddenly into thin air without as much as a warning or a goodbye. Of all the ways he had unintentionally hurt people in the past, this one felt like it would be his biggest transgression. And for that, he was already feeling guilty, even before the act. Yet despite the internal tribunal, he wasn't dissuaded, nor did he consider telling her of his intentions. As understanding as Nyx was of all his whims, quirkiness, and unusual ideas and plans, this one was perhaps going to be beyond her capacity to sympathize. The world might indeed need a savior more than a child needed his father, but asking a *mother* to appreciate that fact objectively, that would simply be asking too much.

Fear of the unknown and quitter's guilt are no easy matters, but the anxiety didn't stop there. Often he wondered, what was he actually going to *do* once he escaped? To be sure, he did have a general outline of his mission: He was going to establish contact with the Farmers or whatever group of them he happened to come across anyway, then deliver a message of hope. He was going to tell them what he now knew about how to the world came to be the way it is, and how they

were all being used as means to a luxurious end for a select few. But what was it that he was going to say, exactly? And how was it going to make a difference in the end? Beyond the broad brush strokes, whenever Adonis tried to put together an actual plan, he found that he basically did not know enough about the Farms or the Farmers to come up with anything concrete. Over the last few days, that particular flaw in his preparation had made him feel at times like he was chasing a childish dream rather than setting on a practical endeavor. Yet still, it hasn't discouraged him enough as to change his mind.

No, despite all the second-guessing and hesitation, and in spite of all the risks and dangers, and notwithstanding all that he had to lose or to let go of, it *still* was worth it. If he had learned anything from Abas's sacrifice, it was that taking action, even a desperate action against all odds was still infinitely better than doing nothing. And so, at times between a pessimistic wandering in thought and another, he found himself feeling curiously... hopeful. Escaping towards the warmth of fantasy, he would catch himself daydreaming about what he might find out there, on the other side of Styx. What interesting curiosities, individuals, or whole societies he might come across. What impact he might have on those poor people, starved for food, and for knowledge, and for freedom, for many generations now. He even started to put together a small speech, something that he might use as an opening with the Farmers. It had to be concise and straightforward, of course. Something memorable and straight to the point. Yet he wanted to say something uplifting, hope-inspiring, even life-changing. He wasn't that good with words though, and asking for help from his friends or his device would have aroused suspicion. So, in the end, he decided to go with whatever made sense at the moment. Still, when he closed his eyes that night, he dreamt of being the blow of wind that starts an avalanche, or the rock that finally sends big waves crashing in the dead calm of the swamp, getting everyone to realize just how filthy it is, and how fresh it could become if only...

It *was* his true calling. And he was going to go.

But, he was not going to take the backpack after all. During the few days following the completion of the Elysion bracelet hack, Adonis had been packing more and more items into his escape backpack. It had started as a small pouch with some water and energy bars but soon evolved into a large camping-style carry on. He had packed some supplies to last him about a week. After all, he had no idea

what to expect. The irony of packing for the complete unknown wasn't lost on him, and he smirked every time he caught himself adding something to the list of items. Here is an ultra-slim thermal blanket for the coldest part of the night. And there are a few warming patches lest he risks getting frostbite like he once almost did that one night when he wandered off the campsite in the middle of the night and forgot to take his device with him. A Swiss knife, of course, will definitely come in handy. And one must not forget to bring fire-starting kits and some fuel. A bottle of antiseptic could come in real handy, and so would a few courses of antibiotics, just in case... and so the list just kept growing. At some point though, staring at the now plump backpack overflowing with easy-life necessities, he came to the realization that he was entirely missing the point. The more he takes with him, the less meaningful his journey would be. It was a subtle point, but one that can be made evident through the simple mind experiment of taking the packing exercise to the logical extreme. Say one was to pack *all* of life's little luxuries that the City had to offer and bring those along with him. Having done that, had one indeed departed the City? Or did he merely extend the boundaries of the City to also include whatever distant land one was set to go to? No, more than geography, the City was an idea. And it was the *idea* of the City that he was trying so hard to get away from. It was the idea that he had always resented so much. It felt quite hypocritical, therefore, for someone who had decided he cannot be part of this society to require for his departure that he take so much of it with him.

No. If his departure was meant to be a statement, then it needed to be concise and eloquent. And so the plump backpack still lay there on his luxurious bed, right next to the shiny metallic surface of his state-of-the-art TP device, under the soothing light of his mood-matching ambiance system, and well within the range of the purring sound of the ever-running water streams of his freshroom. He was going to abandon it all. He was going to take nothing.

And so there he was, wandering about aimlessly in his garden in the half-darkness of morning twilight, bracelet in hand and practically ready to go, yet for some reason, hesitant. He stopped at a winter rose and squeezed its purple-spotted creamy pink petals gently between his index finger and his thumb. It felt fresh and smooth to the touch. He admired for a bit longer the way the ambiance preceding dawn had drawn lines of light and shade across the contours of the large-cut stone wall that marked the end of the garden and the northern edge of the residence. He was already

feeling nostalgic. Reaching towards the first bubble on his bracelet, he felt a rush of fear. It was fear of loneliness, unlike any he had experienced before. Unlike the cozy loneliness of his episodes of solitude within his tile, this prospective loneliness was of a grotesque, dreadful kind. It was permanent and involuntary. It was impossible to undo, as impossible as the un-popping of a bubble. The symbolism was not lost on him. Then with a heavy heart, and an eerie feeling of burning bridges, of leaving an entire world behind such that would be no going back ever to how things used to be, he squeezed the first bubble of the Elysion bracelet, and heard it sound a soft but decisive pop.

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Back in the first days of confusion, when the power went out on the entire San Francisco Bay Area and with it went out all cellular and Internet connectivity, the people's first instinct naturally was to flee the blackout area. The rich simply jumped into their air cars and took off from the airpods of their Portola Valley mansions and Los Altos hilltop vacation homes and Embarcadero penthouse rooftops. Most of them, of course, made sure to pack extra sets of air car batteries, just in case the power outage extended further than a single battery charge can take them. Some of the better contingency-planning types even had ultra-efficiency solar racks installed on their air cars that could extend their range by a few hundred extra miles still. In the end, of course, it didn't matter. For the power outage actually engulfed the entire planet, save the sequestered islands of Oceania which lay impossibly out of their reach. Air car after luxurious air car eventually ran out of juice and had to make a forced landing in the dead calm of the powerless night over the objections of its owner. "Abort landing!" they would command their vehicles, only to be ignored by failsafe emergency measures that had been meticulously programmed to value passenger safety over comfort or convenience, thus overriding the owners' commands in deference to the machine's better judgment whenever a safety concern might arise.

For the not-so-rich, air cars were not an option. Jamming in every highway, land car trailed land car in close successions, like ants marching single-file along the twists and turns of the narrow paths that navigated the contours of the Bay Area leading South or East or North. "I think the 101 is not as bad," those stuck in bumper to bumper traffic on the 280 Southbound would whisper. "The 680 is our best bet," the ones trapped in the other lane would declare. "Change route, destination Stockton," they would command. On

every highway, naturally, the traffic is as weak as the weakest link. The lower-end land cars would run out of power first, making it harder for the ones trailing behind to pass through. As land car after land car stopped in its tracks, the travelers started to realize that a more efficient way forward in an increasingly obstacle-ridden highway was in fact on foot. Once people started doing that, an avalanche effect would take place. The more people abandoned their land cars, the more reason there was for others to do the same. Very soon, every highway was effectively blocked with an impassable stream of abandoned land cars. There they lay, undistinguished in their final demise. Once the pride of engineering discipline and a pinnacle of technological innovation, now abandoned and never to be used again, the Mazda lies ingloriously nearby the Tesla, the SUV alongside the sedan, the convertible right behind the hatchback. Only the motorbike could still navigate the labyrinth, but even that would eventually power down and get left behind, never to be charged back into life again. In the end, just like it is for people, the highway which was the cemetery for land cars accepted them all with equal indifference.

And as the people marched on, destined to become the world's first generation of Farmers, the land cars they left behind along with the highways themselves were destined to be left to the elements of nature to claim back what was always truly hers. Over the years the wind blows dust, the clouds bring rain, and the trees sprinkle leaves all over the scene until the vehicles are all but coated with a thick layer of dirt and moss and decaying elements. The colorful paint, shiny and metallic as it may be, eventually gets weathered down to a uniform shade of earthy grey. Under the surface, lethargic processes of decay are hard at work day and night, without stop. In the gears and shafts and ball bearings, the rust spreads like a plague. Corrosion eats on the batteries from the inside. The rubber of the tires weakens, and the pressurized air finds an outlet to escape. Gravity pulls relentlessly on the weakened beams and frames. Eventually, something gives, and the majestic machine crumbles to the ground under the weight of its own metal and rubber and glass.

On the surface of the highway itself, the frost season etches hairline fractures that grow with repetition into narrow grooves. Winter after winter, unrelenting rainstorms pound the weaker segments and carve some sinkholes here and there along the endless stretches of asphalt. Nobody around to fix them, season after harsh season the imperfections grow. Spring birds drop seeds, the gentle breeze carries dandelions, and summer winds blow tumbleweed. Little by little,

plant life finds its way in. Slowly at first, small weeds might grow in the grooves, and alongside the edges. Tall grasses and brushes take root in the larger sinkholes. Still, no trees can penetrate. But the more vegetation takes hold, the more roots work their way into the soil, undermining the integrity of the artificially smooth film from below. With the passing of the years, spots of soft undersoil cause chunks of asphalt to ease under their own weight, peppering the highway with dips and rises, and inviting yet more seasonal rain to channel through.

