

The Future

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Prologue

The war had entered its fifth century.

It was no longer even referred to as a “war” anymore.

Violence and murder had wound so deeply into human life that the few who still fought for freedom often welcomed death, as the final remedy for the despair of a hopeless battle.

The men who finally ended the war had stopped fighting decades before, because they realized that battling evil simply created more trauma, more violence, more murder, more death...

The men who finally killed evil hid themselves in a deep mountain and made a cure from a bottomless well of pure nihilism.

If you fight evil, evil grows. If you do not fight evil, evil rules...

This hopeless mantra that had encircled the jugular of the species since the species began was finally unraveled one clear morning, under a cloudless sky, when the rising sun had yet to brighten the overhead stars into invisibility.

The trees were dark on the high mountainside when the men emerged from their cave, pulling giant crates with their grunting muscles. Their eyes flickered with mad purpose and tentative hope. Axes were strapped to their belts.

The lowering sunlight from the rising sun lit up the white-flecked tops of the cherry trees that clung to the edges of the mountain.

One tall man with a dark beard, spiky hair and heavy bags under his eyes cleared his throat, then spoke to his companions, his friends, his co-conspirators in the murder of murder.

“We don’t even know how few people we are down to – I would guess 5% of the former population.” He gestured at the circle of silent men, dark as shadows in the dying night.

“We have withdrawn from having families to sacrifice ourselves for the future of mankind. We are the modern monks bringing heavenly peace a warring world.

“For over 400 years, death and murder have reigned supreme. Many here have come to believe that war will only end when mankind ends. Our solution...”

The bearded man stopped speaking, his tongue paralyzed by the sudden shocks of horror in the faces of his companions.

The light brightened suddenly.

The man closest to him pointed and whispered: “Your forehead...”

The bearded man lifted his hand past the rising sun. Above his eyes, his hand turned bright red, the edges of his fingertips bleeding bloody laser light.

“Sky cannon!” screamed a man.

High overhead - barely visible in the navy blue of the middle sky – a gathering ruby light gleamed on a tiny white dot.

The bearded man screamed: “RELEASE THE ANGELS!”

The men hesitated. The cure for violence might be close, but death might be even closer...

“IF WE FAIL, LIFE WILL NOT BE WORTH LIVING!”

The bearded man tore his axe from his belt and swung with all his strength at the closest crate. It cracked and shattered, revealing rows of tiny blonde heads.

A terrifying pressure descended from the lightening sky. The men’s hair leapt up in the sudden static.

“NOW! NOW! HELP ME!” cried the bearded man.

“They’re not enough!” shouted a shorter man with cracked glasses.

“They can be copied, the blueprints are inside – COME ON – IT CANNOT ALL HAVE BEEN FOR NOTHING MY BROTHERS!”

Screaming, the men suddenly leapt forward with their axes as the air began to glow around them.

The birds, startled from their sleep, rose suddenly from the cherry trees into the brightening sky, where their feathers began to burn, and they cried out in agony.

Hacking as their clothes ignited in flames, the men smashed open the crates, and tiny dark creatures with whirring white wings rose into the air like startled dragonflies.

The flying fragments of wood began to burn. The men screamed as they began to melt, but an inhuman will kept their burning arms flying, and more winged creatures flew free of the crates.

Hundreds of tiny bodies with white wings flew with blinding speed up from the mountain as it began to turn a terrifying blue-white.

They flew into the sky – up beyond the yellow light of the rising sun.

The creatures paused in their flight, turning their heads down towards the blinding white collapsing mountain.

As one, they flew even higher as a shockwave blasted up from the massive new crater that was rapidly swallowing countless tons of rock and rubble.

Their white wings whirring faintly, the creatures hovered over the groaning earth, above the mushroom cloud of the former mountain.

The creatures looked down for a long while, then looked at each other. Their blonde hair and blue eyes shone vividly in the rising light of the new day.

There was an electric pause, and then – together – the creatures raised their blue eyes to the tiny white dot high in the sky, just below the midnight meridian that was slowly swallowing the remaining stars above.

Again as one, the creatures' wings began to beat faster, and they rose like an eerie reverse snowfall.

Weapons appeared in their tiny pink hands as they flew like a narrow blown blizzard towards the weapon that had destroyed their masters.

It was the beginning of the end of the endless, nameless war.

The Angels had arrived to save mankind.

Chapter 1

I birth back to life through the graves of my childhood.

When your heart first panics and shocks you back to gasping breath, you grow from nothing – from a zygote, an idea, a blank book – into your adult power in a matter of – god I don't know how long, forever or a moment, cracked memories are not *time*...

I am reborn from ice – like my mother's womb, but warmer...

Like my life, I first gasp in the midnight depths – and end up choking for air in the sun-stained shallows...

I start with *nothing*...

A silent crib, a heavy heavy head, rotating female faces – *do my legs have two colors, or is that sunlight?*

Distant yelling... Pulled up and out, held up in the rain before wet faces, flashing lights...

On a trembling lap – feeling my mother's rough legs, scaly and sandy. Watching her peel off her skin at night, laughing with – my father...

She removes her colors like a mirrored chameleon in the dark.

I doze between a canyon of chests – one hairy, one plump food. Someone plays with my hair, lazy whirlpool spiders...

This is when I begin to suspect...

*My death is reaching **down** to meet my birth...*

Spiders, chameleons, sun-stained shallows – I would *never* have had these analogies as a baby, some – claw is reaching down from the end of my life to pull me *up* – from a single cell to a hospital prison...

I am meeting myself in the middle...

I weep with relief that the icicles in my bones might thaw in time...

I am a skeleton of winter, shivering for spring...

I stagger through my infancy – a staccato movie, most frames missing...

Controlling my innards, hot with pleasure at my body's creaking complaints...

Praise from a new woman, an old woman, at my empty diaper – a thirst for adulthood, a breakout from the broken baby prison of my inflated flesh – the shameful debased coinage of the newly-minted...

Father strides in the distance, focused, careless – I want to become the little black ear-box he treasures...

Mother has to disassemble and reassemble herself every day, which means she must break constantly...

He mostly rages in the night – the dark kills calm – but I learn to love it, like thunder overhead.

Older, in my room with the car-wash windows – blue daylight for an instant – trying to jump and hang in the flashing air...

I erode, I suppose, in the *waiting to exist*, in the wasted early times, begging for attention like a dog barking at a cloud...

Reaching for distracted parents, I fall out of myself, into waves, into – pain...

I taste salt and wet and hurt and love

“DON’T DO IT!”

What, exist? Think? Love?

Fail..!

My mother’s voice – I resent that I have to wear a coat because *she* is cold...

Time accelerates as I rise to life – an old cartoon flies by, Jesus making eggs, complaining about feeling like he’s been dead for three days...

I see a rising white rocket clawing to the sky within me, but I recoil from it – *to flee the rich air, wild surf and sheltering trees for the endless emptiness between dead planets – let that not be true...*

Older, faster...

Friends, new hair, scorn and superiority, pursuing girls like a child chasing balloons – bright, bumping, empty...

Father cares now, mother moves on, back – new babies, new flashbulbs, shining on shiny magazine covers – perfection is for admiration, not love...

Hairspray stings the nose with isolation.

He brings me into his leather lair, with watery smoke and old records – tells me to win *at all costs*, that second-place is shameful, nothing, *invisible...*

Growing, leaving, scalding scorn – grudging appreciation, great value...

I am dizzy, my mind aches from bursting through the sedimentary layers of old time...

And then – then I am *free!*

My mind clears.

I taste bile between my teeth.

I *hate* childhood.

My thoughts slow and circle, looking for a place to land...

I settle into adult thoughts, waiting for my sight to return.

Spring begins to thaw my marrow, drape flesh on the winter bones

My friends – what a strange word, I haven't really used it in years – face rises in my mind – a short boy, freckles, red hair and blue eyes, sitting and talking and talking and talking...

I try to laugh, but my cheeks are dentist-gum numb...

Oh yeah, he used to be *obsessed* with tunneling down to earlier and earlier memories...

He passes through my mind, chattering away self-obsessively...

Every time he would think he had gotten to the bottom, he would unpeel another one – and then spend hours trying to figure out if *that* was a genuine memory, or just an external story impressed on him by endless repetition.

That time that he had fallen asleep behind the couch during a game of hide and go seek, and his hysterical mother had called the police, thinking he had wandered off – was *that* real, a genuine memory, or just another one of his mother's half-smiling, exasperated stories, so common in my tribe, the mothers who are endlessly put upon by absolutely normal childhood behaviour – particularly from boys.

I remember – I could never understand why he would want to muck about with such early nonsense – life is an inverted pyramid; the beginning means almost *nothing*; the spread of power at the end is *everything* – and if you get there, who cares what came before? I have always utterly *loathed* questions without answers – in particular *pointless* questions without answers, such as: *is this early memory a real memory, or an internalized story?*

Pah!

What navel-gazing *nonsense!*

Rage will thaw me...

I never knew what he was looking for back there, down there – I do know that he never seemed to find it, never seemed to get any satisfaction from this endless circular pursuit, never broke free of this obsession – and went a little crazy, if I remember rightly, after Jane...

Light begins to brighten my eyelids – *why does no one ever paint what we see when we close our eyes?* – and a stabbing pain like twin bullets through the sockets hits me, reaching to an ancient ache on the back of my scalp, where the paint stuck – and I get a terrible sense of *time* – *is this even the same sun? How can so little light hurt so much unless I have slept for a thousand years..?*

Coughing in the dark, old bones, a young man with dark bangs sitting in shadows whispering to me that *we shall meet again...*

Counselling me to surrender to the ice, to hibernation – to an unimaginable future...

What did I do?

The question is empty now, self-conscious.

This is better: ***Where did I go?***

A long time away...

My – friend’s face hangs before me now – *how long have I lived?* – and it strikes me with a great internal church bell of sadness that it is almost certain that his face has vanished from the world – as most of us vanish from the world – in a terrifying waterfall of endless obscurity; bubbles that form and pour and splash and dissolve into nothing, into the vast emptiness of most people’s lives in history. They exist to breed and serve and eat and make, and they vanish like a wet smudge of tiny insects in a giant hurricane...

A part of my brain seems to have unfrozen first – a part that was probably frozen for most of my life, because... Oh God, it was an important thought, where has it gone? Sadness about my friend’s face having vanished from the world – *oh yeah, that is it...*

When my friend was searching for his early memories, it terrified me deeply (although I only experienced that as irritation at the time) that a boy could actually get lost chasing his own memories. The idea of *ceasing to exist*, of being forgotten, was always bottomlessly terrifying to me. I genuinely believe that if I had not achieved power, I would’ve had a very tough time even getting out of bed. The pointlessness of eating and breathing and sexing and fitting a jacket and getting a haircut and laughing – when after you were gone, no one would remember your name, or your face, or what you did, and all of your dreams and unrealized thoughts will have vanished as if you never existed – even now, I can feel the ice forming on my spine even as it leaves my brain.

Utterly terrifying...

Was that what it was all about?

Oh God, who cares? Introspection is paralysis, obscurity is the only *real* death...

The light and agony increase. I am terrified to open my eyes – the sun is two spears in the hands of a hunter!

I flee inward – which I *hate*, but it is the only path away from the pain...

Like a vampire...

An old door opens...

Oh when was this, when I was a teenager, my mid-teens?

Everyone has that friend who listens to drum-god Rush and takes that fork in the road that leads either to an obsession with Lord of the Rings, or Ayn Rand. Listening to Geddy Lee screech in tinnitus syllables about Rivendell and the Virtue of Selfishness is a curse that many a beardless youth falls prey to. My red-headed friend gave me a cloth bag full of books on Objectivism, and kept circling around me at social events, trying to make eye contact, clearly desperate for me to fall under the spell of that smoky Soviet goddess of bitter atheism and literary rape.

*Yeah, the flood of pleasure at his **need**...*

Even back then, oh god maybe 14 or 15, I *loved* having people want things from me – it gave me shape, dimension, power...

God I hated people who wanted things from others – it always felt so pathetic and helpless – but I *loved* it when they wanted things from *me*, because I got everything they gave up...

Deeper into the past, away from the invading light...

Another door opens...

Stuck on a boring call one long Sunday afternoon, I thumbed through my friend's bag full of books, looking for the pictures that used to be sandwiched between endless text in those paper-cut days.

In this book there was a photo that chilled me to the bone, and I actually felt an electric current of pure revulsion, and hurled the book away. It was a picture of 3 people – Ayn Rand, Nathaniel Branden – probably groping her from behind his bulk – and one elderly man on the left, with a cleft chin, squinting into the sun (Why oh *why* do old people insist on squinting, it just makes them look like loathsome crumpled wax-paper!) – and the caption under the picture correctly identified everyone except him. He was just: "An unidentified man."

Oooh, there is that spinal chill again! I feel revulsion and rage at that moment. *How dare a man live on this earth for 70 years and leave such a tiny pathetic unimportant footprint – despite being surrounded by relatively well-known people – that one tiny wave from the ocean of time washes him clean away?*

The ocean dissolves us like sandcastles. We build, it breaks – walking into it is death...

Oh God, now my mother's sentimental voice...

"Oh, you don't know, he could've had a wonderful family life, done great things in his community, be remembered by hundreds of people, helped hundreds more – what does it matter if someone writing a book doesn't bother to figure out his name?"

Man alive, what a *female* perspective!

Don't get me wrong, I worshipped my mother, but only because she worshipped my father...

And there it is.

My father – gone how many years, and really only remembered *because of me!*

I was born into privilege, my mother always used to say – which again was an annoyingly female perspective, because that is not how men work, at least not men who achieve what I achieved.

Not that we can achieve it without women, bless their hearts...

The pain of the growing nuclear orange light drives me from the past into *abstractions* – man's final refuge from the tyranny of agony...

I hated the *idea* of it!

'Privilege' is a terrible word to put in the path of ambition.

Yeah, I was born into money, yes, I was born into power, yes, I was born into – well, everything positive and helpful to the pursuit of power that you could conceivably imagine – but the entire point of privilege is to *internalize* the god-damned word!

I remember arguing with my mother, as she backed away...

If you exile 'privilege' from yourself, it just gets in your way by provoking guilt and paralysis and a horrible sense of self-erasure for the sake of your 'good fortune.' The insult of 'privilege' is just a slow-venom response from the biting underclasses – it's their way of having you back away from your own potential for power in horror at your accidental good fortune.

It's total crap, and I hate it with every atom of my being!

I try to move my arms, but they are trapped, like a cylinder porch Christmas soldier...

Panic drives me to further abstractions – perilously close to *philosophy*...

Where the hell *else* does this apply?

If you're born beautiful, you don't make yourself ugly, or fail to exploit your beauty just because you happen to be lucky, right Mom?

If you're born with a great voice, you don't purposefully sing badly so you don't offend the tone-deaf.

No, *mom* – if you're born beautiful, you have to *internalize* that beauty, it has to *become* you – or it is completely and totally useless! You have to say to yourself – and only later, to others – that *real* beauty comes from 'within' – that beauty is just an 'attitude,' and 'confidence,' and all other kinds of nonsense.

The supermodel genuinely has to believe that if you *feel* beautiful, you *are* beautiful! If she doesn't, she won't be able to transfer that delusion to others for the sake of giving gay guys who hate their mothers the power to force women to stop eating and wear shoes that make their feet bleed!

My healthy anger – welcome back! – wakes to fight back against my trapped pain.

Everyone exploits their advantages, *mom* – or makes their disadvantage their advantage, if they have no luck at all. Losers turn themselves into victims, and get resources that way – and if they win, if they get trillions of dollars (and if anyone knows this, it's me!) – their lack of privilege *becomes* their privilege, and so what right to they have to complain about me using *my* natural privilege, when they literally *invent* and use their own?

My father swims into my mental view again, at the height of his power and grace and elegance, and it suddenly strikes me – and I have no idea where *this* part of my brain has been my whole life – that it is not just *me* coming back to life, but also *all the people I remember...*

A sermon from my early childhood – kind of inappropriate now, when I think about it – square-bearded Father Gregory thundering about Jesus strolling through cemeteries and raising the entirety of the dead – he is now talking about *me* – and a realization hits me with a series of goosebumps that I *hope* has something to do with my newfound emotional depth, rather than my dead skin thawing...

I am like Jesus walking through the cemetery – the cemetery of my history...

I have come back to life like He did, and as I return to the light, I bring with me all the people I remember, here, now, to – wherever in hell I am...

In my mind's eye, my father turns from his position at the blackhole center of a brightly lit party, and laughs at me for imagining that I will not understand wherever I am, even if it is...

“Power is power, son. From the Greeks to the Romans to the Aristocracy to the leaders of democracy, politicians will *always* understand the world – because the technology might change, but people don't. Aristotle would still understand 21st century logic – and a politician will always understand the power structure of the society he lives in, and it doesn't matter where – or when – that society is...”

Oh God – *this* is probably one of my earliest memories – not this cheesy speech, which sounds like a Bazooka Joe comic from my youth – but my father at a party...

I had fallen asleep after dinner, then woken up and looked up at my father, who had a giant chandelier hanging over his head, far above his thinning hair – it was like the universe had placed a sparkling constellation over the center of authority in the ballroom. They say that women don't dress for men, but for other women – although men generally dress for power, only sometimes power over women – but I got a strong sense, so long ago, in a building long dust, that *everyone* in that ballroom – I couldn't count the number – had all dressed for my *father* – and that he was a kind of well-coiffed master ape, vaguely thuggish in his tuxedo, perfectly at ease in the exercise of power, perfectly gracious in the certainty of his dominance, and that was when I really felt that I tore myself *loose* from my mother, because my mother was full of diluted sentimentality and sympathy for the underprivileged; she endlessly cared for other people's 'voices' (which always seemed sinister to me, like a ghost moaning into mist), but it suddenly hit me with full force, right there in my tiny solar plexus, that my mother's drippy words about the *underprivileged* were just a kind of *test* – of dominance perhaps – because while she might turn herself inside out in sympathy for the underdog, *she* had married the top dog, the master ape, and if I wanted a woman like my mother – which, if I wanted to be like my father, I would need to get – then I had to learn how to make sympathetic noises towards her obsession with the underprivileged, while recognizing that these were just silly words that she used – perhaps to keep the resentment of other women at bay, or because she was unable to own and accept her own pursuit of the master ape – it didn't really matter, a man can go completely mad plumbing the depths of the feminine – the point was

that it's *great* to endlessly warble about sympathy for the weak, while building your entire life around pursuing and owning *strength*!

Maybe it's a kind of camouflage – but I don't remember my *father* inhabiting that contradiction...

My father wanted to inspire men to *strength* – in part by showing off the beauty of my mother – while my mother dragged people down by offering fructose maternal sympathy for their suffering.

Do we challenge, or do we cuddle?