Now unchallenged, insects and birds, rats and rabbits, leap and burrow and crawl and slither and march and nest all over the scene, until what used to be a smooth expanse once becomes a rugged terrain of broken chunks of asphalt and uneven gravel with an overgrowth of grass and vegetation covering the bigger part of it. Multiple floods, or perhaps one big flood, sweeps a thin layer of soil over it still, and an earthquake sends those badly faded highway signs and billboards and half rusted street lights crashing down. A few decades more, and one could hardly tell that it used to be anything other than a natural clearing in the forest.

Surreal and unequivocal in its statement of the triumph of nature over the overpopulated ways of the old world, the scene remains undisturbed by the presence of any human, perhaps for a hundred years or more. Until, on a late July mid-day, a man wearing an unsuitably thick winter coat materializes suddenly and out of thin air right in the middle of it.

## upsilon

"Try again. Fail again. Fail better." —Samuel Beckett

The first thing he noticed was a sudden rush of heat, a feeling of having been transported into the inside of an oven on full blast. It was apparently midday, and once his eyes had adjusted to the surge of bright sunlight, he could see that he was in the middle of a clearing in a rainforest. To his big surprise, the dry yellow weeds fully carpeting the clearing around him were a telltale sign of late summer season. The time-of-day change, he had anticipated, but the change of season took him entirely by surprise. He had simply assumed, in what he now saw in hindsight as naïve optimism, that since it was winter in the City, then the entire globe was experiencing the season of winter in unison. To be sure, he fully expected to experience any of the different *shades* of winter, from mild warmth all the way to chilly hailstorms or windy snowstorms, but it never even occurred to him that he might find himself in the scorching heat of mid-summer just by traveling away from his wintry home in some direction. A few seconds in and he already learned something new, he thought.

At any rate, since he was evidently dressed for the wrong weather, he took off his jacket and lay it carefully on the ground. If he needs to, assuredly, he'll remember to come back and get it. A few steps forward, he noticed curiously that even though the setting seemed natural, underfoot it still felt like he was in a man-made façade. The ground beneath the overgrowth felt too flat and too unyielding, more like the marble floor of a residence than the dirt of a natural landscape. Yet clearly he was in the middle of a forest, with no sign of anyone or anything man-made nearby.

The terrain was also rather odd. For one thing, the clearance took the bizarre shape of a wide, windy path, separating two sides of the forest apart by a distance that remained remarkably constant as far away as Adonis could see. It was as if the clearance was a man-made separator, or a pathway, that had been reclaimed by thickets and dense weeds and sagebrush. Also, the clearance would have been entirely flat if it wasn't for an unusual pattern of little hills sprinkled haphazardly within it. Less like hills, more perhaps like sharp bumps, each five or six feet high, and no more than ten feet in diameter. Natural formations, possibly, although they didn't look like any natural hills that Adonis had ever seen. On top of the little hills, bushes and ivy shrubs had taken hold, forming a few impassable thickets at some points along the clearance pathway.

It was still hard for him to believe that he was *actually* there. Outside the City, in the middle of some deserted forest where no Citizen had ever stepped foot before. Time to meet some Farmers! A rush of enthusiasm came upon him at the prospect of making contact, even though he hadn't the first clue which way to go looking for them. With the sun almost directly over him, he had no good way to make out cardinal directions for navigation, not that he had any preference as to which cardinal direction to follow in any case. Undeterred, he pressed forwards along the direction implied by the suspiciously regular separation winding through the foliage of the forest. Not only was it the obvious path of least resistance, but he also had a gut feeling that it was -or used to be- a man-made creation and so he thought there was a sporting chance that it might lead him to a place where people still live. The calm of the day was occasionally interrupted by the chirping of a bird, the buzzing of an insect, and now and then by faint rustling in the dry weeds around him. Beyond that, there was nothing. Along either bank of the windy clearing dense trees ruled the land. The pines, he recognized, but those giant redwood trees with trunks larger than he could extend his arms, those he had never seen before. About half an hour into his walk, Adonis was already sweating heavily and started to feel thirsty. He contemplated taking off his shirt, except that he was afraid the direct sunlight on his skin might end up doing more harm than good given that he could no longer merely click some sunscreen into existence with his device still in his tile and impossibly out of reach. Luckily though, the thermal insulation layer of his winter-hiking pants and shirt worked just as well in reverse, and he smirked at the thought that at least in this case, two wrongs *did* make a right.

Still tracing the path, he swayed aside from the clearance and under the shade of the trees on the left bank. As desolate as the area seemed, he had a strong feeling that there were Farmers out there nearby. Hundreds of them, there had to be. Back when he had done the math a week or two earlier, he figured there must be at least 200 Farmers living on every acre of land on the planet. Of course, his math was by no means reliable, and in any case, the inputs to his formula were little more than wild guesses.

Nonetheless, he was confident the problem wouldn't be how to find Farmers, but rather how best to make contact. Even in the shade, he could feel the effects of the unexpected summer sun fast at work on his body. His eyes and the skin of his arms and shoulders were getting red and itchy, and more than thirst he had a strong feeling of

dryness in his mouth. Being the son of the soft life, he was not at all enured to the hardships of the wild, and he knew it. The heat of the air, the sting of the sun, the dryness in the mouth, probably matters of little more than mild daily discomfort to the Farmers of this area, all hit him as major calamities. Back in his tile, he contemplated, his backpack still lay on his bed, armed with all the water and sunscreen one might need on a trip like this one. And everywhere in City streams continue to run to waste in every freshroom without a pause. People continue to frequent the Apples and the Skeletons and lounge on man-made islands and take their significant others on Elysion for special occasions. No tears will be shed at his departure, no debates would ensue, and no steps would be taken to change anything beyond perhaps a small corrective tweak to the Elysion protocol to prevent the next nutcase from...

A distant sound broke the silence, bringing Adonis's awareness back to the here and now. It sounded like a long, high pitched shriek. It could have been the howl of a wolf or the growl of a mountain lion, he couldn't tell for sure. But, could it perhaps be the sound of a person? He stopped moving and planted his feet instead firmly on the ground as if the mere act of listening intently might somehow compel the sound to repeat once more. A few silenced breaths later, he heard it again. A long, loud shriek. Yes, it could definitely pass as the vocalization of a human, albeit an odd or unusual one. A woman, perhaps, or maybe a loud child. Excited, he followed the sound, and before it had stopped repeating, he could already see a column of black smoke rising far in the distance. A campfire! Triumphant for the second time in less than an hour, he dashed forward in fast paces that soon accelerated into full speed strides. Off the clearance pathway by now and fully engulfed by trees in all directions, he stopped to catch his breath whenever the dry foliage cleared a broader view of the sky to make sure the pillar of smoke was getting bigger. It was, dash after dash, getting bigger and more visible. But it was also, as Adonis couldn't help but notice, getting broader and more spread out. At some point, it started to feel too dispersed for a campfire. Had it been a windy day he might have said the gusts were smearing the smoke across a wide area. But there was not as much as a breeze in the scorching dry heat of that alien climate he had landed by random coincidence.

Nonetheless, where there is fire there must be a camp, so he soldiered on for what must have been an hour or more, or at least it felt that long. With every step, the smoke got closer, until it started to permeate the air all around him like a fog that got gradually thicker.

He was so close he could even smell it, yet he still couldn't pinpoint the camp where the fire was burning. Adonis started coughing lightly as a wave of fresh smoke seemed to thicken suddenly all around him. His eyes were getting itchy and his throat very dry, and he could no longer see clearly past a few yards ahead. His excitement quickly wearing out into anxiety, he was just about to start back and away from the cloud of thick smoke when he glimpsed with the corner of his left eye something red fly by. It was a smoldering ash flittering about, that seemed to be suspended gracefully in mid-air by the counter effect of its own heat in the way campfire ashes often are. He can't be far now. Looking to the left he couldn't see anything but a thick grey screen of smoke at first, but then as a blow of wind cleared the air momentarily, he found himself looking at a vast expanse of flames, raging wildly over the trees and brush as far as the eye could see. It wasn't a campfire, to be sure, but a fire of a different kind altogether. It was unruly, and entirely out of control. In a panic, Adonis realized the hazard was approaching, and fast. The flames blazing in all directions were sending out random flares that rapidly ignited the dry leaves and brushes on the fringe, in a dreadful chain reaction that seemed destined to swallow the entire forest, and him along with it.

Now feeling the heat become unbearable, Adonis dashed away from the flames and started running in the opposite direction, only to realize a few short pants later that the opposite direction also led straight towards more flames. As he swung around and started back towards the clearing, a rapid series of eerie groans and creaking sounds stopped him in his tracks. Those were quickly followed by a thunderous bang as the fire splintered a large tree trunk and sent the better part of the tree crashing down right in front of him, blocking his path and sending flares flying in every direction. Adonis sensed an immediate rush of heat as the crash sent a shockwave of hot air racing towards him. When that subsided, he could feel in his eyes and nostrils the sting of a fresh coat of ash and smolder, and on his arms and torso, some flares had landed which stung briefly but sharply like needle pricks.

By now the smoke had gotten very thick around him, and he could feel the heat of the flames closing in on him from all directions. All sense of direction lost, Adonis felt trapped without a viable escape plan. A sense of fear overcame him, unlike any he had experienced before. It was a fear that came with the dreadful realization that something that had always been benign in one's mind could somehow morph into a calamity never considered before. In the City,

fires always burned neatly in fire pits and fireplaces, providing warmth and entertainment, and making for good S'mores and soothing crackling sounds. Now, this here was a monstrous version of the same physical phenomena. It was clearly still the same thing, yet somehow out of control and free to do untold harm. Free to send giant trees crashing down even. Was this what the Farms were like? A place where the benign is turned malicious? Or was it more like a place where the *true* nature of things would manifest, unchecked by the artificial controls of man-made systems? Was this what fire ought to be like when left untamed by the corrective influence of civilization?

Out of ideas and not willing to risk being torched alive by a fire that had somehow taken form outside of a fire pit and morphed into a forest-swallowing, uncontrollable force of destruction, Adonis reached for his bracelet and fumbled for the second bubble. Squeezing it for dear life with all his might, he let out a cry of pain at the sharp sting of flames now practically lashing his face and body.

# phi

*"Between the plan and the fulfillment lies always the hazard. Heartbeat flutters, knife flashes, horse stumbles, cancer grows, more subtle foes invade..." —George R. Stewart*

On one of the green mountains cradling the river Jordan they gathered. "Here we shall erect a temple for the Gods!" the elders proclaimed. The mothers rejoiced, and the children chanted, and as they danced and played their giggles and laughs carried away with the gentle spring breeze. The men hauled the mud, bucket after bucket, from the riverbed below and all the way up to the ridges and slopes to the high plateau. Then as the mud was mixed with pebbles and straw and left to dry under the watchful eye of the Mediterranean sun, they hacked the trunks and branches of the biggest trees and hauled them also. They twined the longest vines into ropes so that they could hoist the wooden frames and hold them together before they lay the mud bricks in place. Wall after erected wall the temple started to take shape, then they strewed some hay and straw below and palm leaves above, a floor and a ceiling. And after it was complete, the women lay poppies at the gates and adorned the halls with jasmines and lilacs, so that the Gods may be pleased, and bestow in turn good fortune on the tribes.

Then as the flowers withered and the elements ate at the floors and ceilings and walls, those who were among the youngest children, now full-grown men, replaced the flowers with candles, the Adobe bricks of the walls with blocks of chiseled limestone, and the hay on the ground with slabs of exquisite granite. In the biggest hall, they fashioned an altar out of stone and etched sacred markings on its sides. "Here when the moon is round we shall sacrifice the best of our lamb and ox and antelope, lest we may incur the wrath of An."

Then when the strange men came from the lands beyond the East horizon, bearing their spears and arrows and shields, and conquered the villages and the mountains and the prairies, they too would honor the Gods at the temple. And so did the other men, much later, as they came dashing from the Western plains mounting horses and chariots and flashing swords and maces.

And so the temple remained, as the peoples prospered and declined, always in good keeping and in high regard, always a place of worship, although the subjects and the prayers regularly changed. Now they're genuinely pious, now just greedy. Now they call

themselves *Akkadians* and give offerings to please Shamash so that he may continue to bless them with his rays of light and warmth from above. Now they are *Assyrians* and proclaim the temple a shrine for Ishtar. They burn on her altar kings and concubines alike and bury their smoldering bones under oak trees in the meadows beyond the rocky cliffs. Now they are the sons of Ammon, and just beyond the high sandstone walls of their citadel the farms and pastures abound, rivaling even those at Moab beyond the deserts of the south. Now they are called Nabateans, and though they won't admit it, they care more about trading incense with the Greeks across the middle sea than they do about pleasing Dushara. Yet they still take time to chisel their prayers in elaborate Aramaic on the tired walls of the temple. Now they are Arabs, and the temple, a mosque. Their fierce fighters don't fear death in the name of Allah, and beside the main façade, they erect a minaret to call for prayer in his glorious name on every dawn and every sunset. Now they are Mamluks, now Crusaders, now Armenians, now Suljuk Turks. With every age bloodshed grows more gruesome, and people, exceedingly efficient at subjugating one another. City ruin lay on top of city ruin, a palimpsest of pride and cruelty. Yet the temple somehow always prevails. With every conqueror, it is ordered to be rebuilt bigger, higher and wider, like a growing child brought up by the sweat and blood of countless souls. Until finally, it stands, a full-fledged cathedral with gigantic marble pillars and floors, exquisite paintings covering the enormous domes of its ceilings, and breathtaking mosaics adorning its expansive stained glass panes, a testament to man's inner complex of insignificance.

And then that one day when many things and people vanished, all of a sudden the prayers stopped. At the time of their direst challenge, the people neglected to reach out to the heavens. Instead of calling upon Anu or Shamash, or Allah or Lord Jesus, they opted instead to flee the cities and scatter aimlessly in search of refuge, like fire ants scrambling out of a flooded nest. At least now there will be no more civilization on this forsaken land, and it shall therefore finally know peace.

With the scariest of all beasts now gone, the rest of the animals slowly and reluctantly work up the courage to reclaim what was always duly theirs. Soon, stray cats chase lizards and rabbits hunt for roots around the outer gardens surrounding the cathedral. Later still, deer and mountain goats, oryx and wild dogs roam freely in its vicinity. The shrubbery, once meticulously landscaped in the gardens and

walkways and alongside the stonewalls, now grows tall and dense, unhinged by the absence of gardeners and clergymen alike.

In the winter rain pours, wind blows, and frost invades. Storm after storm, the tiles loosen, the glass panes fracture, the foundations yield and the walls lean. With winter's repeated freezes and thaws the stonewalls crack and chip. In the spring little weeds take root in the inviting imperfections along the floors and walls. Moss covers the ceilings and pillars. It is just the beginning.

With the passing of the decades and the relentless onslaught of the seasons, nature closes in from every direction. Vines crawl all the way up the walls and arches, slithering uninvited through the shattered frosted glass windows. Trees creep closer, and throw branches and leaves right on top of the minarets and spires. Just about every living thing nests and hunts and mates and feeds and hibernates under and above and around and within the once-sacred confines of the building, until it no longer resembles man's creation but rather an eerie extension of nature's uninterrupted canvas of green and brown and blue.

At last, it is free from the hold of man. At last, it may rejoin the eternal heartbeat of the wild. There it lay, undisturbed, except for one time when a young man with soot-covered face and garments appeared clumsily and out of nowhere, ingloriously interrupting the calm of the night with a loud, wild cry of desperation.

\* \* \*

Though nobody else was there to witness it, Adonis still felt a little embarrassed as he heard the echoes of his overdramatic yell reverberate through the serene nightly landscape where his bracelet had faithfully delivered him. He couldn't help but feel a little ashamed of having so unceremoniously pierced the peaceful quiet of the night.

The sting of nearing flames having abruptly disappeared, and the bright daylight having been suddenly extinguished into the darkness of midnight, his corresponding sense of panic also subsided with matching discontinuity. He was left with an overall feeling of being dirty, and an unpleasant taste as sweat droplets delivered soot from his forehead onto his lips. Yet he didn't even bother to wipe his face or mouth clean, for as his pupils slowly dilated what he saw towering in front of him consumed all of his attention: He had landed right in front of what must be a man-made residence! Even though it

was well after dusk, and despite there being no lighting of any kind emanating from within the building, he could still see its grandiose contours pretty clearly under the light of a full moon at or near the zenith. To be sure, it looked desolate and abandoned: There was thick vegetation practically engulfing it from every angle, and its walls had mostly caved in under the weight of fallen trees crisscrossing its perimeter. It looked to him under the moonlight not very different from a natural hill with overgrowth all over it. Whoever used to live here must have deserted his tile a long time ago for it to be in such derelict state. But still, it was without doubt an actual man-made building, perhaps even hailing from before the Event; A physical testament to the existence of civilization outside the City. That was huge!

Curious to explore it on the inside, Adonis naturally started looking for a grand entrance, perhaps a gateway or a giant door or arch to match the grandeur of the building, but after pacing along the perimeter of one of its sides for about ten minutes, he was ready to settle for any physical opening to slide through. What must have been windows, now shattered and infested with vines and tree branches, all hanged out of reach at least twenty feet above the ground. Luckily it wasn't long before he found another way in, one particular crack in the mossy stone wall had caused some stones to break loose and fall out, leaving in the aftermath a pitch dark gap about four feet wide and high enough for a man to crouch through without too much trouble. Adonis couldn't see at all into the gap, but with curiosity overweighing his sense of caution, he decided it was safe enough of a gamble. Angling his torso sideways, he slowly slid through the crack, careful not to lean too much on any of the weakened surfaces of the walls. Once inside, to his pleasant surprise, he realized that the darkness only consumed the small spot where he snuck in from. For the most part, the inside of the building was pretty well lit with rays of moonlight extending from the numerous openings where the windows used to be, as well as multiple large gaps in what used to be a series of domes forming the high ceiling. The floor was almost entirely marble, of decent quality given that he was, after all, in the Farms. Apparently, time had been relatively kind to the marble, give or take the casual crack and easing here and there. In two parallel rows, a series of massive stone pillars sectioned the main façade into three main regions, two of which contained the ruins of what must have been rows of wooden seating, now reduced to rubble by the elements. Some of the pillars were pointing away from the true vertical by varying degrees of tilt, a cumulative effect of shifting of the foundation below over the years, no doubt. To his

extreme right at one end of the façade was the main entryway, currently tightly shut with a pair of large metal leaves comprising a double-door. From various cracks and openings along the walls, all kinds of vegetation had crept it, and some had grown and invaded areas well beyond the perimeter, throwing thickets and branches right over the marble tiles of the floor. The whole setup felt to Adonis utterly surreal in its combination of elements belonging to the typically separate magistrates of the natural and the man-made. He had positively never seen anything like it.