Men at least don't have to suffer from the hypocrisy of claiming to care for the underdog while pursuing the top dog, perhaps that's why we tend to get more things done in this life...

Or, that life...

I realize now, in my slowly waking state, as images, pictures and feelings flow past my brain like some two-bit screensaver, that the party I recall – which I haven't thought of in half a century – put the stamp of the future on the soft wax of my early brain.

Children are fascinated by power – for boys, it's status, for girls, beauty or something like that – like dogs, we map the hierarchy around us, from a very early age – for me, I was maybe 3 years old when this party happened...

Another wave of sadness slams into me, as I realize that the ghosts returning to life with me don't know anything more than I do.

I could snap my finger and talk to my mother – she is lurking in here, complaining about my arrogance as usual – while simultaneously stoking the ambition of my father – but I could never get her to tell me how old I was when this party happened, in the ballroom, under the sparkling crown of the chandelier.

If she were still alive, she would know these things in that beartrap way that women remember relationships and events and timing – it wouldn't be more than a tenth of a second before she would tell me the place, date, reason and purpose of the ball, as well as reciting the names of at least half the people who were there...

But my mother in my mind is a dead ghost; she only exists as *I* remember her, not as she *was*. The tomb of her mind is truly sealed, and cannot be opened, since she who gathered me together from dust has now turned to dust herself, with all her memories and thoughts and connections and instant answers to unimportant questions long gone...

How long..?

My father wanted to be remembered – as *I* wanted to be remembered – and I suddenly suspect that the only reason I am still alive is *because* I was remembered – but thinking about my mother, I suddenly realize that to be *remembered* is not the same as being *alive*. We can never achieve immortality, because others only remember us as they *see* us, not as we actually *are*, or *were*...

We cannot even correct those who get our lives and our thoughts completely *wrong*... We inevitably become a tool for propagandists, who can turn us into whatever they want to in order to achieve their goals and their ends, and our prominence in the present might be a giant lever for destruction in the future...

I laugh at myself – this takes some effort, it does not come naturally to me – and the ghost of my mad old friend laughs with me; he has come back to life, and where he could not bring to life his own memories in the past, he now lives in my waking memories in the future – he laughs at me because I am tripping over the same tangled roots that took him down.

God, no wonder I never spent any time alone...

Philosophy, philosophy, philosophy – my friend who worshipped Ayn Rand, he kept dribbling on about integrity and virtue and self-sufficiency and not being a – oh God, what was the phrase? *Social metaphysician, second-hander*, something like that –

You have to face reality and not manipulate people and follow abstract principles, even if it means self-destruction...

Yeah, it was childish and compelling and dreamlike – it just meant that you were ostracized into a Walden-like perfection, squatting on a mountaintop, gnawing on your own vegetables and resentment and dying on a glacier before being covered by ice and uncovered by future anthropologists...

*Noted loser from the past died in perfect solitude. By **compromising** nothing, he **achieved** nothing...*

Foggy orange crescents rim the bottom of my vision as the light grows...

Almost there now...

I never bothered teasing myself with false virtues...

A man teases himself with *never* visiting prostitutes again – knowing that he will of course – that's a living hell, just a pretend virtue that satisfies the self-sadism of failing your own 'values' – values which only exist to *serve* your masochism!

The self-flagellation of 'failing morality' is a stupid act of self-sacrifice – my Objectivist friend would lecture me that man's life is the highest value, and whatever serves man's life is the good – and I kept telling him that *nothing* serves a man's life more than *power*!

When you have *power*, you never have to beg – you don't even have to *ask*! All you see are the tops of everyone's heads, kneeling to serve you – your family will never want for anything, for ten generations probably.

Ah, he said, but power doesn't make you happy...

Ha-ha – mind-reading is a *ridiculous* self-delusion... Could he provide me a long list of men who had power, and then gave it up because it made them miserable?

We are not angels – we are apes with pretensions.

I prefer my philosophy honest, not idealistic, which is to say *masochistic*.

In my life, I shrugged and moved on, even after Jane...

My brain-wrinkles form into a scowl in my skull...

Meh – seeking power is the way of the world!

It's a tough and bloody game – and I *completely* understand and sympathize with those who don't want to play. I just – always demanded honesty, from myself and from others. If people don't want to play the power game, they're just abandoning their essential mammal inheritance – all animals pursue power and control and dominance – especially apes! All these people who believe in evolution, and still talk about morality, reciprocal altruism and all other kinds of nonsense, God they turned my stomach – and, wherever in hell I am, I suspect they still *will*...

You get power, you get money – you get money, you get a pretty wife. A pretty wife makes you more successful children.

Any philosophy that threatens the passage of genes is self-defeating teenage nonsense.

God, I used to silently laugh at those feminists who used to swirl around me, with their bad teeth, armpit hair, unblinking eyes and endless nagging – I would listen, of course, and nod and sympathize – because I had learned the lesson of my mother – but inside my mind my eyes were rolling like Vegas slot machines, because so few of them had children, and so their beliefs would just die with them – and they also wanted to bring into the country various cultural groups that had birthrates of 6 children per family and *no* sympathy for feminism!

I wanted to grab them by their fat bare shoulders and snarl at them that the only culture is *reproduction!* If they cannot be bothered to have kids, then it's all just a bunch of nonsense!

You win and have, or you lose and beg – there are no other options except avoiding the game altogether, which simply turns the world over to people like me.

My eyelids twitch, preparing to open.

Last thoughts before the light burns the past away...

My red-haired friend who strip-mined his history for nothing – why in hell was I thinking about him?

It comes to me in a rush: *everything that is not power makes you doubt yourself!*

You cannot doubt yourself in this life – that is the essential sin of the mammal, the end of the line in the pursuit of relevance, survival – power.

The lion must never doubt that he can catch the zebra – when he gets too old to chase, he is done, and dies old and emaciated.

Doubt is death, for him as for us...

My friend the Objectivist did little better than my friend the red-headed navel-gazer...

His ideal standards made all his actions fall short – robbing him of energy and motivation.

Compared to the infinity of perfection, all human choices vanish into insignificance...

The only way to combat the paralysis of doubt is to believe in the soul – that way, you have the immortality of the soul to combat the impossibility of moral ideals – one infinity versus another can at least end in a draw – and if you lose the soul – as we all did – then you *vanish* in the face of ideals; you are not even an insect in the light of the sunset, you are a self-eating atom.

The matter of the mammal meets the antimatter of the ideal, and both vanish...

I had no idea I had such thoughts within me...

I giggle a little. My unfreezing mind has gotten fairly bombastic; I sound like a lantern-jawed motivational speaker, like that giant guy whose name escapes me who mistook his size and looks for depth and wisdom – and more power to him, I would've done exactly the same thing!

I also applauded all the pretty women who rambled on about how the universe will just provide you things if you ask, without noticing that men who want to sleep with them are constantly throwing resources at them – it makes about as much sense as imagining that the universe wants to shower you because it is raining.

I laugh because these are just idle thoughts that I *never* would have entertained at the heights of my glory and power – to compare your ambitions to truth is to rob you of the hypocrisy necessary to achieve power. It would be like me noticing how lucky I was – it would paralyze me. Of *course* your family is unearned, but power is earned, and is worshipped by those who want something for nothing.

I laugh again.

*God I hope they can help fix whatever has happened to my brain – I seem to have been infected with the paralysis of **perspective**...*

My laughter is quickly followed by anger – rage even – which feels good and familiar, since I know that it comes from my father.

I am beginning to hear – voices? Angels?

I suddenly fear awakening.

Dad!

As kids, my sister and I spent one evening watching a spy movie and snacking on “After Eights” minty chocolates.

“One more, only one!”

But they came in shiny black sleeves, and we kept eating the chocolates and putting the sleeves back in the long green box. We felt with searching fingers for more and more – until with dread we realized that there were only empty sleeves in the box, and we would get in serious trouble.

My sister vomited – from sugar or stress, who knows?

My father had a *damn* firm hand – to be fair I only recalled him losing control once, on the beach, when I fell in love...

One more memory, just one...

My father held a civilized distance from me – as he did from all his children – because he knew that intimacy is just another form of paralysis.

My father knew how to hold approval just out of reach – close enough for me to lunge at it, but not so close that I could actually grab it.

I would get mild nods and “not too bad” from time to time, but I always got the impression that I was lacking, or wanting, and had to be more, better, faster, smarter, whatever – it was impossible to tell, but kept me moving and striving...

When I sang in the choir, I liked to hear myself – but my father would shoot me ferocious looks, which confused me.

“Why is it bad to be heard?” I asked.

“It’s *ridiculous!*”

Nothing more.

The man was wall of hieroglyphics...

Looking ridiculous was bad, understood...

I could get some of the connections – if *I* looked ridiculous, then *he* looked ridiculous as a father – and it didn't matter how enthusiastically my mother grinned at my singing, and silently applauded with her white-gloved hands.

Women were the *reward* of power, which meant they could never tell you how to *achieve* it...

Ridiculousness was the *opposite* of power, which must mean that power equaled *status*.

But *status* was – what?

I could never ask my father such a question, because his scorn would wither me into atoms. It would be like a teenage boy asking his father what an attractive girl looked like – to ask *what* was ridiculous was ridiculous *in itself*.

In my school, a white-blond boy transferred from Germany – his last name was “Gerhart.” We both had a keen interest in model railroads, and he kept inviting me over to his house to look at his set. Of course, his last name was almost instantly transformed into “Gay-heart,” so his fate was sealed.

His only option was to violently attack anyone who used that name, but he chose the pacifist route of social obscurity and rejection. Repeatedly whining that his name *actually* meant “spear brave” was worse than useless.

He knew that I had good status at that time. He never explicitly asked me to help him, but I knew that he wanted me – needed me, was silently *begging* me – to champion his cause with the other boys, to tell them to lay off, that he was a good guy, to invite him over and give him my social stamp of approval.

I turned this over in my mind – in part because he did seem to have a pretty amazing railroad set – but I realized that to spend my social capital in defense of a boy who refused to defend *himself* would not elevate him – just lower *me*...

The perversion of his last name was a real challenge to him – are you a beggar, or a fighter?

Will you *ask* for something to happen, or will you *make* it happen?

If you are not given respect, will you force respect out of people?

There is no other way to get it.

If my father never said “no” to anyone, he would have no power.

It was all very primitive stuff – many of my friends would say that it was something to rise above, but I could not disagree more. It was something to kneel before and embrace.

Why would boys reject a boy who would not fight for himself?

For the simple reason that if he had no fight in him, he would be no good in a fight – and all boys spend endless hours preparing for fights – or actually fighting.

A boy who will not fight you will never fight *with* you – so he is useless in battle, and must be cast aside.

My mother, of course, *insisted* that I take Gerhart's side – and I was considering this – since I clearly lacked the testosterone I was about to gain through puberty – when my father snapped at her over dinner one night: "Would you want our *daughter* to date this loser?"

This is really the ultimate comeback, and my mother's cheeks flushed red with humiliation and pleasure – a depth of complexity and contradiction that I veered away from in my mind, like a pirate ship dodging a wide and bottomless whirlpool.

Femininity is a constant test – only weak men resent that fact.

Few women are more unhappy than those who get exactly what they claim they want.

You *cannot* raise the status of other people.

Trying to simply further reveals their low station – if you have to raise a ship, it is clearly already underwater...

Did I ever feel sympathy or pity for Gerhart?

I think to feel sympathy, I would have had to imagine myself in his position – which was impossible, since I was expertly navigated away from ridiculousness by my father's close-up scowls and distant praise.

I suppose I could have gone one step further and imagined my life without my father's guidance – but *that* would have meant toppling out of my own brain, into a void of otherworldly considerations. It would be like trying to inhabit the inner thoughts of some ancient mystic on the chilled peak of a lonely mountain – a mere smudge in the sunrise – it would just vault you out of yourself, without giving your mind anyplace real to land...

I realize it now – with a sudden rush – that I was in my own way attempting to guide Gerhart in the same way that my father was guiding me – I would not give him praise or support if he refused to fight against his own humiliation, because that would be to give him praise for weakness, which would give him relief in the present, while harming him in the future.

I did see his family once at the mall. His mother was a typical German dumpling, with a big soft black coat, thick stockings and sensible flat-heeled shoes. His father was trying to screw a lens onto a camera, contorting his body into a cut-marionette caricature of a human form.

The *shamelessness* and *indecenty* of such a public spectacle – the very opposite of the strong consciousness of ridiculousness essential to the pursuit of power – told me everything I needed to know about Gerhart's potential, his future.

If he could never tell his father how ridiculous he was, he would never be able to defend himself.

If he *did* tell his father how ridiculous he was, he would be damning his mother's pathetic standards. He would be damning the grandfather who so poorly raised his own son – provoking an aggressive pity-response from his dad – and the whole house of cards would come sighing and folding down.

Most people are trapped in ridiculous family structures – thinking you can guide them out with a smile – a leg up in the social strata – is a mad delusion, and speaks to such poor judgement that it does not help them, just kills your trust in your own abilities.

The lion does not teach the mouse to hunt.

I got my father's message after that...

The opposite of ridiculousness is *approval* – if I sang too loud in a choir, it would be vainglorious and arrogant. If I had a solo, and sang softly, it would be shy and self-effacing.

Pah – sing softly, you just disappear in the crowd, blend into the background, like a thumbprint face in child's painting of an audience...

No - *because* I was powerful, *because* I was in charge, *because* I reached the summit of my profession – *because* I was important, and had resources – *because* I was Louis Staytin, the President of the United States of America – I was able to live this long, and come back to life in this way.

And I feel, very strongly, deep down in my – testicles, to be honest – that I will rule this future – my present – just as I ruled the past, and the rational philosophers of my youth will remain nothing, while I will still stride the world like the colossus I once was – and will be again.

I clench my jaw and open my eyes, to cast my gaze on the world I will own again.

Chapter 2

Science fiction was kind of a forgotten genre, but David had still studied it as a young man, in the same way some young men study Latin or come up with their own languages.

Science fiction writers had been so spectacularly wrong – with one exception – that it had become a thoroughly discredited genre, akin to the rantings of “end of the world” prophets who supply a specific date, then lose followers and credibility as that date comes and goes.

500 years later, who remembers the false prophets?

The fear of technology so rampant in late 20th century and early 21st century science fiction had been cruelly revealed as an elaborate psychological projection, a distraction from the real dangers that faced mankind. The clichés and reuse of metaphor was endless: mankind invented robots or computers designed to serve the species, which ended up dominating them and destroying the planet. Mankind fought desperate battles against endless waves of these “slaves turned into masters” – and sometimes they won, and sometimes they lost, but the stories proved so spectacularly wrongheaded that they were now generally viewed as about as believable as lurid tales of demonic possession causing epilepsy. Science fiction was a species of supernatural projection, coming from an incredibly primitive mental mindset – dressed up in flashing lights and beeps – which helped distract mankind from the true dangers that almost took it down.

Science fiction served *power*, not truth or prediction – or avoidance, as it tragically turned out.

David was thinking of the science fiction of his youth because he was now living it, in middle age.

One of his butt cheeks had turned numb, so he shifted in his chair, glancing at the bright orange clock numbers that floated above the bed. It had now been one hour since the injection, and he could begin to see eye movement under the paper-thin ancient eyelids.

The oldest living human being, he thought.

His own father had lived to be almost 150, but had declined to upload his mind, saying that he had lived a full, long life, and did not feel any need to squirt his consciousness into a supplementary flesh-suit.

This was not an uncommon decision, but it was sad of course. David loved his father beyond measure – and love was in no shortage in the world – but he sometimes wondered if he would have loved his father as much if the old man had clung to life. “Nobody stays on a train at the end of the line,” his father had murmured, his eyes widening as the dark embraced him. He did not believe in an afterlife – either for his own body, or in a flesh-suit.

“It would not be me,” he had also said – and there were great, significant, deep and philosophical questions about how well an upload truly replicated the original person. Centuries ago, people would clone their dogs, but notice subtle differences between the original and the copy.

“It’s a round peg in a square hole,” his father had murmured. “Maybe if I had done it when I was younger, it would be less jarring, but I can’t imagine, at my age, waking up in a young body – my brain will be old, my limbs will be young. It’s a crazy mismatch, I wouldn’t be the same person. I’m 145 years old, I have spent the last 20 years being very delicate in my movements – it would be too strange to

wake up with the strength and flexibility of a gymnast, but the terminal caution of an ancient brain. No one gives a jetpack to a half-blind man.”

It was kind of true – David’s uncle had uploaded himself to a 20-year-old flesh-suit, but still had an old man’s habits. He ate gingerly, ran in a stilted staggering manner, pondered too long, refused to turn his head too far, and still massaged his knees every time he sat down. It was always recommended that people upload before they got too old, but everyone liked to hang onto their own body and history for as long as possible.

And who do you love, as an old man in a young body?

The kind of procedure David was witnessing now had long been abandoned – most illnesses had been conquered, except old age, which had only been extended. It was hard to imagine that some future world would be better than the world of the present, so almost no one wanted to send themselves through an icy tunnel of time half a millennium forward.

There had been much debate about waking up the old man in the bed.

That was another reason that ancient science fiction had been floating around David’s mind – the cliché of *bringing the monster to life!*

Was the old man in the bed a monster?

It was all so long ago – what should we think about current morals versus past beliefs? During the ancient days of slavery, how should we judge thinkers like Aristotle who justified the practice? Can ancient tyrannies be judged by modern standards? Can believers in a primitive religion be damned for child sacrifice or ritual rape?

David took a deep breath, noting that the orange numbers over the bed were beginning to ripple as the old man’s breathing began to increase.

Morality is a kind of technology, we are always told – and the problem of morality had only been solved in a general social sense over the past hundred years... Can we judge a 15th-century doctor for failing to prescribe penicillin, when it was not going to be invented for another 400 years? Asking most people to reinvent morality beyond the habits and prejudices of the present is like asking them to reinvent physics – a few geniuses might be able to do it, but you might as well ask the masses to fly unaided...

Is he a monster?

Even more basically: **why** are we waking him up?

David had opposed the idea – it would be too cruel to bring a man back to life so at odds with the present. How could he possibly fit in? In the past, he was the king of the world – in the present, billions will view him as a mere monster, a relic from a brutal time who helped lead the world to near-extinction through the Cataclysms.

And – the man in the bed had raised the son who set fire to the world...

It was actually the historians who won the day.

Most of history is interpretation – we cannot directly access the minds of anyone in the past – if we wake him, we can upload him and put him back to sleep if we want – and then we can access his mind at our leisure, and truly understand how much he was responsible, what he understood about the morality of his time, what his dreams were, how much he lied, what he truly believed – all of this can be unraveled – and more, things we haven't even imagined... It would be a crime against the humanities to leave such a treasure chest of a mind frozen for all time. Every judgement we make about the past is based on incomplete information – this is the only brain that survives from that time; it is our only chance to understand that world... It's not just about understanding the past; it's about ensuring that the past never returns, that we never go through the Cataclysms again...