His footsteps reverberated loudly as he started across towards the far side of the main hall, but then he suddenly heard a second series of steps, fainter than his but faster, and flatter, as if belonging to someone running barefoot. He looked towards the source and almost glimpsed the silhouette of a person as it disappeared behind one of the pillars near the center of the hall. For a moment he wasn't sure what had happened, but then as he replayed in his mind the sound of the steps and the shape of the shadow, it registered with high likelihood as a young boy. Adonis's heart skipped a beat. An actual Farmer, at last.

"Hello! Is anybody there?" he shouted towards the pillars as he paced excitedly closer. For a few moments, all he could hear was the echo of his own hurried steps. But then suddenly the shadow zoomed by again. This time faster, and along a trajectory from the near line of pillars to the far one. It was as if the person was trying to run away from him, sprinting from behind the cover of one pillar to the next. This was understandable of course, given how unfamiliar Adonis probably looked to the typical Farmer.

"It's ok. Don't be afraid," Adonis started, this time more softly, "I just want to talk."

This time the footsteps pounded a hurried diminuendo as the boy or man or whoever that was dashed in the opposite direction and seemed to disappear into a corner. Not willing to take no for an answer, Adonis ran towards the fading sound of the steps as fast as he could. Soon enough he could see that there was a section towards the back of the opposite side of the hall where an arched opening led to a walled-off area. It was hard to tell what kind of setup it used to be, as several shrubs and even a full-fledged tree trunk had somehow taken hold in front of the arch, completely obscuring his view into the room behind it. It was darker back at the far side, but Adonis kept running all the same. Swinging around the tree trunk and jumping over the shrubs, he turned around and dashed through the archway into total darkness. Suddenly a sharp pain shot up his leg from the

ankle. In his hurry, he had tripped over some uneven floor and lost his footing. As he swung his arms and torso in mid air looking for balance, he felt his body slam against a column or a pole of some sorts, which in turn went crashing down in pieces. In itself that didn't feel very painful, but it must have been the final straw for a structure that had been weakened by the elements for very many decades, and before he could react, Adonis could literally see a huge section of the ceiling shift and slide down directly above him.

When he came to, he was feeling numb all over. At first, he thought it was the numbness of winter cold, but then he remembered that he had somehow left winter in the City to a part of the world where it was miraculously mid-summer. The numbness, to his horror, was evidently due to the weight of a giant section of wall and ceiling that had come crashing down, pinning him under. He was lying flat on his back, with broken stone bricks and debris virtually encasing him from all directions. Right above his torso was the fallen concrete slab of the ceiling, which by the mere grace of chance had settled into a balance some six or seven inches short from crushing his body under its monolithic weight.

"Help!" Adonis exclaimed in an anxious voice that simmered closer to sheer panic. He could feel his heart racing in his chest, and though he wasn't in any actual pain, the thought of being entombed under a pile of rubble brought into his mind primal waves of claustrophobia.  
"HELP!"

But there was nobody to the rescue. Absent the benediction of Hermes, and with no device at hand to click him out of danger, Adonis felt a fresh horror that no Citizen had ever experienced before in the comfort of the City: The horror of being physically trapped. He started pushing and pounding on the sleek surface of the concrete slab in desperation. But to his bitter disappointment, it wouldn't budge.

But then he stopped, his senses heightened in anticipation. A curious object had entered into his view from a tight clearing in the rubble above him. From where he lay he could see the contours of an arm, and an open palm reaching in towards him, stopping a few feet short of where he was.

"Please help me," he whispered, "I'm trapped down there."

Curiously, a wave of calm came over him. Horrible as his predicament may be, at least he wasn't alone. This person, might it be the boy who was running away from him before? No, even though

the hand was rugged and dirty, it was still distinctly feminine. Perhaps it was a girl after all. Adonis noted that she wasn't wearing any bracelets. No rings or nail polish on the fingers either. Either she was too young to care about these things, or perhaps more likely she couldn't afford any such luxuries. After all, she was in all likelihood a Farmer. The thought excited him despite all his troubles. This here could be the first contact.

The little hand waved around, all five fingers extended outward. That person was probably trying to see if she could touch Adonis. But it was of no use, as he was firmly pinned several feet deeper than she could reach.

"Can you hear me?" He started, more loudly and in a pronounced tone, "My name is Adonis. I'm here to help your people to..."

He couldn't help but smirk at the irony of his situation, trapped under a ton of rubble yet still proclaiming his status as a savior of the peoples. Man is nothing if not a self-absorbed creature, he decided.

"I need your help," he tried again, now more humbly, "Can you get your parents here so they can dig me out of..."

Adonis stopped abruptly, a sudden blow to the chest having knocked the wind out of him. Something must have shifted, a chunk of concrete maybe, or some piece of debris settling in. He now felt like being crushed by the weight of rubble directly on his torso. In a panic, he groped in his pocket for his device. His alarm doubled as he recalled that he had no device on him. Was this it? Was he actually going to perish under the weight of rubble in a world where a click of a button can and does take people from world to world in the blink of an eye? He tried with all his power to swing his torso back or forth and to push against the concrete with the combined force of his arms and legs at full blast. A few minutes into his futile attempts though, he stopped. His situation was apparently hopeless, and so he might at least try to save his dignity in his final moments.

"Well, I tried," he exhaled in desperation, "Thank you anyway, Farmer lady. I'm glad I got to meet you at least, sort of."

He eyed the bare wrist and fingers again. This total stranger, who was literally faceless to him, and whose voice he hadn't even gotten to hear, she was perhaps going to be his sole companion in his final moments on this earth.

The crush of whatever it was on his chest was now starting to make him dizzy. In an effort to distract his senses perhaps, he found

himself focusing on the physical properties of his companion's arm. It was curious that he was able to identify her gender with certainty, given the lack of jewelry and although her arm was rugged and dirty, and full of cuts and bruises. It was so banged up, in fact, that it seemed to him more like a tool than a limb in how its human qualities had eroded leaving only the bare utilitarian frame. Looking yet more intently, he could judge by the extension of the arm and the size of the palm that the person attached to it would be at least ten or twelve years old, if not older. Even for a ten-year-old though, rings and bracelets are a thing, he thought. Besides, no matter how underprivileged someone was, how hard would it be to get oneself a bracelet, a makeshift one even, made of string or twine if not gold or silver... Wait, the bracelet!

Adonis felt a fresh rush of excitement power through his veins. With his free hand, he fished for the wrist of the other. It was not very hard to reach. To think, he was about to resign his very life to the foresight that he actually had a safety recourse literally wrapped around his wrist. Groping with his thumb, he found the marker where the first bubble had been before it popped. Right beside it, there would be an unpopped bubble ready for the rescue. Just before he squeezed it, he gave that extended hand one last look, as if trying to etch its contours into his memory. He wished he could reach out and touch it, but it seemed to him so far away, it might as well be on Mars.

"Bye for now," he said softly to his newfound friend. And then he was gone.

## chi

*“Better never means better for everyone... It always means worse, for some.”*  
—Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale*

The city of Ottawa was one of the most affected in the calamity that birthed the new world order. Though by no means a metropolis of any significant population, it was nonetheless the diplomatic capital of the state of Ontario, and therefore housed the broader function of state and federal government, and most of the foreign consulates. Counting the corresponding buildings, as well as the high commissions, official residences, and all twelve museums including the towering glassy dome of the National Gallery of Canada, more than fifty buildings vanished in an instant from within a bounding area no larger than 8 square miles. The tourists huddling for photos around the deceptively permanent Centennial Flame at Parliament Hill, the shoppers strolling along the narrow streets of Byward Market, and the students commuting on skates up and down the frozen length of Rideau Canal, they all must have immediately noticed the sudden change. Gone were all those magnificently old buildings that were the landmarks and anchors of downtown. Gone were the quintessential shades of dull-brown and aqua-green that had adorned those aging copper rooftops. Gone was the entire Centre Block with its iconic clock tower and all the gargoyles and grotesques perched on top of its enormous walls of rustic Nepean sandstone.

“Oh dear, what just happened?” they exclaimed in utter confusion from the sidewalks of Elgin street. “It is a terrorist attack?” they whispered dreadfully in sporadic pockets at Sparks and Queens and Laurier. But despite the chaos and the turmoil, they could sense in their private deliberations that such a clean form of destruction, executed so flawlessly and with such surgical precision could not possibly be a terrorist attack. It was, they feared, though they dared not speak of it in the beginning, the act of an enemy of a caliber so cool and calculating such as the world had never seen before. And as dusk soon fell on the city, yet the street lamps and building lights didn’t come on, those who were to become the first generation of new-world slaves slowly started to realize the sheer gravity of their predicament.

Yet for Ottawa in particular, the Event wasn’t the most significant transformation. For in the weeks that followed and as chaos and confusion tore at the fabric of civilized society, fresh waves of yet more unsettling changes kept washing ashore, in what must have

seemed an inexplicably systematic pattern. In series, and always in abrupt steps, large swaths of the city and surrounding suburbs would simply vanish, to be replaced by expanses of bare ground flattened as far as the eye could see. It was as if a mammoth creature had taken a giant knife to the surface of the earth and started peeling off the urbanized crust piece by piece, revealing the fertile pulp below. First, the Glebe disappeared, one early morning and without a trace. Then the larger part of Vanier, all the way up to Ottawa River. Then within a week, in close succession went Alta Vista, Barrhaven, and the entire delta between Rideau River and the canal, where the brown brick buildings of Carleton University had once stood. Always, the people were spared annihilation, while the buildings and roads and infrastructure simply disappeared off the face of the earth.

Thus, batch after unassuming batch, most of the well-kept inhabitants of what had once been a first-world city were effectively rendered homeless, defenseless against the elements of late winter with no food reserves or shelters left standing. With no government, no emergency response teams, and no functioning form of telecommunication, the people were practically left to fend for themselves using whatever preindustrial means they could now muster. Those who couldn't survive the bitter cold of Ontario winter without the support systems of 21st-century North America were quickly sifted out by the swift hand of mother nature. By late March, only those who had been randomly bestowed the gift of physical and mental hardihood were spared.

A week after the final wave of land reclamation came the first people purge. To everyone's horror, about one in every ten people who remained alive were made to vanish, never to be seen again. The victims were seemingly chosen at random. Among the missing were men and women, adults and children, people of all kinds and ethnicities. The enemy, it would seem, had no particular preference of souls to victimize, but was rather indifferent in its affliction of pain and suffering among the masses.

Following that, a relatively uneventful month was granted, perhaps in a deliberate plan to allow the remaining souls to simmer, beaten with the senseless loss of friends and family and burdened with the weight of so many dark questions for which there was no hope of answers. Of those who remained, the defiant ones were easy to weed out. Driven to their doom by an innate tendency like moths to the flame, those valiant ones eventually sought out each other, banded together, and set out to scout the wider region and explore options

for relief and retaliation. In doing so, they only succeeded in exposing themselves to the merciless click on the controls of an unstoppable weapon by an enemy halfway across the globe. Group after group would organize, plan, and then vanish without a trace. Those who were ultimately spared were therefore weak in spirit by virtue of selective subtraction as well as by having seen first hand the consequences of defiance in the post-Eventian world. Thus, weakened in means, then spirit, then constituency, the population of the city of Ottawa had been primed to be cowed into obedience, a necessary step for what was about to follow.

The pamphlets started dropping from the sky right around the start of spring, the sole channel of communication between hunter and prey. Apparently, Ottawa was now ordained as a single stretch of farmland. The people who remained were to see to it, and tend to the farms with bare hands and simple implements, lest they invite more people purges still. Naturally, no explanation was given as to what had happened, or why, or by whose hand. From that moment on, the pamphlets would simply contain orders and decrees. And it only took two other waves of purges for people to fall in line and start doing as they're ordered. By then, the population of the farm of Ottawa had been reduced by about half. Given a choice to serve or vanish, those who didn't disappear had by the end of the first decade created a giant farm stretching over an area larger than a thousand square miles. In different corners, it housed birch and red oak trees, red maple, sugar maple, and hickory. The Farmers were forever kept in the dark on what had happened elsewhere in the world, in the United States, or even in Hull and Gatineau right across the river. Information flow had been decisively severed within the lifespan of the first generation, and it will not be re-established for many generations to come, or quite possibly forever. Unless of course, Adonis was to succeed at making contact.

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Adonis traced the curve of the Elysion bracelet with his index finger. Along its smooth, brushed-metal surface were the remains of two popped bubbles, and the firm roundness of two remaining bubbles marked III and IV. He had been ported upright onto his feet, and his body was still aching with the recent memory of heavy rubble crushing his limbs and torso. He felt relieved, and for the moment impressed with himself for having had the foresight to program multiple bubbles on his hacked bracelet as safety measures. That

provision had already proved essential to saving his life not once but *twice* in a single day.

It was hot where he had been randomly ported, but he could feel it was a different kind of hot. It was humid, cloudy, and felt like it was about to pour down with rain any minute. Where he was standing the sun was well on its path down the invisible curve towards the horizon. Without his device, he could only narrow down the time of day to around 6 or 7 in the evening.

As soon as he took the time to look around him, Adonis felt his heart skip a beat. He was evidently in the middle of a farm, with some sort of a crop of a uniform height extending over a vast stretch of land all around him. It was a green plant that shot straight up like bamboo all the way to his waist level and ended in an unusually large yellow flower. Given the uniform spacings between the plants and the unnaturally flat landscape, there could be no doubt it was a man-made creation. There were no machines though, and no animals in sight. But he did spot some sort of shed out in the distance, right at the center of the crop field. A tool shed, perhaps, or some small storage space for farming supplies. Being the only interesting object in sight, he naturally started towards it to investigate. It might contain a clue to where he could find Farmers, he hoped. He was so close, and so excited, that he all but forgot about the trauma of being buried alive just a few moments ago.

As he made his way towards the toolshed through dense crops, he found himself thinking about the physical realities of life without TP. Earlier today, he was all but incinerated alive in wild flames closing in from every direction. Just a few moments ago, he got himself trapped under tons of rubble, and his life nearly came to an abrupt and horrible end. He had never experienced such horrors before. To the Farmers, perhaps that would have been a typical day out in the wild. Nothing to write home about. And even if it wasn't always that bad, life without TP must surely be toilsome in a very real sense. Crossing a river, climbing a mountain, tripping under the summer sun, things he had always considered niceties of wild nature now suddenly presented formidable obstacles that collectively made life unbearable. Compared to how it was right here, his life had been incredibly comfortable and worry-free. The corrector had said that much to him before, but he hadn't quite appreciated the full meaning of it until now.

The toolshed stood about eight feet high and some ten feet wide. It was made entirely of thin sheets of twisted metal that overlapped and interlocked to form the walls and ceiling. It looked old, and abandoned, with the sheet metal almost entirely rusted and the walls themselves warped and crooked. For a toolshed, though, it was still perhaps functional, if barely. Out of little curiosity, and since Adonis had already committed a long walk to reach it, he decided to invest a bit more effort into finding the door and taking a look inside. To his surprise, there was no door. Instead, he discovered an opening at the far side of the shed where a door would have been placed (had there been one) but was instead merely kept open via a missing metal sheet in the fabric of the wall. The opening was narrow and low, such that he had to crouch and tilt sideways to fit in. The inside of the shed was dark and humid and smelled of a stench so strong and putrid that it stopped him in his tracks for a second.

As soon as his pupils adjusted to the darkness, Adonis immediately fixated on three interesting objects within view. Curiously, there were no tools inside the tool shed. There were no crop seeds, chemicals, or any other farming supplies either. It was basically bare except for three unusual animals stationed in proximity to the middle of the enclosure. In the dark, it was hard to tell with any certainty what type of animals they were. To his left were two of them, one most probably a goat although it could have been an unusually small cow, and the other its baby calf or billy, crouched under it and busy suckling some milk. The ground must have been carpeted with hay or thresh at some point in the past, but by now it had gathered an upper layer of smeared animal droppings and filth. Adonis still couldn't adjust to the horrible smell permeating the air. As the animal to his right shifted its posture, he immediately recognized it must be some kind of monkey, the way it was squatting on its lower limbs with its upper limbs akimbo and its head held upright over its neck and shoulders. Adonis was familiar with goats from the petting zoo, although there they were fatter, better groomed, and much cleaner. The monkey though was of a species unlike any he had ever seen. It had long dark hair, and where its body hair ought to be it was instead covered with patches of dried up dirt.

Not a shed then. It must be a small barn. Almost in unison, all three animals let out sounds as if to acknowledge his entrance into their home. The goat bleated, the baby animal suckling its milk let out some sort of a shriek, and the monkey gazed defensively at the intruder and let out what felt like a long hiss. Adonis swallowed as he stepped closer. The monkey's eyes had put him into a momentary

trance, and its face from up close was rugged yet too delicate for a chimp or baboon. The hair was also wrong. It was almost...