David appreciated the moral sensitivity of the present as much as anyone – he lived in a world so perfect that it was inconceivable to people in the past – especially the science fiction writers, who generally projected their own terrible childhoods – and totally rational fears of authority – onto monsters and robots and rogue computers – but moral sensitivity, when pushed to extremes, becomes intellectual paralysis.

A few textbooks had survived the catastrophes of the Old World, and they regularly castigated and snarled at the evils of historical figures – should not the leaders of those days be held to the same standard they inflicted on others?

No, the ancient man in the bed had to be woken and examined in order to create a clear and unambiguous window into the world that was – the world whose ferocious path almost led to the end of humanity, and life itself.

10,000...

The figure flew into David's mind like a lost arrow. It took him a moment to remember the reference – his body helped him out by providing a sudden chill.

10,000...

That was the number of people left alive at the greatest depth of the last Ice Age.

Yeah, I think it's pretty important to figure out the kind of thinking that led to the near decimation of our species. There was always a great and rational fear that when people get to safety, they forget all the bad habits that led them to danger in the first place. It is true that the "power vacuum" theory has turned out to be utterly false – we tore down unjust authority, and no other unjust authority has risen to take its place, but that is only because we have fixed not only the childhood of our species, but the childhood of us as individuals... It turned out that power arose from powerlessness – the lust for control arose from a lack of control, and we have prevented that wound from forming in the first place...

David leaned forward in his chair, as the numbers above the bed increased and rippled. The old man half-snorted, but David held his hand over the ancient face, preventing the breath from tripping the alarm.

David leaned over the bed, watching grimaces drift over the old face like a sped-up view of clouds over a still lake. The crows-feet tangled in on themselves as a sudden squint crushed the eyes.

Welcome back, old man. You paid a massive price to live this long – when you wake up to the world that is, I believe you will wish you had never gone to sleep, or had slept forever. Because we are angry, and we are right to be so. We are angry that you decimated our ancestors, and came within a hair's breadth of ending us all. We are angry at how painful the lesson was to tear ourselves free of the world that you made – the world that served you and people like you, at our expense. The hypocrisy and brutality of the world of self-serving lies, inflicted on the helpless young and captive populations. Wake up, you bastard. The day of reckoning is upon you!

The old man's eyes opened.

Chapter 3

Because she had once been surprised by monsters, she now spent her entire life surprising monsters in return.

To be frank, there wasn't a whole lot for her to do – but what she did, which was important, she did because of the boys on the mountain.

But that was years in the future...

Her mother was a hiker, and her father was a grumbler. He so loved her company that he would drag himself along on her endless walks, talking about his theories and his love of history.

She generally guessed that her father's talking had turned into a kind of pleasant background noise for her mother, like crickets or distant thunder.

Her name was Alice, and she had once had a sister named Ruth. Ruth had fallen from a high hay bale, had broken her neck and died immediately. Her parents had gone through a long dark period of grieving, emerging only when her father's dark sense of humour pronounced the family to be totally Ruth-less. It was a dangerous joke, but sometimes a flash of bitter humour in the face of the dark gods of brutal circumstances can be more of an exorcism than a provocation.

They had tried to have another child, but Alice's mother was in her 40s, and although lifespans had been extended enormously, no technology had been found to rejuvenate a woman's eggs. There were almost no babies available for adoption, so they had contented themselves with their single remaining daughter, and through a prodigious effort of will, they refrained from over-protecting her. They let her wander in the world of her own accord at a relatively early age.

Her mother loved to walk, but her father loved to move – as in houses, locations, entire environments.

"The world is a dish of endless experiments – who knows what we will like the best?" her father would say, before turning on the living globe and finger-pinching and chatting with various communities.

"Look here, they're trying communal living again in what used to be India – you'd think they would have learned from the last few thousand times, but hope springs eternal in the foolish heart – good luck to them!

"Here, in New Thailand, they are trying collective parenting – which they have no excuse for, it's just a lazy way of saying 'I want to kiss more people!'" He turned to his daughter. "What is the problem with collective parenting?"

Alice already knew the answer – it was amazing how often her father forgot previous conversations.

"Because, dad, we always tend to invest more in our own children, and if we don't know who our children are, or don't care, those children tend to be uncared for..."

"And what has been the most bitter and hard-won lesson of the last few hundred years?"

Alice sighed. "It's all about the children..."

"That's right – everything!"

He spun the globe again, creating a minor tsunami on the perfect digital ocean.

“And here in one of the few remaining states, we have the Platonists, with their polygamy and children who sometimes end up marrying each other. They never come here, their kids have a really tough time getting health insurance... Do you know that there is even a place in Malaysia with voluntary slavery?”

She shook her head, leaning forward with interest – *finally, new story!*

“Oh yeah, it’s pretty wild – of course, no Dispute Resolution Organization would *ever* enforce slavery, that was always and forever a government program – but if you want to voluntarily sign over your liberty, live for another person and not get paid, that’s free will, that’s still fine... I really do like the fact that people still experiment – despite the fact that we absolutely know what works best – and I really do love documenting what’s going on – where should we try next?”

Her mother scowled, arguing with the coffee maker. “I’m not entirely sure why it remains our job to document every idiotic experiment that some hidebound tribals get into.”

“Because,” he sighed, “it’s all beginning to converge, you know – you can see that, you have access to the same globe that I do.”

He put the heels of his hands together, then spread his fingers apart to form a ‘V.’

“It really is the end of history, or of wildly disparate cultures I guess – in the same way that the old Internet was the end of the pony express, or the telegraph, or whatever they were using before that – I really should know that, but I can’t remember at the moment. We are all coming together, everyone, all over the world, the simplicity and purity and liberty is spreading like someone dumped a can of baked beans on the hot pan of the universe... *Pssst!*”

He spread his hands.

“Are you hungry?” his wife asked mildly. “You never make those kinds of analogies when you are full.”

“I could eat,” he replied – a little stingily, his daughter thought.

*It always sounds like he is making a concession to what **she** wants, rather than just admitting that he is hungry...*

Alice learned with her parents; they were both chatty, and usually took pleasure in discussing what they were doing. Her father explained how he helped enforce the laws and resolve disputes, going over all his contracts, complexities and resolutions.

Alice’s mother was an expert in child development, and spent half her days creating presentations on ‘peaceful parenting’ – the idea that children should be raised without punishments – and transmitting them to the few societies that still survived by abusing children.

When it came to answers, her mother was more efficient – her father kept going back in time for his explanations, to the point where everything he tried to get her to understand ended up with lightning creating life in a primordial soup.

One morning, Alice’s mother gestured at some geese flying in a V formation past the window outside.

“What is the same between us and animals?”

“Daddy says we *are* animals.”

Her mother sighed. She stopped doing her hand gestures in the cloudy brain of the cooking bot, turned around and smiled.

“We haven’t spent as much time around animals as I would’ve liked, but you know how your father loves to travel, so this will take a minute or two, but it is really important, so dinner can wait.”

Alice ducked her head slightly. “Where’s dad?”

Her mother grinned. “Not close enough to interrupt and extend this explanation into infinity, if that’s what you mean.”

Alice stared at her mother. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

She laughed. “Quite right! You are a human being, of course, who’s had little experience with animals, so you might think of a human being as like a super animal, or an animal with a bigger brain, or more language or less hair, or whatever – but that’s not really the case.”

Alice frowned. “Animals have brains and language and hair, it’s just a difference of – more or less, not...”

“A difference of degree, not of kind, is that what you mean?”

She shrugged. “Yeah, think so.”

The cooking bot drifted over. “*Meal instructions are incomplete, continue?*”

“Delay dinner thirty minutes.”

“*You bet!*” (Alice’s dad had set the bot to “colloquial,” which mildly annoyed everyone except him – and the bot, of course.)

Alice’s mom sat heavily on the plump grey couch – which promptly informed her that her body fat composition had increased 0.6% – should the cooking bot be informed? Blushing slightly, she muttered a comment about her husband trolling her with the furniture settings.

“Switch body calibration to male pattern baldness,” she murmured, before turning back to her daughter.

“Honey...”

She paused.

“It’s strange, like when you have to explain a word you know very well, but don’t know how to define it. Sorry, maybe we should get your father...”

“No!” said Alice – perhaps a shade too quickly. “You do it, mom.”

She sighed. “Well, I suppose it has to do with all these bots and machines and computers that surround us – and keep us alive, really, keep us fed and sheltered and healthy. You know, for most of human history, people did all the brute labour themselves. You know how we go hiking in these remote areas, with nothing but trees and mountains – and, if your father has his way, half un-passible swamps...”

Alice nodded.

“Well, think of the very olden days, before all of this... People – to be accurate, usually men – well, almost always men, I have to include a couple of women because I’m sure it was possible, though I can’t think of any...”

“Mom...”

“Yes, sorry. Well, imagine having to clear an acre of that land by hand.”

Alice’s eyes were wide. “By *hand*?”

“Yes, I know it’s a little odd, we don’t really use that phrase anymore, it’s kind of ancient by now, but you need to know where we came from as a culture. I mean – OK, you would have a metal blade tied to a long stick, called an axe, and you would have to chop the trees down with that, and find some way to dig up all the roots – honestly, I have no idea how *that* was done – and then you would have to chop up all the wood into long flat sticks – no idea what *they* were called – and then tie them together into some kind of – hut or cabin. Then you would have to cut a hole in the roof for the smoke to get out, because it would be cold of course – and you would need to have a fire, and then you would have to plant all the seeds by hand and find some way to keep all the birds from eating your crops, and deal with the insects... It was quite mad – worse than an animal existence in some ways, because at least animals don’t have to clear all the land of trees and roots that go down like forever... Anyway, it was unbelievably hard to get food and shelter, and people worked all day, and kept animals – and there wasn’t a single computer or robot or bot, which meant that most human beings had to be *like* machines. And you know how your father in particular loves taking apart these machines and figuring out how they work, and imagining that he can program them to make them better – well that was kind of how it was for most of human history – almost all of it – *people* had to be kind of taken apart and put back together so they could be more easily owned and controlled, in the same way that we own and control our machines. But machines aren’t bothered by being servants, and don’t want to be free – they don’t even know what that means, they don’t think or dream – but human beings don’t like being servants or slaves, so there was always this tension between the rulers and the citizens... Animals don’t enslave each other – for most of human history, most people were treated as they were livestock. And that’s how we started, like animals, without slaves – and then we had slaves, for tens of thousands of years... And then, we became like the animals again, and gave up enslaving each other, which is what your dad meant when he said we are animals – gosh, this is turning into quite the history lesson, does this make any sense to you at all?”

Alice cocked her head, meaning both yes and no. “Not the livestock stuff so much... I get that it was tough to – clear the land, you said? I can’t really imagine not having any machines, having to do all of that yourself, by hand? Yeah, that’s – I can’t imagine. But what is the difference between a servant and a slave, and – what were those words, rulers and what?”

“Citizens.”

“No idea what that means.”

Alice’s mother pursed her lips. “Cookie, I would like a coffee please.”

The cooking bot whirred into action, and Alice was vaguely relieved that her father was not around, otherwise her parents would get into a mild disagreement about the appropriateness of being polite to machines.

Alice’s mother hated being interrupted, so she waited until Cookie deposited a coffee into her hand, with the words “*Does your husband want one?*” inscribed on the foam. She smiled.

“Don’t quote me on this to some expert, but I think a ‘servant’ is someone who works for you, and can’t quit, but is still paid. A ‘slave’ is someone you force to work for you, and don’t pay, at least directly – you give him or her a place to live, some food and healthcare if needed, but you don’t pay wages.”

“Why wouldn’t a slave just run away?”

Alice’s mother put down her coffee cup and leaned back into the couch, crossing her legs. “Ah, well, because in the past there was a small group of individuals who controlled – really, most of the guns, the weapons, the law, the courts, prisons, schools, money, and a whole bunch of other stuff that I could remember better when I was younger. And this group would catch the slaves and return them back to their owners. And in fact, they would even force the citizens – the people who lived under the rule of this small group, but weren’t direct slaves – to patrol – to walk around making sure there weren’t any slaves who had escaped – and catch them and return them if they had. And no, they weren’t paid either, they were just forced to do this by this group of individuals.”

“What the *heck..?*” murmured Alice in wonder. “That’s insane!”

“Yes, it was – but what do you mean by that word?”

“How big was this group of individuals, who were in charge?”

Her mother shrugged. “Hard to say, depends how you counted them. There was a very small group in charge of the money, they were really the most important, they could just create whatever cash they wanted out of thin air...”

“What? How could that be allowed? Why didn’t the DRO’s put a stop to it?”

“Oh, there weren’t any Dispute Resolution Organizations back then.”

“So, how did people resolve their disputes, their disagreements?”

Her mother got up, walked into the kitchen and dropped her coffee cup into the waving dishwasher tentacles.

“Sadly, not very well, which is why everything had to change...”

“The Cataclysms,” murmured Alice.

Her mother shot her a sharp look. “Where did you hear that word?”

Alice shrugged. “Some kid at the playground. A boy...”

“Of course,” sighed her mother.

“He was playing a game he called ‘Cataclysm,’ where...”

Her mother held up a hand. “That’s nothing you play a game about – seriously, please don’t get involved in anything like that – and let me know if you see that boy again, I really need to talk to his parents.” Seeing the look on her daughter’s face, she added: “I know, it’s awkward – and maybe a little embarrassing – but it’s *really* important to not turn anything like that into a game, that was a pretty terrible thing that happened in the world, and it actually went on for quite a long time – and we will get to that topic at some point in the future, but for right now I want you to enjoy the fruits of all that suffering – and here is your father!” she finished with obvious relief.

When Alice was in her early teens, her family moved to be near the mountains. It was pretty easy to change locations – just program the coordinates into the house, and off you went!

She was drawn to raw nature – the mirror image of her mother, who preferred every convenience that modernity could provide.

The first day they settled – after one of her father’s incomprehensibly short fifteen minute naps – they all went on a family hike.

Her father loved to combine personal jet packs with the sky-trampolines – which looked impossibly dangerous, but was actually almost perfectly safe. Air-bots would create and dissolve sky-trampolines that you could bounce forward from – you could move incredibly fast when you got good at it – and if you stumbled or missed, your jetpack would right you immediately and return you to the waiting trampoline.

It was a tiring way to travel, so they took a few breaks – but covered a good distance before starting their hike, deep in the woods at the base of Mount Cheshire (so named because it had a wide gully that looked like a secret smile).

“All right, enough technology, let’s do it old-school!” grunted her sweaty father.

The air was sweet, the thinning pine trees swayed overhead, and – other than the faint contrails of stratospheric sky-trampolines – the air above was perfectly clear.

Alice’s mother had a bug-bot floating around her; Alice and her father declined, since his argument was that an immune system needed as much exercise as the heart and legs. (It was a bit of a self-serving argument, because for some reason the bugs always swarmed his wife anyway.)

Alice suddenly wanted to ask her father how many people were left in the world – the word popped into her mind unbidden: “left.” It was a strange word to think of, because her life – and the lives of everyone she knew – were perfectly pleasant and free of trauma, but she couldn’t help but think of everyone’s reaction to the word “Cataclysms.” There was something faintly ominous in the “s” at the end of the word – a time so terrible that it had to be plural; one Cataclysm couldn’t capture it all.

The family paused at a lookout, panting. They nodded politely towards a small cluster of floating VR eyes, most of which nodded back. No mouths or ears appeared, so there wasn’t really anything to say. Probably some old people who couldn’t make the climb directly, but liked the view.

The pine trees stretched as far as the eye could see, like a creaking sea of ragged green teepees. Occasional threads of smoke rose from the fires of campers.

Her father nodded towards the setting sun. “There used to be lines cut all through the forests, everywhere, so they could drive ground cars. It’s hard to imagine why anyone would want to carve up all this beauty, but I guess that’s all they had at the time. These cars were powered by dinosaur juice hundreds of millions of years old – like the ancient monsters had come back to life, carrying people from place to place, the oldest horses in the known universe!”

The setting sun was drawing out her father’s poetic side, but Alice didn’t mind.

There was a distant flare in the deepening blue sky as a jetpack saved a stumbling sky-jumper.

Alice tried not to be annoyed that her father had a habit of shading his eyes when examining the horizon – even when the light was failing.

“I wouldn’t give up anything that we have achieved,” he murmured. “And it would be crazy to even consider it, because of the sacrifice... We lost so much to be where we are – and maybe we don’t have music that is quite as good, but we don’t have war, and there’s almost no crime – no violence, we found the cure for that, of course, but the *cost*...”

The shadows of the pine trees lengthened as the sun went down. The city lights in the crescent of the moon glowed faintly. They would have traveled there years ago – or to the sea-cities, but Alice was scared of deep water, and her mother hated deep space.

“What I like the most these days,” said her mother, “is that there’s nothing that is about to *end*. When I read or watch about the old days, before...” She shivered. “There was always a sense that everyone was caught in this – giant machinery that was slowly pulling everything apart. I can’t imagine what it would be like to wake up every day and read the news, the latest events, the latest dictates – more restrictions, more craziness, more inflation – price changes – knowing that things were just going so out of control, and that there was really nothing to be done except try to get away or wait it out – which thank heavens some people did, or...”

Her mother trailed off, as parents generally do when the topics get most interesting.

They watched for a moment in silence as the landscape darkened further. The sunset lit the tops of the pine trees, turning them into glowing endless orange cones.

Two by two, the VR eyes winked out. A mouth with a bristly white moustache appeared for a moment, and an ancient voice reminded them to watch their step as they walked down, then that vanished as well. As the half-sun appeared to be eaten by the distant jagged teeth of the pine trees, a distant festival of sky-dancing sketched glowing trails like lazy fireworks under the brightening stars.

Alice's father gestured at the landscape before them – perhaps at the entire world, at least that's what it seemed.

"Everything we have, we inherited from suffering... The Cataclysms were the worst thing in human history, when we were almost done."

He turned to Alice, two slivers of sunset embedded on the right side of his pale blue eyes.

"When we finally learned that it all starts with *you*, we got all of this beauty and peace."

Alice shivered slightly, and the sun disappeared.

Chapter 4

Like many people – at least those in the past – Alice found fear and her life’s purpose in the same moment.

Much though she loved her parents, she also loved time alone, and so went for lengthy solitary walks. There was virtually no sense of fear in her world – at least of people; accidents and illness were still occasionally fatal, as she well knew.

When she was younger, Alice had asked her father whether she should be afraid of people, and he had nodded seriously, before smiling gently.

“You know how obsessed I am with history, right? Particularly ancient history, like a thousand years ago. Well, there was a time even before that, ancient-ancient history, or ancient-squared history perhaps.”

Alice giggled. “Or maybe the word ‘ancient’ with a line on top, like in music.”