Suddenly the thing behind the goat shifted in the darkness and became thinner and taller, then it seemed to be moving towards him in tiny silent steps. As it got closer, there could be no more doubt. It wasn't a calf or a billy. Its two legs held it upright and its two arms extended out for balance. Its head bobbed around as it moved but remained vertical, and within its face eyes gleamed and lips curved into a playful smile. Despite the nakedness and the filth, the thing was apparently a tiny human being. A toddler, perhaps two years old. What it was doing alone in a barn and how it winded up suckling milk directly from the udder of a filthy goat, that he could not fathom. Unless it wasn't alone. Adonis glanced again at the monkey, which was now clearly distressed at the proximity of the toddler to Adonis. The monkey's facial expression of alarm was all too familiar, and he could no longer ignore its long black hair and curiously delicate fingers. As it got up on its feet, Adonis felt his heart skip a beat. The posture was decisively human. This wasn't a barn after all. This was a dwelling. He was in the presence of a *family* of Farmers. This dark, bare, stinky enclosure of few paces in either direction must be their *tile*. The mother, stolid and weary-looking as he had never seen before, was marginally mistakable for an ape yet clearly a human being in retrospect. The child, a pitiable creature breastfeeding from a farm animal in full sight of his parent. Adonis couldn't help retching loudly at the thought, which seemed to alarm all three beings simultaneously. It wasn't the fact that the toddler did it that got to him. A toddler wouldn't care, shouldn't care where its milk came from. He wouldn't know any better. It was the fact that his own *mother* let him. She just sat there completely unbothered by it. It was *routine*.

As he regained his composure, Adonis eyed the mother with newfound admiration. With a slow, serious tone he started:

"My name is Adonis. I came here to help you. What's your name?"

The woman's blank stare left him with a slither of doubt that he was, in fact, speaking to a monkey. Meanwhile, the reverb of Adonis's words seemed to get the toddler startled at first, then downright frightened. He or she bobbed in quick, out-of-balance steps and rested behind its mother, its head extended with curiosity from behind the safety of her leg.

"It's ok, you have nothing to be afraid of. I'm not here to hurt you. You and your child are safe here with me. I'm Adonis. What's..."

The woman interrupted his message with a very loud hiss. Then she opened her mouth wide and let out a loud sound that was just not humanlike. It was loud, like a shriek of an animal but deeper. It felt like a gust of wind was howling through a large hole in a dead tree trunk.

Unable to interpret her attempt to communicate, if it was at all an attempt to communicate, Adonis found himself focused on her face, searching for any sense of understanding in her expression. But all he saw was a blank stare. As his examination reached her mouth, though, he found a clue to the mystery of the sounds she was making. With her mouth wide open, Adonis noticed that where the woman's tongue was supposed to be, there was just a little stump. Her mouth was basically a gaping hole with some five or six teeth left scattered around the corners. She couldn't make an intelligible vocalization if she wanted to.

The sight immediately evoked in Adonis the memory of that early morning long ago, back when he was just a little boy exploring the wilderness and stumbled across the body of a dead Farmer washed ashore. The dead man's mouth was also a gaping hole, with his tongue presumably bitten out by some sea creature. But what about this woman? The only two Farmers he had ever laid eyes on, both missing tongues by some miraculous coincidence? No sooner than he started to ponder over the odds that he was interrupted by an unexpected combination of pain and imbalance. Within a second, he found himself knocked onto the ground with a large creature perched on his torso hammering him with blows directly to his face. Too stunned to react, the stinging pain of every blow brought him closer to fainting. The dark beast was more massive and much stronger looking than the woman and had seemingly appeared out of nowhere. The shrieks of the other creatures were now getting louder. The goat was stomping its feet hysterically, and with the corner of his tearful eye, Adonis glimpsed the mother and child whimpering with fear.

"Stop! Wait! I'm a friend," Adonis exclaimed quickly as the creature paused its onslaught. But just a brief moment later its bulky arms reappeared, now gripping a large stone with its pointed edge angled down towards Adonis's chest. With his eyes shut from sheer horror, and not willing to risk being impaled in the heart with a stone-age weapon, Adonis quickly reached out to his bracelet and popped whatever bubble he could grope in time.

## psi

*"Freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction."*  
—Ronald Reagan

On the surface, the island of Manhattan showed remarkably little change from the second before the Event to the second immediately after. Even though many buildings and skyscrapers were plucked right out of its skyline, so many more remained intact that in the bigger picture it didn't look like much had changed. But so much *had* changed in fact, if under the surface. The entire power grid had failed, the underground subway system was gone, and every last telecommunication tower had vanished, along with every library, museum, and police station. Without traffic lights to keep order, the ever-busy mesh of parallel streets and avenues almost immediately grid-locked. Minutes later, confused masses started pouring out of the subway stations into the streets and walkways like ants swarming out of a flooded nest underground. Chaos was swift. Before the sun had set, looting had already begun. With police out of the picture, street gangs were in full swing within days. By the end of the first week, natural selection had already worked on them, ensuring the survival of only the most brutal few. The Slacks were strategically barricaded in Central Park, camped out in the gaping hole where the Met used to be. The reservoir nearby provided ample fresh water and the trees of the park made for excellent fire logs. They survived by guarding the entrances to the park and making strategic looting runs to nearby targets whenever the circumstances were favorable. The Lat-Zeros claimed the area from Trinity Church all way north to Soho. They roamed the streets haphazardly and bullied people into giving up their last supplies of food and fuel. The area north of Washington Heights was disputed between two rival gangs and the inevitable skirmishes that resulted drove many of the inhabitants to hide underground in the subway stations before those were in turn flooded as drainage pumps failed. Not many people bothered to ask the big questions. Nobody could afford to, with the reality of day to day survival consuming the last drop of everyone's energy. Pretty soon the supplies dwindled, and those who crossed the bridges looking for answers or supplies or ammunitions never came back. Within a month, the city had completely imploded, and organized crime degenerated into primeval chaos with each poor soul fending for their own. Naturally, the soft spirited soon perished, along with the ill, the delicate-bodied, the far-thinking, the risk-taking, and the trouble-making types. Survival of the fittest, always busy at work in such circumstances, ensured the demise of all but the

most simple-minded, hardy people on the island, the ones that make for better Farmers. Only then was the final stroke elegantly penned by a cold, unconcerned foe from an impossible distance afar.

At the time of the final arrangement, there were still some ten million people alive within the confines of Manhattan. Those were to become the original population of the Manhattan farm, an open-air prison spanning the entire length and breadth of the island. To arrange for that, every man-made construct on the island was first TPed away, leaving a monolithic expanse of open space stretching out into the horizon in every direction. Next, concrete walls were TPed into place, bordering the entire island and crisscrossing inside it so that a honeycomb pattern of internal sections emerged, each about twenty acres in size. The people were then TPed naked into the grid by random assignment. Someone in the City must have figured that housing the entire population in a single pasture would result in unmanageable stampedes and keep the door open for unified resistance to emerge. At any rate, in the process of transforming the space into a honey-comb patterned organizer of humans, the incredible complexity of what humanity had built for itself in Manhattan had been reduced to a horribly clear-cut construction. The residential blocks of Upper West Side and Alphabet City, the graffiti-laden bridges and tunnels of Harlem, the posh storefronts of Tribeca, the dazzling lights of Times Square, the double-faced businesses of Meatpacking District, and the neck-twisting skyscrapers of Wall Street, all were forever gone to be replaced by a single, eerily uniform mesh of 40-foot-high concrete walls stretching uninterrupted from Hudson to East River. And within those walls, the men and women, the old and young, the businessmen and the homeless, all found themselves captive inside barren hexagonal fields with no explanation or end in sight, like some sort of a sick joke or a terrible nightmare one just couldn't shake off.

What might those poor souls have whispered to one another in horror and disbelief? What cruelties might they have committed upon each other in desperation when apathy and cynicism finally set in? What shifting alliances might have formed, and broken and reformed among them in captivity? What forms of utter insanity might have permeated the congested atmosphere? We may never know, for none of that was deemed worthy of record by the new overlords. And at any rate, none of it would have mattered much. There was going to be no more civilization on that land that had once been the pinnacle of human accomplishment. It was now and will forever remain a symbol for the subjugation of man on the hands of

man. For the moment, it would be used as a reservoir of idle Farmers to be tapped into as the need may be in other Farms all over the globe. And within just a few generations, it will be repurposed into a breeding ranch for fine sapien meat.

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The popping of the third bubble didn't seem to place Adonis into a different time zone or climate. It was still late evening, hot, and humid. Yet with the first whiff he inhaled, he could clearly tell he was somewhere entirely different. Even with his eyes still firmly shut, he had no doubt the place reeked with aged feces of thousands of animals. It was a stench so horrible that he felt about to faint upon the very first breath. As he opened his eyes, he felt his heart skip a beat, and his knees weaken as the blood in his veins thickened with horror and disgust. He was standing in the middle of a vast crowd of living *things* that stretched as far as he could see. The individuals forming the herd were all standing, fully naked, their faces totally blank with mental apathy. They were all no doubt humans, yet there was some element of human nature that was decisively missing from the scene. You couldn't really call them people. Rather, they were a collection of humans, each standing stoically in the filth of their own bodily excrement. There was no eye contact between them, no words spoken, no hand gestures or facial expressions. They just stood there, catatonic in their surrender, like sheep in a farm passively waiting to be sheared or slaughtered.

In his angst, Adonis still didn't miss the realization of where he was. This here must be where sapiens are raised to be slaughtered for meat or harvested for fat or hair or whatever else. This here is a massive collection of Farmers, being bred like cattle for the enjoyment of his friends back in the City. He wanted to meet Farmers, well here they were, herded in the thousands between high walls to the point where their standing bodies were crushing against each other. With that, Adonis became conscious of the arms and shoulders that were rubbing against him as he shifted and turned and bobbed and tiptoed around in order to peer at the horizon in different directions through the sea of shoulders and heads. There were at least several thousand souls trapped in that horrible confinement. The walls were too high to see past, and there was no ceiling or covers of any kind. Small spacings scattered uniformly between the masses of bodies turned out to be where large troughs were placed that contained sort of grass. Food, most likely, for the human cattle to gnaw on while waiting for slaughter.

Well, it was his last shot given that the only remaining bubble on his bracelet embodied the last-resort, take-me-back-home program. The surreal nature of the scene must have given him an unexpected surge of courage, and he found himself jumping on top of a food bin and raising his voice to address the masses: "Everybody, may I have your attention please!"

The heads immediately shifted. Some in confusion, some in alarm, but most remained as neutral in their expression as if they just didn't care.

"My name is Adonis. I come from..."

"I am here to help you find a way out of captivity. I'm here to set you free!" he recovered, realizing it wasn't prudent to start by emphasizing how he hailed from the land of the enemy. But before he could figure out what to say next, one man in the crowd produced what could only be described as a loud grunt, evidently directed at him. Another soon followed, then another. Soon the herd was loudly bellowing, snorting, and hauling out of control. Adonis froze in horror as he realized why the sounds were so primitive: Every mouth that opened revealed a dark gaping hole.

They had no tongues. Not just the woman in the farm shed, not just the man who had washed ashore years before, but *all* of them. He felt a chill travel down his spine as he followed the horrible path of logic to the ultimate realization. It would have been carried out very easily, perhaps one Citizen project on a lazy summer afternoon. A click of a button, somewhere in some ministry, and all the tongues of all the Farmers would vanish. Perhaps it was the enthusiastic idea of some smart student spending a week on work on Farmer-management as a change of pace from a year of uninterrupted luxury; someone just like Ponos. Full of ideas. Perhaps it happened ten years ago, or many decades earlier. Probably around the time of the Event, well over a century ago. No tongues, no language. No language, no capacity to organize. No organization, no hope for revolt. He fell to his knees as his legs gave. How naïve, all that time preparing for a speech, scrutinizing every word for maximum effect. All the while his audience not only hadn't the capacity to relay the message but in all likelihood didn't even understand spoken language in the first place. How could they? Having lived their entire lives in a world absent tongues!

The faculty of language now only existed in the City. It was hopeless. Utterly hopeless. The corrector had all but said it to him already: The world had morphed into its current form through an irreversible process. It would never revert to what it once was again. But there he was, son of a blissful, idyllic society thinking he could single-handedly mold the entire world back into shape just like any desire might be brought into existence with the click of a button within the confines of the shielded bubble he had grown up calling home. He felt weak in the stomach, and he let go of his tears. As the sea of people closed in on top of him, monkey-like hands started groping his body and tongue-less mouths attacked in increasing veracity what they must have identified as food. Adonis felt the moment decelerate into slow motion, and with a swift decrescendo fade into an indifferent form of silence. He registered, incuriously the feeling of inefficient mouths biting at his arms and shoulders, each with too few teeth and much-reduced strengths. If anything, death would soon come as a result of trampling or smothering. In the end, they'd find a way to eat his dead body still. Maybe in that peculiar way, he could be said to have sacrificed his life for their benefit. Not that any of it would matter anyway. What he might be able to do to help a swarming nest of human-shaped animals wasn't of any interest to him. He felt his spirit attenuate rapidly with the passing of every second until when he had become utterly despondent, he found himself indifferently squeezing the fourth bubble on his bracelet. The one he had saved as the last measure, the one he had vowed never to use. The one that would take him back home.

As the world morphed back into the familiar scene of a civilized tile, he was ashamed to have felt an immediate sense of safety. As that died down, all that was left was despair. A great feeling of desolation overcame him. It wasn't sorrow that he felt, but mostly dullness. He tried to push away all conscious thoughts of his adventure, and concentrate on the void of the moment. After all, he had an entire life to reflect obsessively upon the bizarre happenings of those few short hours he had spent out there in the Farms.

## omega

*"The time has come when the old world must make way for the new."*  
—Vyacheslav Molotov

A bright-colored bird pecking at the window was a welcome interruption. Adonis lay down his pen on the hitherto blank paper, maybe he should take his time. He and that little bird were a lot alike, he reflected: two diurnal creatures uneasily awake at such an unnatural hour of the night. Glancing around his office, he felt truly at home. Everything was arranged exactly as he would have it. The room was elegantly simple as to be the work of a reductionist mind. There was no artwork, no decorations, no fancy lighting or wallpapers, nothing at all that wasn't put in place to serve a utility. In front of him was a plain white, frosted glass desktop. Beyond that was a large empty area for pacing around when deep in thought with his arms locked behind his back. A wide window provided a view into to the garden, to keep him tethered to the grounding elements of mother nature, and provide for the occasional interruption of a bird or a cat or an insect, or even the occasional whistling of a strong breeze to get his mind off troubling thoughts. A couple of chairs met each other at an angle around one corner, serving as an alternative reading nook whenever the office seat got too stiff on his back. And finally the latest addition, a hacking station occupied the farthest corner, delivering continued sustenance to his dream of rigging together a time teleport, so that he may keep trying, and keep failing. One day it will work, he reassured himself in his habit of late. Time was, after all, more of an ally than an enemy towards the end.

Adonis reached for his device and swiped off the lights to sleep mode, allowing the room to fade into the dim lighting of the moon shining through the windows. As he glanced at the device in the dark, his own reflection smirked back at him, taunting him with the realization that it was, in fact, his own face that looked so old and faded. His neck and traps were still visibly tight and robust, but his visage had conceded to the years a certain appearance of youthfulness. The skin around his cheeks and forehead was now distinguished with a few wrinkles here and there, giving the overall feel of a tired soul, but the eyes gleamed still with almost as much light as ever before. His hair, time had graciously spared, except maybe for a receded hairline and a little gray around the temples that didn't contrast too much against the blond substrate. Perhaps it wouldn't look so good if he was to let it grow as long as before, but

he was actually satisfied with wearing it short now, so it didn't matter.

In recent days he had often wondered what he would do if his youth were to be magically restored. What if he woke up one day and he had his muscular body, his sharp focus, and his overflowing energy back? Would he be more successful, more effective at accomplishing his goals this time around given all the experience and wisdom he had accumulated over the years? Much of his life had been an act of trailblazing, and surely a second go at a pass would be much easier, much faster now that the trail had been blazed in the thick of the forest? But then he'd realize that the daydream didn't, in fact, make any sense, not even in the hypothetical. It wasn't just his body or mind that had aged, but his soul was tired as well, worn down by the passage of time and all the disappointments and calamities that it had brought upon him. The same predicaments made him wiser eventually and unavoidably eroded his spirit in the process. For him to be a youthful soul again, all those life experiences would have to *unhappen*, in his memory at least, so that he could be freed from their debilitating burden. And if that were to magically happen, then he would be reduced to his former naive self again, and would probably do things exactly as before. There was no cheating time. One can never subject their past person to their present mindset, not even inside of a daydream.

Adonis stood up, paced around a little, then slid out of his office and into a lavishly decorated hallway that stood in stark contrast to the simple room he just stepped out of. He kept the lights off and satisfied himself with the dimness of what little moonlight penetrated the skylights from above. The diamond chandeliers still did their usual moonlight sparkle despite it being the darkest hour of the night, and the gold-embroidered walls and majestic marble floors gleamed their part as well. It is incredible what the influence of a lady might do to the look and feel of a residence, let alone a lady *artist*. As he paced down the dark hallway, he skillfully dodged what little blocks or puzzle pieces or other toys were lurking on the floor here and there, but despite his best effort, he still took the sharp pain of full-impact over a piece of Lego right on the heel. One day, he thought, one day he'll learn to navigate the hazards of this hallway without incident. Or maybe he'll just learn to put on his night slippers!

As he paced down the hallway, he ignored a buzz or two on his silenced device. At this late hour, it could only be Atlas. Of all the

gang he was the only one who never lost to the years the habit of late-night pinging and impromptu plans to grab a bite or go for a quick dip, or this or that or the other. Marriage and kids had domesticated them all, and although they never admitted it, the effects of age had worn them down into a lazy daily routine, but not Atlas. He still went for a refreshing dive or a quick run no matter how late at night he felt like it, and when he craved pizza at the crack of dawn, he still went out for pizza at the break of dawn. Adonis wondered what Ponos was up to lately though. The devoted family man, as dutiful a caretaker as he always was as a worker everywhere he landed.

He was now pacing closer to his freshroom, as announced by the purring sound of the water streams getting steadily louder. It was at once calming and taunting. Yes, water streams never stopped flowing in the City, a casual symbol of the triumph of man over his fellow man. Out in the Farms, the masses toiled in thirst and hunger, that was the natural way of things.

Beyond his freshroom lay the bedroom, where his queen lay in all her majesty. She was as she had always been, the anchor of his life. And now she was also the mother of his children and the witness to his journey in life. Beyond her throne room, the darkness of the hallway extended further still leading eventually to the children's memrooms. Amazing to think that the children, those who at a time not too long ago didn't even exist, now were not only existent but had also accumulated their own memories as to require their own memrooms. He, naturally, had resisted the pressure, and as of yet hadn't dedicated to himself any memrooms. It seemed to him like such a waste of space. Besides, the memories that really mattered, he argued, were not amenable to any form of physical embodiment. The memory of Abas had all but faded in the distant past, and aside from that, the only significant memory was...