He smiled. “Yeah, like you know how some people are called Richardson, and that means ‘son of Richard.’ It seems to be logical that the son of Richardson would be called Richardsonson. And his kid?”

“Richardsonsonson.”

He pointed a finger at her: “Go!”

“Richardsonsonsonson... Richardsonsonsonsonson... Richardsonsonsonsonsonson...”

“Repeat and fade!”

“Uhhh – Richardsonsonsonsonsonson”

He clapped with delight. “Perfect! And there was a technology in the ancient world that allowed you to be frozen, if you were very sick and about to die, in the hopes of being brought back to life in the future, when there was a cure for your illness.” He counted off his fingers. “So let’s say that Richardsonsonsonsonsonson froze himself, what would you call him?”

“I don’t know, ‘Frozen Richardsonsonsonsonsonson?’ Ice-Richard-son-repeat-and-fade?”

“Could be – though I for one would call him Richardsonsonsonsonsonson-*sicle*.”

Hearty laughter.

“Anyway, in the ancient-ancient times, when people lived out in the woods, like we do – but it was really wild all around, and they had no technology, no computers, no bots, no machines – there were lots of animals that were pretty dangerous – some of them tiny, like insects and microbes and germs and viruses – and some of them huge, like bears, and some of them large and numerous, like packs of wolves and coyotes. There were also alligators and crocodiles, which were basically land sharks that lived in ponds. Even a small animal, like a chipmunk or a raccoon, could give you a deadly bite that could drive you mad, they called it hydrophobia, or later rabies, and there was no cure. A tiny cut could get you infected, it was a real mess all around, particularly teeth, which killed a lot of people by getting infected. They didn’t have tooth bots at night of course. Anyway, people ended up congregating in cities for a variety of reasons, and in the cities they didn’t have to worry about natural predators, except maybe a couple of wild dogs, which were not too bad to deal with. You never had to deal with a bear or a pack of

wolves in a city. Getting away from these natural predators was one of the big advantages of living in a city – but of course living in a city exposed you to all the unnatural predators, thieves and pickpockets and murderers and stickup artists – people who would point a weapon at you and take your money. But at least you didn't have to worry about wolves and bears."

Alice's eyes were wide. "Were people really that dangerous back then?"

Her father nodded slowly, seriously. "Oh yeah. It was just terrible – and I haven't even told you about the worst predator of all, the most dangerous hunter of human beings..."

"What, worse than a bear?"

"Well, bears don't really hunt people. No, the worst predator was..." He paused.

"What?" Alice could see her father regarding the inner visage of her mother, and wondering if his daughter was old enough to hear about the most dangerous predator in human history.

"Let's wait, I suppose it gives you something to look forward to..."

"Awww..."

"I know, I know. Anyway, one of the things that people did was to tame wolves, and turn them into dogs. Dogs were great for hunting, and guiding livestock, and guarding, and teaching some empathy to children – it was like domesticating cats, which happened mostly so that rats and mice could be kept away from stored food – especially in the winter. Predators were turned from enemies into friends, mostly by domesticating them, which meant having them bond with human beings, and treating them very well, and feeding them, you know, petting them and taking care of them in general. You kept the most dangerous natural predators at a distance, and you domesticated the local predators, to turn them into friends."

Alice sighed. "Dad, you *really* have to learn how to shorten your answers..."

"Yeah, sorry. Anyway, one of the great lessons of the last century or so has been the domestication of human beings – we finally figured out the true cause of crime and violence, and solved it, across most of the world, for all time I think. It took a lot of suffering to get there – to get here – but this is the foundation on which the peace and plenty of the modern world is built."

Alice could tell he was skirting around some big topic, but she decided to let it pass.

"So – I don't have to worry about people, then?"

He smiled. "No, honey, you don't. The odds of you running into someone dangerous are about the same as the odds of you being struck by lightning – less, even. We actually learned how to end evil, or the desire to use violence to get the unearned."

She jumped up, her legs tingling from sitting too long. "So – I'm free to roam?"

"Please do!"

And roam she did.

Beginning at about the age of 9, Alice explored a good chunk of the world – at least, her local world – largely on her own.

She would sit in the white pews of a sky-taxi – or use a sky-trampoline – and visit the local towns.

She loved walking down the wide, tree-lined avenues, past the local markets – which mostly contained human-made pieces of art, clothing, furniture and food, popular among the ‘purebloods’ – the people who had decided to live without machinery for various reasons.

Some of them were ‘back to the land’ folks, who said that the most natural life was the best life, and tried to do everything by hand – or at least with as little machine assistance as possible.

Some of the *purebloods* also believed that exploiting machines was a form of slavery, and refused to participate in the bot-life. Lively debates were held on a regular basis about all these issues. The oldest and most intractable problem of ideology – absolutism – was regularly challenged and crucified, so to speak.

Was it permissible to let machines clear the land before you took up planting by hand?

Was it acceptable to let nano-bots scour your body clear of cancer, if you got sick?

Alice accepted that human beings would always want a challenge – and one of the greatest challenges in a peaceful society was the question of purity. The debates never got out of hand, of course – people moved back and forth between various positions – both ideologically and physically – but the question could never be resolved perfectly – because, of course, perfection is impossible.

If a life without machines is the best, then if you need to dip into the world of machines in order to survive cancer, say, then you should do so, in order to continue enjoying the life without machines...

At the other extreme were the people who viewed bots as a stepping-stone to a higher consciousness, a form of godhood, and eagerly merged their consciousnesses into every spare atom of quantum computing they could get their mental hands on. They were constantly pushing the boundaries of the overlap between human consciousness and machine mind – inserting modules that allowed them to program their own brains. They rarely returned from their digital journeys, and so did not often participate in the various debates – plus, they often lost the knack of communicating in merely mortal terms, and often preferred having virtual consciousness to having actual children, and so tended to fade away from human society, operating on the fringes of what could be seen at the flickering edges of the collective digital mind.

They sometimes combined with each other, as well as machines, and claimed that the ecstasy of the ultimate merge was greater than anything that could be achieved by what they somewhat condescendingly referred to as the “mortal flesh suit.” Their happiness took them so far outside of natural society that they ended up getting lost over the digital horizon, like fading echoes in a bottomless canyon.

Alice found the variety of the communities amazing and wonderful. Some people liked to live with their own ethnicities, other people like to blend in multiracial societies; there were a few female-only

neighbourhoods, and even a few male-only – and one teen-only neighbourhood, which truly fascinated her.

Automation was the essence of the world – there were five kinds of neighbourhoods in general: Bigbots, Nanobots, Humanbots, Normalbots and Botless – no bots at all.

In the Bigbots neighbourhoods, the automation was large, creative, innovative and startling. You could be served by dinosaurs, pixies, space creatures – there was an entire town devoted to Lord of the Rings, with every creature from the books faithfully replicated. You had to stay on your toes, and get used to it, because the BotArtists were unconstrained in their creativity. You could hire a twin for the day – Alice was once startled by being served by a waiter who looked exactly like her, down to the little scar under her left eye that came from swimming goggles a year ago.

The restless spirit of the endless artistry extended even to the houses, which constantly changed colour, shape and style. Sometimes, when you were walking down the street, a cottage would morph into a castle – and then a bulbous anti-gravity fun house, if a children’s party was underway.

It was all a little – intense for her rational mind, and she began to steer clear of these “waking dreams” avenues.

The Nanobot neighbourhoods could be equally surreal. There, people preferred not to see any automation at all, so restaurant meals arrived floating on air; ancient people with uncertain legs zoomed by, appearing to sit on nothing. People had animated conversations, gesturing at invisible phones, and children climbed randomly in midair, their hands and feet supported by invisible servants. Even sky-taxis and jet packs were invisible – people just flew through the air, pointing and laughing.

Alice preferred the Humanbots neighbourhoods, where all automatons took human form – with a red dot on the left earlobe, to distinguish them. Recent work to make the robots even more human had been pulled back, because it kind of messed with people’s heads, and so duller eyes and more doll-like hair had become the norm.

Normalbot neighbourhoods were the most familiar – machines looked like machines. Form followed function – vacuum robots were giant suction holes with spider legs, construction bots were a tangle of arms and conveyor belts for moving and piling; waiters were metal bipeds with forklift arms.

Botless neighbourhoods were nostalgic throwbacks to the time before automation. Engines were allowed, machines were welcome, but bots were not. These were actually growing in popularity, because the inevitable human impulse to dabble in the spectacular grew wearisome, and it wasn’t actually good for people’s long-term mental health to live in the resurrected dreams of hyper-creative artists.

Everyone advocated for their own visions, and competed for the minds and hearts of the transient. Neighbourhoods grew, split, vanished, formed and reformed, on a continual basis.

“We cannot safely or sanely move past our evolution,” said a passionate bearded man at a café. “We evolved in the woods, very well, we can leave the woods – but we cannot leave reality, we cannot survive at the mercy of other people’s imaginations. When we are continually presented with that which was impossible even twenty years ago – baby T-Rex’s serving us brunch – it dissolves our capacity to process reality. It is entertaining, it is distracting – but it is *inhuman*.”

The “no bots” advocates referred to the tinkering with unreality that characterized the other neighbourhoods as a *Rumspringa* – a youthful time when curiosity trumps common sense, and novelty distracts from virtue.

Outside the towns – and there were always tours going everywhere, people loved to advertise their own lifestyles – you could really dive deep into the nitty-gritty of rural life, among the people who eschewed technology as a whole.

Alice had inherited her father’s interest in history, and would sometimes wander around towns with a book-bot whispering in her ear. She tried some of the latest virtual reality technologies, but found them *far* too realistic for her tastes. She went on a Martian experience, sniffing the cinnamon winds of the red planet, shivering under the cold pale sky, but it either felt unreal – or terrifyingly real. After she had a minor panic attack looking at the tiny moon-like Earth from Mars, she unplugged and never returned. There were entire communities of people living virtual lives on Mars, and they often enticed her to stay, but she found the experience (and actually smiled when the word popped into her mind) *alienating*.

A few people were actually living on Mars, but interplanetary colonization was generally viewed as the most extreme of sports, like solo Alpinism or sea-floor exploration, and was left to the thrill-junkies who lived to surf the edge of adrenaline.

The people who escaped into virtual reality did get their exercise, on rotating room floors that could simulate just about any ground surface, allowing them to move, climb, hike, swim, you name it – but it just seemed too unreal to be enticing. Also, Alice was alarmed about some of the reports that people who spent too much time in virtual reality lost their caution in the real world. They would forget to put on sunscreen, lean over cliff edges, imagining that every negative consequence in reality could be undone like the “save game” world of VR.

Her parents let her explore these alternative worlds, but did remind her that she was only alive to explore them *because* they had limited their own youthful use of the infinite technology, deciding to return and start an actual family.

Her father said once, “It seems odd that some people still want to escape into a virtual world when we have made the real world so pleasant!”

Alice had asked him about combining her love of history with virtual reality, but he said that no company would let her go into an accurate historical VR, because as a child she would just be too traumatized by direct and vivid contact with most of human history.

His eyes grew deadly serious. “It’s too much of a horror show to be experienced directly. You can watch it on a flat screen – there are still some of them around – and you can also read about it in books, on

flat-text. But what you *cannot* do is step in and experience it yourself, directly. Honestly, I have no idea how people in history kept even a shred of their sanity, given the horrors of the world around them. Although I suppose that was also the perspective of people in the Old World... We look at the world of history and see it as a madhouse of evil and violence – but the people back then looked back even further, to the Ancient World – a time of plague and superstition and starvation and war and death by infection and tooth decay – and imagined that *those* people lived in hell as well. No, even if you find someone willing to let you go into, say, 600 years ago, just report them to our local DRO, because they really shouldn't be doing that. They would probably be fined – not ostracized, but still..."

Alice would wander into a few back-alley flat-screen movie shows about the past, where very elderly and sad-faced men – whose grandfathers' probably passed down to them first-hand childhood accounts of the Cataclysms – would tell her age-appropriate stories of the Old World, their voices paper-thin.

"Back then, my dear, parents were forced to pay for the schools, and children were mostly forced to go. There was a lot of violence and abuse – what? What is abuse? Well, it's when you... Generally, it's when you try to make yourself feel better by making someone else feel worse – in this case a child. Why did people do that? Well, I guess everyone thought it was something called 'human nature,' which was very strange when you think about it – it would have been in the past, too, if people had bothered to think about it at all. Forcing people into a building is the definition of a prison – a prison? Yes, sorry, a prison was a massive fortified building where criminals were put – and a lot of non-criminals, sadly – and forced to stay for a certain amount of time, because they had confessed to some kind of crime, or been found guilty. Anyway, the schools were the closest thing that most people ever came to being in prison, because they were forced to be there – and bullied constantly, and lied to about the world, and morality, and their society as a whole... And it was really the only place – outside the family of course – where people experienced direct violence, often daily. And the truly mad part of it was that the parents were forced to pay for all of this violence and incarceration and indoctrination – sorry, 'incarceration' means keeping people in buildings against their wills, it's pretty much the same as 'kidnapping,' but it was justified by the general beliefs at the time. No, the truly mad part was that the teachers – who were paid by threats of violence against the parents – would always instruct the children that they must never *ever* use violence to get their way! 'No violence, no stealing,' was the general saying in these school prisons – while the teachers and the managers and *all* the workers got paid by violence! Who forced the parents to pay? I'm afraid that's where the limit of considerate education comes for me – you will have to ask your parents about all of that, that is not something that you should learn from a stranger..."

There was a non-blind spot at the center of her society, at least in talking about the past – a massive trauma that reminded her of an experiment her father had done with her once about trying to push two opposing magnets together. Closing the circle of ignorance, talking about the core of the evils of the past, was something that people still shied away from – even generations after the Cataclysms. It was the only real sign of superstition that she found in her society. It was like the world had killed some kind of demon or deadly ghost, and was afraid to speak its name, for fear of bringing it back to life...

"When you are older, when you are older..."

But then, one day in the woods, on the mountain, Alice found fear, found her future, and came the closest to the evils of the past that could be conceived of in the world of the present.

Chapter 5

Alice became friends with the dark-haired man from the café – he had a daughter, Emily, who became her best friend.

Emily's family were often referred to as "harpies," which was a combination of the ancient word 'hippies' (because of their loving view of nature), as well as 'harpies,' since they could be quite insistent on their 'back to nature' philosophy.

Emily's father was a swarthy, dark-haired man with wide shoulders and extravagant passions, who railed against the modern world, and its dependence on computers and machines.

"You know that we are *carbon*-based life forms, not *silicon*-based life forms, right?! Let me tell you about my day – I get up before dawn, milk the cows, boil the peanuts I washed last night, then break the earth with a metal plow pulled behind an unruly mule. I fix my own shoes, do my own carpentry, grow my own fruits and vegetables, and a couple of times a year, slaughter my own pigs. I preserve and smoke my own meat, and rely on these..!" Here he slapped his meaty biceps. "...instead of *this!*" Here he simulated frantic typing in thin air. "Heeere, botty-botty-botty, keep me an infant forever!"

He wasn't exactly a fanatic – and Alice wasn't afraid of anyone, of course, since she knew she would never be yelled at or hit – so she took him on after dinner one night.

"You are very passionate about this."

He rolled his eyes and burped. "The word 'passion' is an insult used by the bloodless to criticize those with actual emotions."

Alice smiled, unoffended. It was widely recognized that to be offended was to automatically lose the argument.

"What do you mean?"

He fixed his eyes on her. "What is the purpose of life?"

It was her turn to roll her eyes. "Why, happiness of course!"

"Why?"

"Well, because it is the one state that we do not achieve in order to achieve some other state. We get bitcoin to buy things, we buy things to make us happy – once we are happy, there is no other place to go..."

He jabbed his finger into the palm of his other hand. "Right – and every time a man – or a girl – uses a machine, do know what he or she is actually saying?"

Alice smiled. "'I don't want to waste my time?'"

He barked with laughter. "No! If a man uses a machine to lift something, he is admitting that he is unable to lift it himself! Every time we use a machine to do something, we are confessing that we cannot do it ourselves, or are unwilling. In other words, we are either weak, or lazy!"

Alice smiled, enjoying the debate. "Are you calling me weak or lazy?"

His eyes widened. “What, insult a child? Of course not, you are in a state of pre-knowledge. Think of the people stuck in the outer rims of VR, who barely ever come back to reality. By living in a computer, they are saying that they need a computer in order to be happy. Isn’t that a little sad, don’t you think?”

Alice considered. “Let’s start with something a little easier, which is medicine – surely medicine is acceptable, if you get sick.”

He pursed his lips, frowning. “Okay, but what you need to understand – sorry Alice, that was a little condescending – what’s *important* to remember is the old lesson of automobiles from the Old World. People were forced to wear seatbelts, the idea being that if they crashed, they would be safer – but they actually caused *more* danger! People with seatbelts simply drove faster, and more dangerously – the people who got injured *more* were people on little two-wheeled motorcycles, or people just walking around, ‘pedestrians’ they were called I think. People with easy access to medicine tend to live more risky lives – they eat badly, exercise less, perhaps they have other bad habits – it’s not entirely clear that access to medicine extends the lifespan enormously, it simply backfills people’s bad decisions, quite often.”

Alice gestured at her watching friend. “So if Emily got sick, you wouldn’t take her to a doctor?”

His eyes narrowed. “I’m not a *fanatic*, my dear!” He touched his daughter’s cheek with great affection. “The purpose of life is happiness, and if Emily died from a curable illness, I would be miserable for the rest of my life, probably. It’s quite a common thing in the world, that when someone has a belief, you push it to extremes, hoping to break it – and then abandon the entire system. It’s like having a sky-trampoline, then saying, ‘Well, it doesn’t bounce me to the moon, so I’m not going to use it at all!’ Extremes are not a test of a system aiming at a moving target like happiness. Ambition is necessary for the young, but looks kind of ridiculous when a man turns a hundred and forty! Exercise is good – unless you work too hard, and hurt yourself. Absolutes can never hit moving targets, and vice versa. But let me ask you this...”

He paused.

Alice said: “Yes?”

He chose his words delicately. “Of course there will never be other Cataclysms, but I do sometimes wonder what would happen if there was a failure in the computers or the bots or the machines, and people were left to face reality without all of this silicon nonsense propping them up.”

He took a bite, happy to talk through his chewing.

“I mean, imagine if VR went down – people would lose half their relationships, their sense of where they are, of reality itself... They’d get to see what their food *actually* looks like – and their friends too, if they have any nearby. Look – it’s not healthy to become so dependent on external machinery that you can’t really function without it. It’s not how we evolved – it’s how kings and rulers and *slave* masters evolved, but not us, not working folks.”

He nodded with evident pleasure.

“I know that I can produce my own food and shelter with my own hands, and that gives me great satisfaction – and I’m desperate to communicate to other people that the hard work and sacrifice is

worth it! I feel like I'm trying to pry people away from a kind of digital drug – I mean, you're going hiking with Emily tomorrow, after the sleepover, when you could just as easily walk in VR, or take sky-trampolines, or even be carried by bus-bots – you're choosing to *walk*, because you want your feet on the ground, the scent of oak in your nose, the wind in your ears, making that tiny roar."

He smiled in sensual delight.

"You want the crunch of leaves and needles under your feet, the swaying as you walk, and you want your breath to come hard and tight, and your muscles to throb at the end of the day – that kind of work is what makes us *human*, it's how we got to the top of the food chain, and now rule a peaceful planet – it just feels kind of odd to abandon all of the musculature that got us to where we are, for the sake of turning machines into slaves to do everything for us!"

Alice nodded and took a sip of water.

"That's totally true, I do love to hike, as does Emily – and I like the variety as well." She widened her hands. "To be honest, I view where you are coming from as kind of the opposite extreme of the VR dwellers. They live *in* machines, you want to live *without* machines – I'm not going to nag you about axes and plows and silly things like that, I get that absolutism is a cheap argument – but I'm kind of for the Aristotelian mean. If I want to hike someplace remote, I want to jump there, or be carried. If I had to spend a week doing boring hikes in order to get to a beautiful hike, I probably wouldn't go, I'll be honest with you. And – ok, tell me this – when was the last time *you* went on a distant hike?"

He pursed his lips to one side, considering her question. "I'm not pausing because I'm trying to find some way out of your question, but because I don't really remember, and I actually haven't had much of a desire to hike, since I work with my body all day, and find great satisfaction in *that* labour!"

"That's fine," grinned Alice. "I do love a good debate! Here's my issue, if this makes any sense. I think that the desire to enroll other people in your recipe or path to happiness generally takes *away* from that happiness. You would prefer it if the world would be self-sufficient, in the way that you and your family are, right?"

He nodded eagerly.

"So you see, you are *less* happy because *other* people are not listening to you – or at least do not follow your advice or prescription, or whatever you want to call it. So you are putting your happiness in the hearts and minds of others, and you cannot control them directly, since no one does that anymore, so your happiness is taken away from you, and depends, at least in part, on whether other people *accept* what you have to say. Myself, I don't... want to put any part of my happiness on the free will of others."

"You mean, even a husband or your children?"

Alice paused, waiting for the response to bubble up in her, as it usually did in these kinds of conversations. "No, because you're talking about changing the whole world – my husband and my children will have similar values to me, so they are a preselected group, not a random sample of everyone that I would want to change." She took another sip of water, holding up a finger. "I guess there are two ways to go about trying to get other people to change – the first is to insist that they change, and give them lots of arguments and evidence – and the second is to be happy yourself, and see if they are interested in how you got there. You seem to judge people who are dependent on machines

very negatively, and I think in general it's that negative judgement that will push them away from you, and not give you the happiness that you want – or add to their happiness, either, I guess.”

He stared at her, then laughed in delight.

“That is a really good argument, I can't believe you're still so young – but this is a brave new world, particularly for kids of course – good for you! I don't have a great response, so I will just say that tomorrow – listen up Emily, you'll love this – tomorrow, you can hike anywhere that a sky-taxi can take you.”

Emily jumped up, knocking over her cup of herbal tea. “Really? HWANK!”

Emily had had bronchitis when she was younger, and still had a little bit of asthma, and when she got excited, a kind of faint goose-like honking came out of her throat.

They stayed up late that night, using Alice's phone to examine every nook and cranny in the proximate wilderness, looking for the greatest possible hike. They finally found, tucked under the low-hanging canopy of the 3D map – a natural cave with a thin but rapid waterfall spraying out of it. It was not too distant – about halfway up Smudge Mountain – and there did appear to be some vague paths leading up from some lower meadows.

Grudgingly, Emily's father zoomed in on the map, examining the paths in greater detail. “Hmmm, it's not really bear country, those paths look too narrow, so you should be fine... I'm going to really throw myself into the fire and ask you to take an emergency bot with you – with the understanding that this is the reason *why* I try to avoid technology, since depending on one thing tends to lead to depending on another, until you haven't seen a natural sunrise in three years, like my brother.”

This would be Emily's first time on a sky-taxi, and she was enormously excited. The pair stayed up very late talking about the adventure to come, until Alice sensibly reminded her friend that it would be much less enjoyable if they didn't get enough sleep. Emily agreed, on the condition that they travel without phones in the morning, since they tended to be so distracting.

After an early breakfast, Emily's father mounted a horse and rode off to borrow an emergency bot. He reminded them that the bot might need some sunlight from time to time, and to use it to call the sky-taxi 45 minutes before they needed it.

After activating the emergency bot, they played a lazy game of horseshoes as the sun rose above a distant and rather unkempt barn. Soon enough, a pure white six-seater sky-taxi slid through the air over the cows, causing them to moo anxiously. It settled just above the ground.

Emily's father said: “What do they call them – rows?”

Alice smiled. “Pews. We get into the pews.”

Alice lugged up their backpacks and the bot, then leaned forward to the crystals and murmured their destination. The sky-taxi surged into the air, expertly blowing anti-wind against the slipstream, so that only a vague breeze stirred their hair as they shot through the sky.

“Some people like sky-taxis with windows, but I think they suck!” cried Alice in heady joy.

Emily laughed. “I thought we would have to be yelling the whole time, but this is kind of weirdly quiet. I can see why it reminds some people of a church.”

Alice asked the sky-taxi to skim the treetops, and they competed as to who could find the most bird’s nests.

After a while, Alice turned to her friend curiously. “Do you like this natural life that your family has?”

Emily made a face. “Well *that’s* not a big question or anything!”

“We have some time.”

Emily tucked a long strand of hair behind her left ear, turning to regard the treetops flowing under the pews.

Alice could sense a strong feeling rising within her friend, but gave her space to let it form.

Eventually, Emily said softly: “I actually really like working on the farm, it does feel real and vivid and – smelly, of course. It feels better that my friends actually have to visit, and we see each other for real – and there is always something to do, and I’m never bored, and I don’t feel like I have to run like crazy after this stimulation stuff that everybody else seems to want all the time. I do miss having more in common with other people, you all have these references to things I don’t really know anything about – although I guess I do for you as well. It’s definitely what my dad thinks is the best thing – and my mom too, of course – and I trust them that they are looking out for what is best for me, and they never make me do anything, and of course I never get punished or anything like that, that’s a given, who does? And my dad is very clear that whatever I want to do as an adult is totally up to me, so in three years I can make whatever choices I want, and he will support me no matter what, so I would say I’m happy in what it is that I’m doing.”

Alice smiled. “That’s great, I appreciate that, thank you, I know it was a sudden and big question, that’s kind of like my habit if you hadn’t figured that out by now!”

“Oh yes, we all know,” laughed Emily. “Sometimes we call you ‘Chalice,’ because there’s a lot to drink in.”

Alice giggled. “‘Chalice.’ Haha, that’s really great! I envy you little bit, to be honest, if you don’t mind.”

“Mind? Why would I mind? I thought I was a little bit pitied – not exactly, but you know what I mean – like a poor relation who can’t afford a cook-bot.”

“Envy because you have something to battle. You battle nature, and animals I guess to some degree, and the challenge of a fairly different lifestyle from everyone else, or at least most people.” Alice raised her fists into the breathing air. “I wake up punchy, and I go to sleep punchy, and my dreams are punchy, but the world seems so serene and even-tempered and peaceful that I feel as if my punchiness would just be like – I don’t know, like everyone’s looking at the reflection of a beautiful sunset on a still lake, and I just heave a big giant boulder into it and smash up all the serenity. That’s not exactly a good way to put it, because they could just look directly at the sunset, but you know what I mean. You have something to fight, and all I do I think is fight my own punchiness.”

“You know what people would say about that, right?”

They cried out together in singsong voices: “Where in your childhood did that come from?”

Alice smiled ruefully. “Yeah, that’s what they always say, but I don’t think anything particularly bad happened to make me punchy, other than my sister of course, which was just a brute accident, and I was so young, I don’t really... So much about us is genetic, they say, so – I mean, I had my Scans like everyone, totally normal, very peaceful parenting, my family is great – but I’m still punchy, and I kind of wonder if I’m gonna grow out of it, leave it behind, even out, sink into the – swamp of everyone, if that makes sense. But it’s growing instead, especially after puberty, and all that. Maybe I should just start a...”

Her mouth froze.

“What?”

“Oh, no, nothing.”

Emily leaned towards her. “Truth spell,” she murmured. This was from an old game they played, where they were wizards and had magic.

“Haha, oh my goodness, that’s kind of ancient!”

“Truth spell on the freckled forehead!” said Emily, placing her cool hand on Alice’s skin.

“Oh, I was going to say, perhaps I should start a war, but that’s about as not funny as anything could be.”

“That is some edgy humour right there,” said Emily, drawing back slightly. She blushed suddenly. “No, it’s fine, I’m not offended, but I guess I’m just happy that there’s no one else in church with us.”

“No secrets of course, but it’s okay if we just keep this between us.”

They knew some of the history of the Cataclysms. Enough to know what would never be considered funny.

Emily nodded slowly. “Okay, I’ll do one, and then will be even, and will have to keep each other’s secrets.”

“Oh. Ok.”

Emily leaned forward and whispered: “Perhaps you and me and a group of criminals should take control of everyone’s money...”

Alice laughed nervously. “Find a way to make Bitcoins out of thin air, stealing everything from everyone!”

Emily gasped. “Oooh – and we could force all the children to learn what *we* wanted – what served *our* needs – so they would become our slaves!”

“And find a way to sell people into debt, so we could become rich!”

“Children too! Even the unborn!”

“And – find a way to charge people for going to work – charge them for a certificate saying they could!”

“And if they ever displeased us, we could just take it all away!”

Alice’s cheeks were red with daring. “Oh – oh, I’ve got one – we could *force people to fight our wars!*”

The two girls shivered – although the sun was rising and the air was warm – and went silent.

Some jokes were just too dark.

Chapter 6

The girls were not expecting to see anyone, this far from anywhere...

Sometimes, when they hiked in the early evening, they saw various VR eyes and ears floating through the trees like eerie fireflies of distant thought, but they weren’t expecting any in-person footfalls on the stony heights of the mountain.

They had never met a mean person – sometimes impatient, short-tempered, mildly irritated – but always, there was this general social approach of being extraordinarily nice to children, so they were never concerned about interacting with strangers.

The only crime they had ever really heard of was the crime of wasting your life, which was constantly aimed at the VR addicts, called “DOAvers,” for Dead on Arrival VR. Occasionally, somebody would suffer from some biological ailment – brain cancer or something like it – and there would be abuse or violence, but since these lost souls lacked free will, they were not prosecuted as criminals, but rather confined and cured as victims of endlessly fallible biology. But actual willing malevolent evil violence – that was as unknown in their world as a poltergeist at a physics conference.

Alice and Emily had made it up to a small clearing a strong stone’s throw below the cave where the waterfall originated. Looking up, they could see the small vertical chasm, a tight spray of rushing water, the green loops of hanging vines, and small rocks polished by the rush spilling from the mouth.

“Why is it called ‘Smudge Mountain?’” panted Emily. The emergency bot floated up around her sweaty head, as if in concern.

Alice smiled. “The first sketch of this area was 700 years ago. This mountain was drawn in the distance in charcoal, on the horizon – when the artist got back to town and unrolled the paper, it had all smudged.”

Emily shivered. “I can’t imagine the world back then.”

Alice snorted. “Who’d want to? Sorry, what do you mean?”

Emily shook her head slightly. “Everyone here is always – so nice to us. Us kids. It’s hard to get a good description of what it was like – back then. Everyone keeps their mouths closed. That’s worse, it leaves everything to my imagination. Like it was hell.” She gestured at the mountain peak above. “Like kids were just a smudge on the horizon.”

Alice nodded appreciatively. “It wasn’t hell though. Hell is where you went if you were evil. But kids can’t be evil. My dad says that kids had to be broken because the world was broken – and the world was broken *because* kids were broken. Round and round. I think of it more as a torture prison.”

"I don't know how they did it. How did they go on? Get out of bed? Go to – school?"

"I don't know," said Alice softly. "Attacked, beaten, lied to, ignored..."

"Why?" whispered Emily, brushing her hair back.

"We don't have to know," replied Alice. "It's never coming back."

They drank some water, then started the steep tangled path up towards the waterfall. They loved angling themselves to flow through the tangled branches – a slow contorted dance of passage.

It was Emily who first put her hand on Alice's arm. Perhaps because her father was a *harpy*, and she was raised closer to the land – and the ill temper of farm animals – her sense of caution darted up, like the flared neck of a cobra.

"Stop!" she hissed.

Alice did not take away her arm, and froze.

"What, do you see something?" she whispered, barely audible.

Alice nodded ahead, through the darkening undergrowth. "Those boys..."

Alice sighed. "Gosh, you startled me, I thought you saw a bear or something. Or a wolf."

"No, there's something..."

"What?" Alice moved forward and squinted. In a clearing ahead – just past the waterfall, two boys – almost young men really – were idly poking a stick into a small fire. Something brown was on a stick over the fire, but she couldn't tell what it was... The lightly blown sparks from their fire merged with the sparkling splashes of the waterfall in an elemental dance.

"I don't like the look of them," said Emily, her face pale. "Let's go."

She took a step back, pulling on Alice's arm, almost toppling her.

"Emily," whispered Alice, "we've come all this way – and this is the one time you get to use a sky-taxi! We're so close, it won't be the same looking at it later, on the globe – don't you want to explore? They're just two boys." Alice squinted again – her eyesight wasn't quite as sharp as her friends'. "And the closest mean children are like half a world away, in a *statist country*..." She said the last two words with near-visceral contempt.

On its almost-silent wings, the emergency bot shifted a little closer to them. With their heightened startle reflex, the girls spun around to look at it.

Alice saw Emily's eyes widen slightly.

"What?"

Emily nodded urgently, towards the fire. Alice turned, and saw that only one boy was now sitting with his stick in the flames.

Had he been looking at them?

“So what?” shrugged Alice. “The other one probably just had to pee.”

Slightly shy people gain peculiar strength when they summon unusual assertiveness. Emily’s hand tightened almost painfully on Alice’s arm, pulling her backwards.

“Alice. We’re *going!*”

Alice nodded, swept along on the undercurrent of her friend’s fear. It seemed odd to Alice, since boys – or children – or people as a whole – seemed about as threatening as a box of kittens, but something odd was happening to her friend, and it wasn’t worth arguing with someone obviously in a high state of excitement – later they could debate, but...

There was a sudden squishy electric-arc sound, and a shower of tiny blue and yellow sparks exploded in the air. The very faint whirring of the emergency bot’s wings stopped – in the sudden shocked silence, they saw the hot shards of metal and plastic spread, scatter and fall to the ground. Alice had a sudden and almost irresistible urge to stamp on the tiny wreckage, for fear that a fire could spread and consume the trees.

She even raised her foot – but stopped when she noticed that Emily was not looking at the scattered wreckage, but rather – eyes as wide as eggs – was staring into the bushes to the left of the cave. It was such a look of fear that Alice’s foot froze, and she stood there on one leg like a stunned comical flamingo.

Alice followed her friend’s gaze, and saw a – oh, what was it called, some ancient weapon or plaything of centuries ago, shaped like a ‘Y,’ it shot pebbles or something like that – *slingshot*, that was it!

Someone just destroyed our property... The sentence ran through Alice’s mind like lemmings off a cliff. This had simply never happened to her before, she had never heard of anything like this happening at all, it was almost unimaginable that someone would voluntarily choose to break something that someone else owned – particularly a child, the ultimate protected group in society!

She opened her mouth, but had absolutely no idea what to say. The wild thought flickered through her mind that these two boys were really space aliens in human form, who had no idea how human society actually worked, and... And...

And that something terrible would happen...

A thin tendril of fear began to rise within her, as if her bowels were a tiny fire producing smoke. The sudden distance between them and their parents opened up in her heart, and she felt very alone and apart, out of nowhere it seemed.

The boy by the fire laughed – she could see in the flickering ancient light that an utterly unjustified optimism had set him on the path of trying to grow a beard.

“Good shot!” he cried – and there was a flicker of emotion in his voice that Alice truly had no words for – it was a kind of pride and triumph and domination and coldness and arrogance and – and – suddenly she *was* afraid. She had heard many foreign languages, travelling either in person or through VR, but they all had similar tones of reason and openness and friendliness – this was like a deep well with a person trapped at the bottom, trapped in deep time, in the old world, like a child who had fallen down

that well, and cried lustily for help, but by the time you climbed down the crumbling wall, the child had turned into an crow-cleaned ivory skeleton that jumped at you in the dark...

Oh my gosh, what is happening to my brain? thought Alice in panic.

For the first time in her entire life, she felt a sudden desire to turn and flee, to run, to scamper from – from *predation*.

The younger boy emerged from the bushes, jammed his slingshot into a back pocket, spat to his right, and grinned in a lopsided – almost distorted – manner at them.

“No reason for outsiders,” he said easily.

Alice felt another shock of fear. People who are utterly at ease in a bizarre situation... Again, she had no language for it, other than the phrase: *no strangers to strange*...

The older boy lifted his stick from over the fire, scattering yellow and orange sparks.

“Do you eat meat? Do you like meat?” he asked. Although the skin of whatever he had been burning was still bubbling, he used his molars to rip off a strip. His hair was dark in the growing gloom – his cheeks smudged with soot and scratches and – and – paint?

He raised his head to stare at the two girls. His eyes were hooded under his thick brows – eyes the exact same colour as the surrounding background, so that they looked like two holes that went straight through his head. Alice thought absurdly of two bowling alleys, side-by-side...

“Can you talk?” demanded the older boy. “Dontcha know that it’s rude to not answer a simple question?” His voice sounded pained, aggrieved, insistent.

“Maybe they are scared,” offered the younger boy. “Bot kids, far from home.”

Emily’s voice startled Alice, she had never heard this tone from her friend before: “Why did you – destroy our emergency bot?”

The younger boy spat again, he was chewing something they could not see.

“You are trespassing, and spying,” he said angrily. “You ever seen *me* coming to your house and staring in *your* windows?”

The older boy said: “We want them to take us off the map, because this is ours, but... They don’t care, they don’t take us into consideration, so why should we return the favour?”

Oh no, thought Alice, remembering the history of philosophy she studied when she was younger. *Moral equivalence and reversal, this is not good at all...*

“There’s no need for us to be enemies,” said the younger boy, walking forward and extending his rather grimy hand. Closer, the girls could see that one of his front teeth was missing, giving him a slight lisp. “You are kids, we are kids, no need for...” He closed his fists together and punched each knuckle into the other – far too hard. The girls flinched at the sound.