Sometimes during his nightly ritual of pacing up and down the dark hallways of the tile, he would imagine that some of those doors out in the distance would open up to the scared past. Over there was the door to his childhood walks of discovery, and beyond that was the door to Elysion, to the night when his precious firstborn would be conceived. The one to the left led to the night when he first kissed Nyx, or rather more accurately, when she first kissed him. The door hiding in the darker shadows of the hallways of nostalgia was special. That one opened up to the day of his secret trip out there to the Farms.

He was of course no longer sad about having failed to escape the City. There were several years of sorrow and depression, but eventually, the self tribunal yielded a favorable final verdict. And in any case, to his mind now the success or failure of the individual made little difference. Perhaps it was the wisdom that comes with the progression into old age, or maybe it was just the resignation of a tired soul. Over the years though, he never lost memory of all the vivid details of his brief journey. Perhaps at some subconscious level, he had hoped that one day, merciful forgetfulness might eventually set in and wash away the unpleasantness of the memory, and along with it the bitter aftertaste it had left in him. But such an epic journey was not one to be forgotten, for despite having failed at his objective, he *was* the very first Citizen to ever leave the City. And that was by its own right a remarkable achievement. He had also seen wonders. Fires that devour entire forests, and ancient buildings that testify to glorious civilizations predating the Event. And people, being bred in ranches like cattle. Of all Citizens, he alone had seen those things. And that in itself was an act of defiance. With age, he had come to realize that rebellion can come in surprisingly different flavors. He had fully understood now that his father's true act of defiance was not the suicide in itself, or the time teleportation of books in itself, but rather in his ability to convince his son to carry the torch, his ability to extend the spirit of resistance into the next generation despite the ordinarily impassable chasm of time. True defiance, he could see clearly now, is ultimately an act of rebellion against time itself. This is so because, in order for things to change, it is necessary for defiance to be sustained by a persistent chain of free souls over many generations. That was the *real* challenge.

No, it was no longer sadness, but hope, that was his uppermost emotion. And whenever he paced the moonlit hallway of his family tile and sailed back in thought, it wasn't the disappointing scenes of his trip to the Farms that surfaced into consciousness, but instead, it was often the memory of a single distinct moment of human connection. It was that moment when a Farmer's hand had extended towards him, reaching down inside the rubble and trying to help him out of his entrapment. At that particular moment, he had encountered tangible evidence that there existed somewhere in the Farms, a heart still capable of human emotion. Often he wondered if that in itself had been the purpose of his life. If it were all just for that fleeting moment, then the ordeal still would have been worth it.

The scatter of toys intensified with every step closer to the doorway which led to the little one's bedroom, but the pain in his heels seemed to have done the trick to keep him on his toes. The door to the bedroom was ajar, and through the darkness, Adonis could see the silhouette of the little boy lying non-gracefully over the sheets of his bed, his body extending diagonally from side to side. Since the bed was much wider than the four-foot stretch of the little one's body, it made no difference in practice which way he slept. Not a worry in the world, he thought. Good for you, young man. You sleep tight tonight. For now, *I'll* be holding the fort.

The silence was briefly broken as the boy let out a comically loud snore as if to acknowledge Adonis's unspoken pledge. Adonis smirked into the darkness. He no longer felt despondent. Watching his son grow with the years had renewed his faith in the rejuvenative powers of life. The experience had reaffirmed his belief that no matter how bad things got, all it would take is one fresh generation to restore sanity. Not only was it possible for that to happen, ultimately it *was* going to happen, sooner or later. It was merely a question of when. There was, therefore, no hard requirement that he succeed to correct the course of all mankind within his fleeting lifetime. Time was eternal. And as long as he can be said to have taken a step or two in the right direction, as long as he made *some* progress no matter how small, and as long as the next generation picks up where he left off and takes, in turn, their own few steps forward further still, as long as this keeps happening, success was sure to follow. All that he needed to do on his part was to ensure that his son follows in his path like he had followed in Abas's path.

All wasn't lost after all, he thought. As long as this little one is there to carry the torch, then all wasn't lost. He eyed him one more time, barely making out his silhouette through the veil of darkness. Between a father and his son there will always stand the impenetrable barrier of time. Abas had cheated with the books, and so will he, Adonis with his own son. He started back toward his office. His nightly rounds, much like his overall course in life, generally took him in a full circle. Like a planet in orbit around its nexus of gravity, he thought, regular in its overall pattern although it can be said to be in free fall literally the entire course. If his life course had been a circular orbit, he reflected, then that one day at the Farms would have been the perihelion of his journey through life itself. And as such, it made sense for it to have been as accelerated, climactic, and brief as perihelion ought to be. Besides, having been faced with not one but multiple life-threatening calamities in a single day

following an entire lifetime of safety, Adonis had come to realize just how precarious his fleeting life really was. And that had caused him to hold on to it even more dearly. That one day had been his coming of age. As usual, things made a lot of sense to him in the darkness of his late-night rounds.

He had been unfortunate though, in that he had been born into the dark age of degeneration, when societies here in the City -as well as out in the Farms- had already ossified. He could have just as easily been born into more malleable times, when the world order was still in flux and the spirit of change permeating the atmosphere. He could have even landed, by a lucky roll of fate's dice, one of the fortuitous ages of the past, perhaps the time of the Carthaginians, or Andalusians, or Americans, when people were proud to be who they are, and eager to push the boundaries of civilization. When people were entitled to know the big picture and empowered to embellish it with their own creative strokes. Alas, his luck hadn't furnished him a life like that. For that much at least, he was genuinely disappointed.

He often daydreamed about what the world might be like after he'd gone. And always, he wished he could stick around and observe for longer. Fifty years, a hundred, maybe for the next two hundred years. It wasn't survival instinct as much as genuine curiosity - akin to the reluctance to put away a good novel until one read it to the end. And even then, one might still wonder what might have happened next in the imaginary world that had sprung to life within its pages. Many years from now, maybe a group of Citizens would band together and somehow succeed in curbing the City's oversight over one of the continental zones out there in the Farms. They would call it a free zone, or a neutral zone, or a natural sapien reservation. Generations later, sapiens indigenous to the free zone, their tongues intact, would develop a rudimentary language. Here and there, local groups might develop different writing systems. They'd chisel on stone or etch the rocks in the caves. They'd grow and prosper each in isolation generation after generation, safe from the corrosive influence of the City. Eventually, they'll bump into one another, whereupon inevitably and unavoidably, violence and war will erupt. Out of calamity peace will ultimately emerge, and over time, complex inter-group alliances, pacts, and trade agreements will form. Maybe it will take five centuries, perhaps even in ten, but, eventually, a civilization would emerge to rival the City itself. Where history would go from there, nobody can tell. One would hope that the future inhabitants of the City, by then mature in their tenancy on power and responsible in their use of TP on fellow human beings, might accept the emerging

civilization as their own peer. Maybe even embrace them as equals. One day, perhaps? One could only hope.

Back at his office, Adonis sat down at his desk. It was a very different desk than his father's had been, as he was a very different man both in appearance and at heart. Everything looked and felt different across the two generations, except for the letter he started penning:

My Dear Son,

You are all that survives me, the embodiment of my hopes, dreams, and of my yearning for a second chance at life.

That's how Abas had put it, so many years ago in that letter that had started everything. Adonis saw no reason to start his own message any other way, and perhaps -who knows how these things worked-by opening in the exact same way, he might be kindling some sort of a family tradition. Besides, it was, as he by now clearly understood, a perfectly truthful declaration. The rest, he decided, he would elaborate in his own way:

Not too many years ago I used to laugh at your adorable silliness whenever you made up wrong words like "foots" and "goed" and "mouses." Yet we adults also say silly words all the time, like "everything," "permanent," "infinite," and "forever."

Son, my journey is about finished, but yours is just beginning. My father was the first to kindle the flame of protest. Because of his rebellious spirit, I was the first to step outside the confines of the City. A tiny step forward, but a step forward nonetheless, and that's all that matters. A day will come when it is your turn to take a tiny step further still. And as you do it, know that you'll be honoring the memory of your fathers. Then you'll pass the flame. It takes as long as it takes. A hundred generations maybe. It's not our place to impose a timescale on history. We are to live and die, keep

the fire burning bright, and march the pace of mother nature.

They'll call you stubborn, they'll call you obstinate, they'll call you insolent, defiant, argumentative. But they'll never call you what you really are: The last remaining human. You think you can't do something. You think you can't, you think you can't. But you can. Say it out loud, for me, right now, say "I can."

He was of course paraphrasing from Yorgen Estbiomsen's book, the one Abas had sent one time so many years before. It seemed unbelievable how after all that time, those few words of inspiration were still fresh in his memory when the cacophony of life had all but faded into obliviousness.

I'm sorry for all the things that I should have told you but didn't. It wasn't for lack of desire, but rather because I just couldn't fit them into words. The bigger feelings in life are often larger than words.

He put down the pen, his eyelids feeling heavy with sleepiness. There was still so much he wanted to say. Maybe he'll write some more later. There's still time.

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