Alice swallowed – swallowed again, then found her voice. “We really need to be going.”

“No!” said the older boy loudly. “You trespass, you pay the rent, it’s that simple. Law of the land.”

The... rent? thought Alice.

With extraordinary rapidity, the younger boy walked forward, and grabbed both girls very hard by the forearms.

“Sit a while,” he breathed, and Alice, using instincts she didn’t even know she possessed, commanded herself not to flinch in the face of his breath, which stank like the exhale of a collapsing mausoleum.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the older boy nodding and kicking something lying on the ground beside him. “Yeah, we’re low on wood – and we have another gopher.”

The younger boy dragged them forward to the fire. Emily tried going limp, but he pulled her forward anyway, and she had to get up, because her knees were being scraped to hell.

“We are reasonable folk,” continued the older boy. “You keep our fire going long enough to cook the next gopher, and you can go on your way.”

“We don’t want to stay,” said Alice, feeling quite disoriented. Although expressing her reasonable preference had gotten her what she wanted 100% of the time throughout her young life, she was absolutely – and quite suddenly – certain that her will had no coinage here. *My free will is mere fiat currency here...*

“You don’t want to stay?” repeated the older boy mockingly, standing to his full height. He was a lot taller than Alice. “Well we don’t want you here, but here you are, so I guess we’ll just have to find a way to make the best of it.”

All these strange justifications circled the two girls like tiny sharks – like the sparks from the fire – and Alice suddenly remembered an argument she had heard when she was very little, that it was much safer being attacked by a big dog on dry land than a two-foot shark in the water, because the water was the shark’s element, and there were no trees to climb...

Emily began to cry – some unknown instinct of hers felt tears coming, but pumped them up a little bit, perhaps to find some scrap of empathy or compassion in the two utterly strange boys.

The younger boy picked up his stick from the fire and pointed the glowing end directly at Emily’s face.

“You shut up!” he yelled. “I don’t care if you’re a girl, no sniffing, no blubbing, no face-mess or lippy trembles, all right? We’re not here to hurt you, do you have any idea what kind of insult you are throwing in our face by crying at our fire? WE’RE NOT HERE TO HURT YOU IF YOU ARE NICE!”

As if in a game where the sun was grabbed from dawn to noon, the faces of the two girls went suddenly pale. They both immediately understood the implication – that some unknown and incomprehensible activity called being “nice” was all that stood between them and getting hurt – how badly, neither wanted to know.

“What do you want from us?” asked Alice.

The older boy sneered. “Oh *now* it’s time to play dumb, right? First thing she’s got to do is stop the blubbing. We’re not animals, we’re not beasts of the jungle...” He screeched like a monkey. “It’s just a

bit of business, like I told you, payment for trespassing – more civilized than others would treat you. You keep this fire going while we roast the gopher, and we're even, we're square, we're done."

Emily took a deep, shuddering breath. "And then – and then, we can go?"

The older boy roared suddenly: "DID WE EVER SAY YOU WERE WANTED? I DON'T THINK SO, GIRLIE! YOU ARE TRESPASSING, YOU WITH ALL THIS 'PROPERTY' STUFF SHOULD DAMN WELL UNDERSTAND!"

Alice was shocked – she had only ever heard true bellowing in recordings of historical speeches, when deranged politicians slid the hot spikes of inflammatory language into the festering resentments of some boiling mob.

Strange to say, but the younger boy suppressed a giggle as the older boy shouted at Emily. Alice's mind spun, absolutely at a loss as to whether this was a good sign, or a very bad sign. Was this all a kind of play-acting, a test of their strength – or could these two dangerous boys cast all norms of civilized behaviour aside because they knew they would face no consequences for any of their actions?

Her mind raced through wild escape scenarios.

*We could kick the fire and run, or I could grab a stick and whack one of these boys in the head – a burning stick, even better – and we could flee back down the path, but unless we totally disable them, it's their territory, not ours – they are sharks in the water, not dogs on the land. Also, they have that slingshot thing, and the younger boy can aim like a laser, he could take us down no problem – and Emily has that asthma thing – 'SUCKS TO YOUR ASS-MAR' came into her mind from a long-ago story – so she couldn't make it very far, and the boys are bigger and stronger, and we can't call the sky-taxi without the emergency bot, and there's just no way we can get away, at least not reliably, and I can't coordinate anything with Emily without the boys knowing, so – what are we supposed to do? We actually can't get away until they **let** us get away!*

The image of her father rose in her mind, and she suddenly felt a confused form of protective tenderness towards him. *Even if he was here, I've never seen him deal with anything like this, what would he do? Would he take a stick to these boys and beat them? They are used to these woods, and handy with weapons, who would come out on top? And in this kind of situation, if anyone escalates violence, without it being a decisive victory, things go from bad to worse in a heartbeat...*

Thinking of a heart beating led her mind to an old picture she had seen of an Aztec ritual; these primitive brutes worshipped a god that fed on the tears of the young, so they would torture children to death, sometimes cutting their hearts out of their living bodies, to feed the sadism of their ghastly god...

Dear world, what chasm tumbling to Hades have we stumbled upon?

But again, the mood shifted once more, without warning. Once the two girls were seated, and had refused the proffered meat, the boys sat in a relaxed manner, one leaning against a tree and clasping his hands behind his head.

The older boy smiled, almost gently. "See? No need for tension..." He pronounced it *tenn-shun*. "Chiefs don't have to be angry when people do what they say. And you're interesting, I bet we are too, once you get over this – fear I guess. You are from out there..." He gestured vaguely at the crescent moon, still embedded in the blue jewel of the sky. "...and we are from – somewhere around here..."

The other boy nodded sagely. "From parts unknown."

The older boy jabbed a decisive forefinger in his direction. "Exactly. Parts unknown. A spike of history, as they say. We are like noble savages and computers meeting in the woods." He stared at his grimy palm. "Dirty hands clasping robot fingers, I guess." He laughed briefly, but uproariously. "And we wouldn't even be wandering around – forever – 'cept my dad won't plant crops, that's not the *old ways*..."

"Don't you have any questions for us?" asked the younger boy, slightly belligerently.

Alice could see Emily swallow. "Well, uh, where are you from exactly?"

The older boy leaned forward, the light and dark of the flickering fire washing up his face. "From way outside your experience, I would bet. I would bet everything I have, up to – or down to – and including, my soul!"

*Soul... Now **that** was a word from the old world...* thought Alice.

The younger boy appeared irritated. "Stop talking in circles, you're like a dizzy magician. Girls," he said decisively, turning to them. "You don't know anyone like us, do you?"

Both girls shook their heads numbly, their hearts pounding uncomfortably – almost audibly, they feared.

This satisfied him for some reason. "Good, good – as it should be. We are The Originals, we don't put children on top, we were *raised*, not *praised*. We are not princesses, like you. We don't expect the world to spin around us, we learn from our elders, the old ways I guess you could say. We don't live in clouds, we don't ride robots, we don't – outsource our bodies, our flesh don't mate with metal. We are fully human, in a way that..." His sudden burst of verbosity seemed to fail him, and Alice guessed that he had reached the edge of the clichés he had been fed with as a little boy. *When you run out of propaganda, you run out of personality...*

With sudden vehemence, the older boy said: "We just want to be left alone!"

The younger boy sighed, scratching his ear with a stick. "But we won't be, now, will we?"

There was a long pause, pregnant with disastrous potential. Both girls had a sudden intimation that detaining them had been an impulsive action, and the ramifications of that decision were slowly becoming clear.

Emily leaned forward. "We don't have to tell anyone, we don't care – this was just a kind of misunderstanding I think. We can go on our way – and when people ask us how our day was, we can mention everything *except* this. It doesn't really matter, we're just like two spears flying past each other on a battlefield..." That last image clearly made no sense to her, and she closed her mouth suddenly.

The older boy wrinkled his nose. "You would – lie? To your parents?" He laughed harshly. "Is that even – allowed?"

Alice seized on the moral question, as was her habit. "If we are in possession of information, it's not always a lie if we don't tell it. Every morning my dad asks me how I slept – can I tell him every single detail of every single one of my dreams, every time I woke up, if I even did? Can I tell him all my loose and random thoughts – which we all get when we are in the process of waking up, and lazing and lying

in bed? We can't ever communicate *everything* about us, so if we have to tell everything, I guess we're just lying all the time, every time we open our mouth – even if we don't speak..."

The older boy tossed a bone with several clearly visible incisor marks into the fire. The marrow began to bubble through the holes. He grunted. "Now *that's* deep, which is to be expected from someone who's been told what to think. *The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth!* This ain't a court, but you and I both know that's all just a bunch of words, because you want to get away and tell. If you saw me unzip a flesh-suit and show you my reptile insides, and your little daddy asked you how your little walk was, and you didn't mention *that*, you would be lying through your freaking teeth! Leaving out the most important thing *is* lying, and I know how you would look lying to your little daddy, because you just did it to me, right now, right here!" The boy finished in a sweaty flourish of strange panting.

Wanting to break the tension of escalation, Alice jumped up. "You wanted us to get some wood, right? I assume you don't want us to go together, we can go one at a time, I could go now..."

"Sit down, girl!" cried the older boy. "Let's just face it, we've all been lying to each other, this whole time!"

The girls waited for him to continue, terrified of what he would say next – *what could he mean?* But he just sank into a gloomy silence, staring at the fire.

The furry animal at his feet suddenly began to squirm to life, making a pitiful screeching sound. The boy raised his bare heel and brought it down hard on the creature's skull. The twitching and screeching stopped.

The younger boy raised his eyebrows. "You know, if we were to skin that thing, I bet these little girls would pass right out."

The older boy laughed. "Imagine if we start skinning it, and it comes back to life under the knife, like peeling an apple that turns out to be a giant red eyeball!"

For some reason, they found this funny as well, and laughed again, heartily.

The younger boy said: "Oh, they're waiting for the sky-angels to swoop in with lightning and save them! Pew, pew, pew!"

Alice felt a strong compulsion to keep the conversation going under her tutelage – when left to their own devices, the minds of the boys fell in sinister directions.

"I'm guessing you don't want to tell us your names," she said. "I understand that – but can you tell us a little bit about yourselves? You're right, we've never met anyone like you before..."

The older boy turned to her with some interest. "Oh yeah? What about us is so different?" He raised his knife in warning. "And remember now, I know what your face looks like when you lie!"

Alice's mind frantically ran through the various corridors of possible conversations. Open criticism was out of the question; praise would be scorned, remarks on personal appearance would give offense, what on *earth* could she say?

"You don't seem to care how we feel," said Emily suddenly.

The unusual sentence hung in midair, like an arrow frozen in flight.

The older boy nodded slowly, obviously considering her words in all their complexity. “I bet that’s totally new for you. Tell me what it’s like out there, where you come from.” He smiled. “It’s not a trap, I promise you. I really want to know.”

For some reason, Alice really did *not* want Emily to answer that question – but she herself could not think of a response fast enough.

Emily said: “Well, what do you want to know?”

The older boy scowled. “Well *obviously*, if I knew what I wanted to know, I wouldn’t have to ask it, now would I?”

Alice laughed shakily. “Well, I can tell you, since you want to know – and I’d like to know about your history as well, so we can figure out why we are so – different. I’m not going to talk for my friend here, but how I was raised?” Her brow furrowed, it wasn’t language that she was used to.

She spoke rapidly, to cover the trembling in her voice. “Well, my first – memory, really, wasn’t anything real, it was just a dream. I was walking through the woods – gosh, it just struck me that maybe that’s why I still like to walk through woods, haha – and I came across a giant tree, and down in the earth under the tree there was this faint glow outlining the roots, like when you hold your forearm up to the sun and the tiny hairs on the outside are lit with light – and I began to dig around the base of the tree, it was really hard to get through, but underneath was a – cave, I guess you could say, and in the middle of the cave was a treasure chest – which makes no sense, I don’t remember ever seeing one in real life. And I opened the chest, it was kind of rusty I think...”

Her story was interrupted by the older boy clapping sarcastically. He mimicked her story, conveying her accent quite accurately: “*and in that treasure chest I found golden gold, the treasure of my life, and I thought I would have to look for that treasure forever, but it turns out that my life **was** the treasure, and I have been shiny gold ever since, and I can’t wait for some man to come and dig for my gold, under the tree, like an octopus...*” He held up his hands, fingers waving madly.

Alice had no idea how to respond – she had never been mocked in her life.

“Come on, man,” said the younger boy in an aggrieved voice. “Don’t ask her a question and make fun of her like that, that’s kinda rude.”

The older boy rolled his eyes and cracked his knuckles. “Ah, tell me your life and I’ll tell you a dream... I guess I’ll ask the questions.” He turned to Emily and curled his forefinger towards her, calling her over. She hesitated, and he picked another stick out of the fire and pointed the fiery end at her. “If I wanted to hurt you, you would be hurt already. Now get over here.”

Alice felt a sudden stab of annoyance when Emily looked towards her, as if to ask permission or guidance. Alice shrugged tightly, thinking: *What on earth do I know about how to deal with this?*

Emily got up and walked over to the older boy, then hesitated.

“Can you move – that,” she said, her voice shaking, pointing at the mound of bloody fur at the boy’s feet.

The boy followed her finger, then shrugged. Using the side of his foot, he shoved the dead gopher away.

“How do you – want me?” asked Emily.

“You can just kneel down here,” said the older boy, drawing a small square in the leaf-scattered ground in front of him with the glowing stick. Smoke rose from the scarred earth.

Emily did as she was told – and, sickened by the scene, Alice looked at her friend, who seemed to be kneeling before a swarthy Sultan like a slave girl. She almost expected Emily to clasp her hands behind her back and lower her head forward.

Seemingly appeased by his total control, the boy leaned slightly back and rubbed his belly with a strange delicacy.

“What is your name?”

Emily gave up her syllables, which seemed horribly intimate to Alice. Emily did not ask the boy’s name in return, because that would have been to claim equality, and provoke an escalation.

“Well, Emily, were you ever hit as a child?”

She blinked. “Well gosh no, of course not!”

“What about being yelled at? Anyone ever raise their voice against you – other than tonight of course?”

“No, that’s never happened. Why would it?”

The older boy paused, then laughed suddenly, turning to his companion. “You know, I was just gonna say to her that it is *me* who is asking the questions, like I’m some dumb villain in a fireside story!” He let loose an exaggeratedly-evil giggle.

The two boys laughed, then the older boy turned back to Emily.

“Ever done anything stupid?”

“I – don’t know what you mean.”

The boy smiled without humour. “Well, for instance, me and my buddy here are currently in the process of doing something very, very stupid, and will get in a lot of trouble for it.” He gestured at Alice. “Your friend or sister or whatever here had her little dream of going through the woods and finding gold under a tree. Well. *We* will get the opportunity to walk through the woods and be forced to pick out a switch to get hit with – not so big that it breaks a bone, not so small that it doesn’t hurt at all – it’s a trick, let me tell you. So: have you ever made a stupid mistake, done something stupid?”

“No, I can’t think of anything. I don’t think so,” murmured Emily, in a near-perfect voice of subjugation.

The younger boy asked incredulously: “So you’ve never been called stupid?”

Emily shook her head.

The irritation of the two boys appeared to be rising, but Alice could not figure out why.

The older boy said: "So: either you've never done anything stupid, or you've done stupid things, but never been called stupid, which means that everyone around you is lying to you." He leaned forward, his right hand still gripping the cooling stick. "Tell me this, Emily – are you *perfect*?"

She paused for a moment, and Alice could almost feel the onrushing tide of scalding honesty.

Emily said simply: "I feel perfect as I am."

The older boy's eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?" he murmured.

Emily did not hesitate. "I don't violate the non-aggression principle. I'm reasonably kind. I stand up where needed. I don't do anything malicious, or mean. I wouldn't..." Some ancient instinct slammed the door on her remaining words.

However, the damage by implication was done.

The older boy leaned over her and murmured: "You'd never punish trespassers, is that it?"

She refused to answer, staring down. He spun his glowing stick in an orange 'O', then gripped the middle and used the cooler end to lift up her chin.

"No, I wouldn't. Most conflict is just misunderstanding." A sudden tear trickled down from her left eye, and her voice wobbled. "We didn't know this land was owned, or claimed – there's no record of it anywhere that I... And there's no need for punishment – in the worst case, maybe ostracism, but I've not heard of that in... Why would anyone want to do this?" She turned to Alice pleadingly, her voice catching.

Her innocent and open question seemed to make the boys uneasy for a moment.

The younger boy said softly: "Come on, we should..."

"It's too late," said the older boy out of the corner of his mouth, as if that somehow magically meant the girls could not hear him. "It's like what Dad says about telling a story: if you're in, and you get lost, and it doesn't work, you just have to commit and keep going."

He turned towards Emily again. "You came out here for new experience, right?"

She nodded.

Quick as a flash, he dropped his fire stick and slapped her *hard* across her face.

He said: "Well *that* was stupid."

It was so totally unexpected – and unprecedented in the girl's lives – that Alice jumped up and leapt forward, without even thinking, and glared at the older boy. She was too terrified to touch him.

She said: "Why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

The younger boy was moving towards the pair, but the older boy shot him a look that stopped him in his tracks. The older boy curled his fist and punched Alice full in the stomach.

She doubled over, but wasn't in a great amount of pain – she just knew instinctively that her only chance to avoid escalation was to pretend to be more hurt than she actually was.

“Hoo boy,” giggled the younger boy, in nervous and half-terrified excitement.

The older boy was unabashed. “That’s about enough chitty-chat. Go and get some wood, Emily. I’m still hungry.”

The strange and uneasy air of intellectualism that had dominated the first part of the interaction completely vanished.

The boys ate the second gopher in silence, seeming to forget about the girls, and talked in obscure terms – coded words, it seemed – about fairly incomprehensible things; some sport they had dominated an enemy in, some girl they had humiliated by asking her to meet them far away, and refusing to show up – everything was about primitive status and victory and subjugation. They were untroubled by the effects of their actions, had no ability to negotiate – except to fool people – and laughed at suffering. Their world was divided, without any grays – and people in their stories leapt back and forth from good to bad without any transition, almost like teleporting.

The girls were frightened and confused – they had no idea what to do with being hurt and ignored, since that had never happened in their lives before – what did it mean? If they were forgotten, and not needed, could they just leave? They exchanged glances and found some relief in pretending that they could leave at any time – but when it came time to actually move, with many an eye-motion from one to the other, their will and courage faltered, because the sun had set, and if they were suddenly commanded to stay, and night was falling – well, their imagination failed them, which was perhaps even more terrifying than having a certain answer as to the path of their captivity.

Were the boys trying to impress them by reciting stories of dominance? Alice took some comfort in that idea, because it meant that the boys needed something from them, some kind of respect or admiration or obscure approval. This meant that they had at least a tiny bit of leverage in what seemed like an increasingly desperate situation.

And then, incomprehensibly, they heard the tolling of a distant bell, and the boys got up, turned their backs to the girls, and urinated on the fire, putting it out.

The older boy turned around, tugged at an imaginary ear, said: “Good luck” – and then turned and marched in sturdy steps off through the bushes – and both boys disappeared.

Chapter 7

It was hard to believe that the boys were actually gone. The two girls stared at each other in the growing dark, hardly daring to breathe – although Emily’s faint *honk-honk* could be heard in the slightly laboured silence.

She raised her eyebrow at Alice, wordlessly asking: *do you think it’s safe?*

Alice shrugged. She tried to listen hard for footfalls on the leafy ground, but her heart was pounding so loudly that it coursed a faintly *roaring thud-thud* through her ears. Realizing that she had never really listened to a forest before, she was aware of the trickling of the water, the slow creak of the trees, the whispering dragging of the leaves – and her own heart of course, again and again...

An oddly legal phrase flew into her mind, probably from listening to her father's business conversations:
There has to be a statute of limitations...

She frowned – sometimes her own mind could be puzzling. Then she realized that the phrase meant that the boys could not be circling back forever – if they were lying in wait, or hiding, at some point they would have to come out, or be assumed to have gone.

She almost snapped her fingers in strange relief, remembering the endless games of tag and hide-and-go-seek she played as a girl – it was just for this kind of situation. She vividly remembered hiding in a closet while her friends looked for her. It felt like forever, but she was afraid to come out, for fear that they were listening for her, rather than just looking for her. Eventually she had fallen asleep, and had been dragged awake by her mother, who had been looking for her for over half an hour, demanding that the house give up her location – but the house didn't know where she was either, so her mother had been forced to look by hand (her mother had used that odd phrase, which had made Alice giggle: "look by hand" – she could only think of her mother's hand with an eye in its palm).

You can only wait so long – at some point, the game is over, and you have to come out...

Plus, it wasn't like they had all the time in the world – their emergency bot lay in pieces, night was rising – and apparently they were still trespassers on the lands of crazy and evil people.

Stepping as delicately as a low-gravity ballerina, Alice glided over to her friend, and whispered in her ear:

"We have to go."

Honk-honk. "We don't have any light."

One of the things Alice suddenly loved about her friend was that she did not ask if Alice had a light, but just stated an obvious fact.

Holding Emily's elbow, Alice pointed at the place where the path began to wind down the mountain. Slowly, gingerly, they began to climb down, accelerating as they realized how fast the light was fading.

Alice felt a stab of utterly unexpected irritation – rage, almost – when her left foot dislodged a few pebbles, which went clattering down the mountainside, summoning devils in her mind's eye.

"Sorry," she whispered in agony.

In the darkness, she saw Emily's hair shake: *it doesn't matter.*

The climb down – which seemed endless – turned into a terrible game of "red light/green light," due to the clouds constantly scudding across the face of the faintly illuminating moon. The dim electric blue outlines of the natural world came and went, forcing them to stop and wait.

Alice suddenly understood the draw of moon-worship – for those who hunted at night, or travelled in the dark, the moon was a necessary god of possible sight.

As time passed, she realized that she should look upon the start-stop staccato passage of their descent with relief, because it sliced the time so decisively that she barely noticed its passage – it was only the growing tension in her lower back that indicated how long it had been.

It was only when they got to the bottom of the mountain – which was pretty hard to measure, since the slope only gradually went from 45° to close to horizontal – that they realized that their frantic stop-and-go descent had been driven by a desperate emotional need to get *off* the mountain, the source of the crime, rather than because there was some plan that could only be achieved on relatively flat ground. They were trying to *get away*, rather than *go towards*.

Emily panted: “Sorry – I need to rest.”

Somehow, Alice knew that her friend had considered saying: “We need to rest,” but probably thought it would be presumptuous.

They stepped a little off the vague path, and found a wide broken tree stump they could lean against. A chill breeze wandered through them, stroking their bone marrow with icicle fingers.

Emily jumped up, brushing at the backs of her thighs. “Gah! Creepy crawlies!”

Alice got up too. Nature forbade them rest.

“It’s only pretty if you keep moving,” she said.

Emily burst into tears. “Man alive, I wanted to push their faces into the fire!”

In the dark, Alice nodded, uselessly. “It is like a weird calculation you didn’t even know you could do. Like: do we hit them, push them off the edge, set fire to them and run – stuff we’ve never ever thought of, or even...” She took a deep breath, putting her hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Look, whatever we did, we did it right – although I hate that you got hit, I never thought I would have to see that in my life, and I’m so sorry that happened, but we are here, and we are okay, and it really could have gone in some totally different direction – I don’t even know what that means, but I’m pretty sure it could’ve been worse. You did really well, and it’s tougher, because you are smaller than me, and you couldn’t run, because of the asthma.”

Emily smiled through her sobs. “Yeah, sucks to my ass-mar...”

Alice laughed shakily. “You remember that too? It was kind of like that, wasn’t it? Except we didn’t end up half-drowning in endless descriptions of sunlight on leaves.”

Emily took a deep breath. “I’m not even that upset, which is – weird I think. I sometimes wondered – I don’t know if you ever did – what I would do in a dangerous situation – and now I know. I kneel, I get hit, I half-run, burst into tears, and giggle. It’s like the badness doesn’t reach too deep into me, if that makes any sense.”

“Yeah, totally.” Alice cocked her head to one side. “For me, it was like they were just bald dangerous apes, not even people as we know them, not open to reason – but really weirdly complicated, I couldn’t figure out what their motives or mood changes were half the time – or more than half the time. I don’t get that...” She waved her hand up and down in the dark. “...crazy up and down mood stuff.”

Emily took a deep breath, then coughed, with a last fading *honk*. “Yeah, well we will have plenty of time to talk it over in the next few days, and I imagine your dad is going to get totally involved – and my dad too – but we’ve got to figure out what we’re going to do now. I ate most of my snacks on the way up – I have some crumbs and leftovers, but water is going to be a thing, we can probably follow a stream sound if we can catch it, but – well, how on earth are we going to get home?” Her voice caught towards the end of her sentence.

Alice said: “Like most things in life, it comes down to the programming. What is the general programming for an emergency bot going down?” She put three fingers to her wrinkling forehead. “I really should know this stuff, but it’s so easy to take it all for granted...”

Emily stared at the ground. “I don’t know either – I hate to say, but I wish a boy were here, he would probably know, they love to figure that stuff out for no reason.”

“Well, there’s a reason now...”

They stood in silence for a moment. A wolf howled at a great distance.

Alice half-forced herself to speak. “Well, I don’t think there’s much point going anywhere now. We were supposed to tell the emergency bot to get the sky-taxi 45 minutes before we were done. It matters what happens when the emergency bot goes down – but I don’t know – as I said... It would be nice if it summoned the sky-taxi in that case – but in that case, it would already be here...”

The thought hit them both at the same time, and their hands found each other.

“We have to go back,” whispered Emily.

They gazed up at the frowning forehead of the dark mountain, glowering above them like a charcoal smudge of monstrous intimidation.

After an endless climb, they crept to the clearing beside the chirpy burbling waterfall. Alice felt almost offended that nature cared so little for their upset.

The sky-taxi was waiting patiently for them, over the broken remnants of the emergency bot, and they piled in – brushing their legs and behinds so they could finally sit without fear of insects – and mostly collapsed on the white pews.

They barely spoke on the way home, knowing that events were now set in motion that would change their lives for the foreseeable future.

As it turned out, the “foreseeable future” meant: the rest of their natural lives.

Chapter 8

The meetings were rarely serious – not lighthearted or frivolous – but not grim either.

This was an exception.

Alice's father David was a tall man with side-swept thinning sandy hair, an air of brisk decisiveness and a forceful momentum of energy that pulled others in his wake like barely-prepared water skiers.

"To me, this is *not* negotiable," he said to the assembled faces around the black conference table. "I know it was my daughter – and I get that makes me look less objective – but I'm approaching this from a totally moral, UPB perspective. If people want to stay the hell out of our society, that's up to them – free will, no problem. But – at least according to my daughter and Emily – these were children out there – teenagers, sure, but not yet adults – and they don't have any choice in the situation, and the choices their parents are making will keep them out of the Civ forever. I mean, can you *imagine* what kind of Scans these kids would have – dark spots and trauma all over the place, black holes... No one will insure them, no one will enforce their contracts, no one will even *rent* to them or sell them anything – they'll stay ostracized, am I wrong?"

Todd, a slightly portly man of a hundred and thirty – with a mildly irritating habit of clasping his fingertips together and speaking softly over the laced pink spiderweb of his hands – spoke slowly. "My friend, it might not be an NAP violation – wait, wait, I get that hitting the girls was – and the threatened confinement reported is – but maybe the boy, in the chaos of his upbringing, thought it was a matter of self-defense – and maybe the girls misinterpreted a strong invitation for some kind of confinement... I'm not saying this is the case – or even close to it – but we don't know for sure, and we certainly haven't had any chance to cross-examine anyone out there. The girls met their outliers, which is startling for all of us – it's why I don't travel beyond the Civ – and they came home a little wiser, but none the worse for wear in any permanent way. Are you suggesting that we go in with military force and grab the kids?"

David sat heavily in a chair and gazed around the long table. The dozen heads of the major Dispute Resolution Organizations stared back at him, and he could see the curiosity and excitement in their eyes. The situation was a great deal different from their usual days of poring over the minutiae of contractual obligations, looking for escape clauses or enforcement porosity.

Alan – an extraordinarily talented young man of only forty – leaned forward and rapped his knuckles softly on the flawless surface of the obsidian table. "We have never had anything like this before – well, maybe the older ones here, but not me for sure. It's like a bunch of wild animals out there, an insurgency of history or something like that. I hate the idea of the kids being mistreated, of course – that goes without saying – but what are we going to do with them? If we go in and bribe or bully or..." His voice faltered, as if he were about to utter an obscenity. "...use *force* to get those kids out, then what? We all know what happens after the age of five or six, if the kids have been – brutalized before, or neglected – and what did he say? About witches?"

An older man coughed, waving his hands. “No, not witches – *switches*. It’s an ancient custom, six, seven hundred years old, from the deep South in Old America. Kids would go and have to – pick out a branch that their fathers would beat them with.”

A bald man exclaimed: “Man alive they were apes back then!”

A middle-aged woman smiled grimly. “Hey, no insulting apes. They’re just animals.”

David drummed his fingertips on the table. “Ok... Big perspective on the problem, pull-back time. Everyone in society is vetted, everyone who goes astray is corrected – except for this mystery group out there on Smudge Mountain... I’m sure there are more, but that’s all we know about – they’ve never been part of society, and they cannot be ostracized, because clearly they don’t like us very much, and they are obviously mistreating the *hell* out of their children, which creates the usual violence and addiction and promiscuity – and with that promiscuity comes additional babies, all of whom are going to be treated badly, and we have a potential – I hate to use this term, but it’s kind of like a social cancer on the edges out there. Their birth rate is probably way higher than ours – this won’t be the last time we collide. My daughter and her friend were like – a warning. We are going to have to do something. The Cataclysms were caused by everyone just – kicking the can down the road.” His face was dark with passion. “We don’t do that. Not anymore. *Never again!*”

The old woman sighed. “You know we can’t fix the older kids – you recognize that, right? Maybe the younger ones – but if they’re bonded with their mothers – however twisted that bond might be – then the trauma of separation will probably undo any benefits we try to bring to the situation.”

The bald man said: “It’s like people before the Cataclysms finding a pocket of slaveowners right in their own backyard...”

Alan replied: “Yeah, but back then they would imagine they would know what to do – but all their answers were just violence. We don’t have that – disadvantage.”

There was a silence for a moment around the room, as everyone’s mental musculature strained at the weighty problem.

An older man with sleepy eyes said: “Maybe it’s just one family, or just a few... We might not even know where they are – those boys might’ve been hunting right at the edge of their range.”

The elderly woman replied: “If it’s a small genetic sample, then inbreeding might solve our problem.”

David frowned, flexing his fingers. “Come on people, we can’t just cross our fingers and hope that the problem goes away on its own – this isn’t how we got the modern world, how we survived the Cataclysms, how we sustain the Civ.” He sighed. “We’re just going to have to fast-forward our own history, with this new clan. Bring them here, teach them peaceful parenting, find a way to accelerate their development...”

The elderly woman snorted. “Oh come on David – you can’t imagine they’ve never heard of peaceful parenting! No – they’re out there in the middle of who-knows-where because they *want* to keep abusing their kids. These – boys did seem to know something about us, how we live – weren’t they complaining about our machines and everything? So the adults of the tribe *know* how we do things – they just want to stay out there so they can bully and beat their own children – we simply *cannot* let that happen, that’s not an option, that can’t be on the table!”

Silence all around. They were only a few generations into peaceful parenting, so they still felt a vestigial urge to avoid problems and defer decisions.

David checked his notes and said: “So – combined, we have 345 security officers. First thing we need to do is find this clan, count their numbers, get a sense of their mobility and structure and – weaponry, of course. They could be Stone Age by this time, if they’re still stuck before the Cataclysms. They might be underground, they might be on the constant move, it might be very hard to find them – but we have to try, of course.” He stood up decisively. “Come on, if you or I – or any of us – were stuck out there as kids picking out our own sticks to be beaten with, wouldn’t we want the modern cavalry to ride to our rescue?”

There was uneasy silence.

David fixed his eyes on each face in turn. “What if they had hit one of your children, or even worse – captured one, which they might be planning, for all we know? No, we have to save those kids, we have to fix the situation, we have to make sure this abuse *never* happens again!” He smiled grimly. “We should be pleased, that there are still moral crusades to be had in this perfect world of ours.”

He leaned forward on the table.

“Everyone always argued, throughout all of history, that utopia would be boring. Well, let’s prove them wrong, at least this time!”

Chapter 9

Various high-level meetings were convened among the heads of the DRO’s, who coordinated with the mapping experts – who themselves sent out a series of drones looking for the Clan, as they had become known. The DRO leaders met with the security teams and reminded everyone that violence was absolutely the last resort, because it was so economically inefficient – as well as immoral – to initiate the use of force.

David in particular went over the Use of Force guidelines repeatedly, drilling the assembled security teams on the steps, ticking them off on his fingers:

“I know you know all this, but humour me. First, we have contact; second, negotiation. Third, encirclement. Fourth – disabling Clan members. Fifth, self-defense – or in this case, defense on behalf of the children. No one – and I repeat, absolutely *no one* – is authorized to use force, except in an extremity

of self-defense, when all other options have been exhausted. Now, I know that this is an unusual situation, which is why we are providing additional training. First of all, the Clan – or Clans, for all we know – have no friends or relatives in the Civ, so ostracism probably means nothing to them – it seems that they have voluntarily self-ostracized themselves already, we don't yet know how or from where – which means that our most potent weapon for UPB is – well, impotent, at the moment, or at least in this situation. I imagine that they have no desire to participate in the Civ – they are opposed to it on principle. We don't know what kind of weaponry they have, but nothing major has been reported missing from any armory, including the major weapons such as bio-targeting and sky-laser controls. All the stuff we use to keep ourselves secure is still secured. They might have old-fashioned guns – what some of you refer to as bang-sticks – and of course, going even further back in time, they could have bows and arrows or spears – and I know that sounds ridiculous, but it's nothing to laugh at. They are silent, deadly, hard to track – no heat signatures of course – and can theoretically pierce your shields.

“So first, we make contact – and second, I will go in unarmed to negotiate, although frankly I don't think it will go too well. The more primitive the tribe, the more control they want to keep over their children; it's the only way to keep that tribal mindset going. So they're not going to give up their kids, and they are not going to want to reform their culture into anything civilized, so I'm going in as more of a fact-finding mission... Don't get me wrong, I *hope* I can get the information peacefully, but I think we have to be realistic about our chances.”

It seemed to take forever to find the Clan – they obviously knew something about the surveillance techniques available to the Civ, and had become adept at dodging or undermining them.

Based on their knowledge of traditional hunter-gatherer tribes, the DROs estimated that the Clan probably had at least twenty families. Calorie calculations were put together, and larger animals in the area sky-tagged with tracking gems.

Deer would stop moving, and drones would be sent out – only to find coyotes or wolves eating the carcass. Close-up footage was reviewed, to see if any larger portions of meat were missing, compared to the consumption rates of the scavengers and predators, but the results were inconclusive.

Eventually, one deer stopped moving briefly during the day, and then began moving in an erratic fashion, even over gullies and canyons – and it was found that the tracking gem had been removed from under the skin, and attached to a crow.

“They are on to us,” reported David at the third weekly meeting.

The bald man said: “Is it possible that they have cloaking of some kind?”

David sighed. “Well – anything is possible of course, that's not a well-framed question... As always, it comes down to the question of whether they are principled, or just cunning. If they are principled, they will reject cloaking on philosophical grounds – if they are cunning, they will use whatever comes to hand to maintain their lifestyle.”

The very old man said: “I don’t suppose we have anything to bribe them with – other than their independence, which we won’t provide. Bribing is always cheaper than fighting.”

David shook his head. “The Civ doesn’t have anything to offer them – they’re kind of our inverse image; violent culture, no technology, brutalizing children. I certainly wouldn’t put it past them – I really do respect their intelligence – to have left one or two members behind to mess with our scanning and tracking gems, while the rest have moved on to some even more remote location.”

The elderly woman said: “It’s been a while since I studied this ancient stuff, but was it not considered at one time that criminals had a habit of returning to the scene of their crime? Some old Russian story, can’t remember... Do we have surveillance on Smudge Mountain, where your daughter and her friend were – held?”

David frowned. “No, we don’t – but that’s a great point. Long odds, but worth a try. I’ll see it done.”

The bald man wrinkled his nose and coughed delicately. “I hate to say it, but we have to be frank in this kind of situation, there could be hundreds or thousands of children’s happiness at stake...”

David spread his hands. “It’s an open forum, speak your mind.”

“Well, I can’t help but think that part of keeping the two girls captive was a form of – mating display, or a twisted expression of romantic interest. We see some of this in the statist regions; the men there all feel inadequate, relative to our own alpha power, so to speak. When they come in contact with Civ women, they tend to strut their physical prowess – usually intimidation or captivity or something like that. Classic leveling up.”

The older woman narrowed her eyes. “They are unwilling to become civilized, so they push around women. Not much makes me really angry, but that...”

David frowned. “If I take a couple of steps down the road of this conversation, it would seem that there is a general air of suggestion – not putting it on anyone in particular – that it might be worth using my daughter and her friend as – bait?”

The bald man’s cheeks were red. “I can take that... It was me, and – yes, I was wondering if the two boys wanted to provoke a more primitive feminine response with their more primitive masculine – behaviour. We all know this – I’ve seen it. Once you come in contact with Civ females – or males – then the grubby members of your own tribe seem much less appealing. The Civ ‘spoils’ people – that’s their opinion about our use of technology; it’s probably also true about what happens to their view of their own women.”

Emily’s father – whose name was Gregory – startled everyone by pounding his fist on the table. They had almost forgotten he was there, at the end.

“Technology got us into this – what are you saying, just use children to lure these painted savages into striking? More technology? Sky-lasers, neon nets, what – time machines next, to accelerate their

evolution? Look – this tribe has been out there for generations – maybe they came from here, who knows – leave them the hell alone!”

David raised his eyebrows. “Why do you think that – technology got us into this? The girls were hiking...”

“Delivered by a sky-taxi! Guarded by a bot that was taken out by a rock!”

“No!” said David, raising his voice slightly. “That was all – you.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to blame you for this – it was so totally unexpected and unpredictable, but don’t you blame technology for *your* free will decision to let the girls travel wherever they wanted. You and your wife were the adults in charge of the children. Again, I’m not blaming you for what happened – I let my daughter travel widely – but you really need to accept responsibility for the choices that you made, and not blame technology, or a rock, or a slingshot.”

Gregory’s dark face flashed with anger and shame. “I’m not mad at technology – I’m angry with myself, for failing my own values. I reject technology, and then just handed it over to my daughter like a piece of candy...”

The old woman said: “Who knows what is good or bad?”

Gregory turned on her sharply. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, don’t give me that ‘she’s violating UPB’ stare of uncomprehending horror. I’m talking about what happened on the mountain.” She gestured at everyone around the table. “The girls are unhurt, and this confinement and violence and bullying gives us the chance to rescue hundreds of children from abuse.” She turned to David. “I hope you are reminding Alice – and you, Emily – that *enormous* good will come out of their brief suffering. That this is not all some unending disaster. We are convened here to save those lost children – and we only know they exist because of those two girls.” Her eyes narrowed. “To put it another way: knowing that they will save hundreds of children from physical and mental torture, would those two brave girls have still chosen to climb that mountain? I think they would.”

David nodded slowly, curious and unoffended. “Wise words, thank you...” He raised his head. “Even if I were willing to use these girls – my own daughter – as bait, we wouldn’t even know where to place them. Having them sit around the waterfall on Smudge Mountain would seem like a rather – useless waste of time. The odds of the boys returning are tiny – and even if they did, I’m sure they would just sacrifice themselves for the Clan by getting captured and refusing to give up any details – even if they *had* any details of the location of the Clan, which I wouldn’t give them if I ran it.”

The bald man nodded soberly. “True, true. But we could get a lot of information just from scanning them – health, of course, and most importantly: mental development, presence of empathy, possibility of evolution, you know...”

David said: “I’m pretty sure that we don’t need a Scan to figure out their level of empathy and mental development. As for the possibility of evolution, well that’s the one knot that we just can’t unravel, as we all well know. Maybe if they were younger – five and under – we could work with neuroplasticity to bring them along – but then they wouldn’t have been much of a danger to Alice and Emily.”

“It could be the kind of proof we need to authorize more aggressive action – I’m referring to Scans...”

David leaned forward. “Don’t you trust me, Lou?”

The man’s cheeks grew redder. “What do you mean?”

David’s voice was low. “My daughter is held hostage on a mountaintop, she tells me what happened, I’m telling you what happened – and we all know what that means regarding empathy and development. There is a straight line between the events, my daughter telling me, and me telling you – either the events didn’t happen, my daughter lied, or I am lying, or some combination... Do you really need a Scan?”

Lou held his gaze and shrugged. “I have no problem with your passion – I would feel the same way in your *muk-luks* – but we can’t trot you out to get more general cooperation across the Civ every time we need support for this. Everyone understands the Scans though. They are more objective, less flavoured, less personal.”

David paused. “You’re right, thank you.”

The elderly woman said: “Just put a Shield on your daughter, nothing can touch her.”

David grimaced. “That’s pretty simplistic. She could still be roped, taken underground, held underwater – arrows might get through – I don’t know, my mind doesn’t exactly work that way – but just because she would be immune to rocks and lasers and bios doesn’t mean she can’t be harmed – or scared, for that matter.”

The ancient man said: “How are the girls doing in the aftermath of this? I guess I’ve always been curious how kids raised peacefully would deal with trauma.”

The two fathers exchanged knowing looks. David sighed. “I’m not sure you want to know...”

Chapter 10

Violence creates a strange intimacy; violence strips away the personality to the essential animal, which few people ever get to see outside of sex or panic.

Alice was drawn to return to Smudge Mountain – this is a kind of ‘mastery over violence’ that sometimes compels victims to revisit the scene of the crime. Alice listened with rapt attention – while pretending to be distracted by her holo-gloves – as her father reported to her mother the difficulties they had finding the Clan.

She thought often of the boys – particularly the elder one. It was not a sickness, it was not obsessive, but her primitive brain had been activated to the presence of danger, of predators, and it circled this new knowledge like a shark spirals a wounded fish.

One night, she realized that she would have to... She laughed silently.

“Have to...” Both my parents would roll their eyes at me giving up my free will so easily – or under the memory of such compulsion, whatever...

She realized she would have to return to the Mountain, to the scene of the crime – so talked about in the Civ. She used the surveillance globe to examine it, and saw the giant clusters of eyes and ears as the VR people visited the site of such a violation. However, that trailed off over time, as the drama of the confinement and the resulting search began to fade from people’s minds. The news also kept reminding people of the rarity of such an attack on children.

I could always go ‘incognito,’ – privacy is so important to us – so no one would see me...

But – how to get there? *Privacy is the Civ*, she had often been told – the right to remain free from view, personal to your own life, was the essence of civilization. Of course, this didn’t always apply to children – who had more rights and privileges than any prior civilization (in other words, this was the *first* civilization) – but Alice did generally agree to inform her parents where she was going.

She thought long and hard about disobeying her parents – it felt surreal, almost supernatural. There was a kind of implicit contract between them – she was treated well, she treated them well. They didn’t lie to her, she didn’t lie to them. They kept their word...

She had never really thought about disobeying them before, because they weren’t authorities in that sense – they were in charge, they didn’t control or bully her, they were just reasonably consistent, and...

When she was very young – the memory came flooding back as she touched her foot to the boundaries of obedience – she had broken a promise to her father about candy.

He had nodded, from his high perch of size and wisdom. (When she was very little, Alice had looked up at him, not knowing the difference between the top of his head and the floating clouds, and thought that the clouds were a kind of crown that wrapped around his mind, like a hazy chandelier.)

“So – we don’t need to keep our word anymore, is that it?” he asked gently.

“No!”

“Do you remember that I had promised to take you swimming tomorrow?”

She nodded.

“Do you like swimming?”

Nod.

“You feel happy about swimming tomorrow?”

Nod.

“If I break my promise, and we don’t go swimming, you’ll be sad..?”

Nod.

“And will you feel as happy the next time I promise you something good?”

She shook her head.

Her father took her hand. “It’s totally fine that you took the candy. It’s natural. But I won’t have higher standards than you. That would mean I will lose, just about every time. You really want me to keep my word when I make a promise to you, right?”

Nod.

“That’s how I feel about your promises. Either we both keep our promises, or we don’t have to. Which do you want?”

Alice remembered a tear trickling down her cheek. “Let’s keep them.”

Her father smiled. “I agree. Just remember that there is an animal inside of you, and an animal inside of me. And that animal just wants stuff, and doesn’t really care about truth or promises or goodness or anything like that – and it’s part of us, we shouldn’t just throw it out, because that would be like throwing out a finger or a toe.”

She had smiled.

“We are mammals, you know that – but we are also angels, and that is the most real part of us. The angels in us really care about truth and goodness and promises, and are willing to give up candy for the sake of trust – and also, because trust will get you more candy than breaking your promises. If you break your promise, and eat candy, we can’t have it in the house, so you won’t get any at all. If you keep your word, and don’t eat candy when you say you won’t, we can have it in the house, so you get some. Does that make sense?”

Nod.

Hug.

Candy.

Swimming.

Laughter.

Joy.

But I never made him a promise – them a promise – to never go back to the Mountain...

As she said the words in her mind, they faltered and faded away, their legitimacy collapsing under the weight of the certain knowledge that breaking an implicit promise without explicit communication was just about the worst thing...

She had to go, but she didn't want to disobey – and it was strange, that the word “disobey” had only really emerged in her mind since that night on the Mountain. She had never really thought of *obeying* her parents, or her society – or any adult for that matter. She did what she preferred other people to do; she kept her word and didn't yell at people or – it was hard to even imagine, *hit* them. It would be horrible to be on the receiving end of these things, so why would she do them?

Alice had heard stories of other children – babies, very rare, and no one close to her of course – who had failed their Scans, and society had leapt into action.

One kid she met on her travels – in a no-bot neighbourhood – had whispered about what happened when her Scan had been only on the border of empathy.

The Scans were up in the air, and three doctors were present, gesturing and rotating the three-dimensional image.

The head doctor said to her parents: “This is your baby's brain – thanks for the Scan – and as you can see, this part of the brain which is supposed to be where the empathy is developing is quite dark, like a cave. If we spin it here, and here, we can see that the brain development is just not happening as it should, and this is a certain path to a dangerous – and probably destructive – adulthood. As you know, children are kind of ‘grow and release’ creatures. You have total privacy to raise your child as you see fit, but of course everyone in society is going to have to live with the products of your parenting, and you have one child kind of on the edge, and another that is not developing empathy in any meaningful way at all. Now we are a wealthy society, as you know, but children without empathy grow into adults that cost about 5 to 10 times more than they ever produce – and who is responsible for that expense? Certainly not your baby himself, of course – it is you as parents – and us as the more generalized society – that is responsible for this dark cave in the brain where your baby's heart should be, so to speak. Whatever is happening in your home is crippling your baby's ability to grow mirror neurons – the parts of the brain that allow us to step into somebody else's shoes, and feel what they feel. As you know, the Civ is based on empathy, and your baby won't be insurable if this continues. What that means – I'm sure you've reviewed the contracts in detail, but we do have to spell it out for legal reasons – what that means is that when your baby grows up and does something destructive (and you will notice that here we are saying not *if*, but *when*) *you* will be responsible for the full costs and restitution of that destruction. When your child assaults another child, you will be fully responsible. When your child steals, you will be fully responsible. If your child becomes a thief, a rapist, or a murderer, you will be held fully responsible. If your child becomes an addict, or promiscuous, or sickly, you will pay the bills. Because you are responsible for your child's development – if you raise a child without empathy, you

will be held responsible for that child's crimes all the way through his adulthood. I'm sure that you don't want to live with that kind of tension – that you could lose all your savings, your capacity to enter into contracts, and be utterly ghosted by society, when he does something impulsive and destructive.

“That is the bad news – the good news is that your baby is only... five months old. We see here that he missed his Scan at six weeks – which really undermined your Contract Rating, by the way, which is why your rent went up 25% – but you have brought him in now, which is great – he is young enough that this can be resolved almost completely. You need to tell me – us – what is going on in the home that is failing your child. I'm guessing it's more to do with neglect than physical or verbal abuse, since the hippocampus is not enlarged. Is there something preventing you from holding and cuddling your baby? What about breast-feeding and maintaining eye contact, and mirroring emotions – you know all of these things, you maintained your Contract Rating by taking parenting classes – five years ago, it seems, with a slight refresher last year. So what's going on, we really need to help, don't feel bad – something is happening that is unexpected and largely unknown, and we are absolutely here to help you solve this problem.”

There were reports of stony stares and curt replies and angry protestations of perfect parenting. Complaints were made that the Scan was defective, the children were fine, the doctors were colluding, they just made money by pretending children were broken – the DRO was corrupt, double-dealing, conflict of interest, hatred of the parents for some reason – the full litany of paranoid justifications ran through the room.

“You have no proof of any of this,” the head doctor replied. “And your contract with us clearly spells out that we have the right to subject you to a noninvasive and perfectly safe Scan at our own discretion. Just so you know, this has only happened – what, five times over the last year? It is incredibly rare, which is one of the reasons why you chose us as your DRO – we don't take this decision lightly, and I for one hate to force it on you, but – oh, I really don't know how to say this, because it won't land well for you at all, given your state of mind, but you are not being rational at the moment, and we don't know why. We reviewed your history, and your parents were very good, you had solid empathy Scans at six weeks, three months, six months, one year, five years – all the way to adulthood. You haven't come in for your checkups for the last – two years, but you paid the penalties, and that's fine I guess. But your contract clearly states that while your children are your responsibility, they don't *belong* to you, because they grow up to have massive effects on society as a whole. We didn't become a peaceful society without enforcing peaceful parenting – that is the big difference between us and everything that came before of course. Sorry, I'm lecturing – you will both need to submit to Scans. Other consequences will accrue as well. We cannot return your children to your home under the current circumstances, because their lack of empathy – if it continues – will bounce back on us all. As you know, we keep our rates so low because crime is almost nonexistent. We can't allow for the development of a criminal mind – for moral, as well as practical, economic reasons.”

Protests, threats, abuse, attempted violence – security was called, the parents were sedated, and the Scans were done.

Alice knew something of the terrible treatment of children in the past. She had heard of societies pathologically obsessed with various bigotries such as racism, sexism, homophobia – but which didn't even have a word – or a concept – of *childism*.

This was truly incomprehensible – as incomprehensible as the owning of slaves was to those five hundred years ago, she imagined.

“Everything starts in the home” was written and discussed continually – it was a central theme of all of the books and shows she consumed as a child; it was a constant topic of conversation among adults, and between adults and children.

“Think of a journey from here to Alpha Centauri,” her uncle had once said to her, taking a stylus and rotating it slightly. “If you change the starting position by a tiny bit, you can end up missing it by an entire light year.”

Society was an inverted pyramid – everything broad that happened to adults started as a tiny point in infancy. Alice was trained to view people as leaves on a tree – the twigs and branches and trunk and roots were their entire history; they were just the effect of everything that had happened before, from the seed onward.

Her father had said: “We think we are judging people, when we are really judging how they were parented – their parents, really.”

In the distant, nightmarish past, children had been regularly beaten (they called it ‘spanking,’ which she was not familiar with, but it was explained to her that the word existed because people didn't like to say the word ‘beating’). Children were assaulted, neglected, malnourished, confined in terrifying child-prisons where they were indoctrinated to hate themselves and each other... They had no practical rights, no weight in society, no say in how they lived – and no one and nothing was looking out for them, making sure that they were doing well, developing properly...

Her uncle had whispered of this one night, when he came to check in on a sleepover, and Alice was the only girl awake, and they fell into an easy starlit conversation.

“Back then, it was so bizarre. You've heard of the age of slavery, which was basically every society across the world throughout all of history, over a hundred thousand years, until the Old British ended it – well the slaves were held in general contempt, they were beaten in public and openly humiliated and could be killed with impunity – all sorts of terrible stuff. Societies back then treated their slaves exactly as they *described* the slaves – there wasn't this totally weird contradiction or opposition between how they talked about the slaves and how they treated them. Slaves were viewed as expensive disposable scum - and they were treated exactly that way.

“But that wasn't how it was with children, that's the strangest thing. There was a singer, named after some city in ancient Texas, and she had a song – I'm sure you can still hear it in the archives somewhere

– about how children are the future, they need to be treated well, and loved, and respected, and encouraged – all the good stuff that we would mostly agree with now, in the Civ – but she treated her own children terribly, her daughter basically committed suicide, she was married to some violent guy, it was about as bad a situation as you can imagine...”

He scoffed. “Imagine *that* in the age of slavery! Imagine there was endless public and private sentimentality about how slaves were the future, they were just *wonderful*, they needed to be praised and encouraged and loved and respected – but they were regularly beaten and starved and killed! That would be an insane society – mentally damaged, so contradictory it almost defies imagination. Someone having those opinions now – that you must beat and destroy what you love and praise – would be subjected to about a million Scans, looking for whatever brain damage would produce such unbelievably contradictory perspectives.”

He sighed. “And this is the strange thing – the strangest thing, probably, in all of human history... Even in the days of slavery, slaves had their champions, who said slavery was evil and should be ended, that the slaves were human beings worthy of self-ownership, that sort of stuff. Particularly after Christ. But in the old days, about children, it wasn’t even a debate. Occasionally, people would point out this contradiction, but they were either ignored or destroyed. This massive, unbelievable, galaxy-wide contradiction between the publicly-stated respect and love for children, and the private exploitation and destruction of children – it was completely ignored, like it didn’t even exist. The only way you knew it *did* exist in people’s minds was their fear and hatred of anyone who came along and pointed it out.

“And even the science was clear – even back then. Child abuse was like planting a bomb in the brain that went off forever. Child abuse took an average of twenty years off people’s lifespans. It was a dose-dependent trigger for promiscuity, addiction, criminality, ischemic heart disease, cancer, you name it. Big studies had been done, the data was readily available, spanking was destructive, it didn’t produce anything other than short-term compliance and long-term dysfunction – the schools were getting worse and worse, you couldn’t even really call them schools, they were just prisons for children – all of this was known, the statistics were out there, everything was clear as day, but I guess – I guess all of the power structures relied upon the destruction of children, and so – as we found out about a hundred years ago – peaceful parenting is the most revolutionary act in human history, because raising children well was the end of tyranny... And I guess all the tyrants in history knew that, which is why they tried to destroy anyone who stood up for children.”

Alice said: “I guess the parents were upset themselves, and probably didn’t want to raise their kids to not fit in with society at all.”

“There was a quote back then that I read once, that it is no measure of mental health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society. That’s the craziest thing, that everyone knew, and everyone talked about it, but nobody connected anything together...”

Alice had shuddered, in the dark, under the covers.

That night, she had had a nightmare of returning to the world of violence against children.

And now, in the present, after being captured and attacked, she knew that she would return to the Mountain.

Chapter 11

Alice could not figure out the morality of the situation – normally she would go to her parents, but they were one source of the problem, so to speak.

She sat in the little white cubbyhole in front of her window, one rainy night, while the white porchlight disintegrated into winding glass tears. She stared at the rivulets, letting her mind wander, hoping against hope that somehow the collapsing beams of light would answer her questions when they hit the windowsill.

I know how to activate the privacy mode of the sky-taxi, I've seen my father do it a hundred times – this means lying to him, and to mom, and it might all come to nothing, I might go back to the Mountain and find only bones, empty earth and a few blackened sticks... But I know dad can't find this Clan, and those boys and I – and Emily I guess – are united in some way. I might have changed their world, I know that they have changed mine. But what do I want from this? Do I want – do I want to rescue them, or have them dragged before the Civ and humiliated for their pig-ignorance? Do I want to smash their lives as they tried to smash mine?

Over and over, she thought of the moment when the boys decided to leave, as if the two girls no longer existed.

How utterly bizarre – I feel a teeny tiny bit offended that they left, that we ceased to exist for them – mostly because I don't know why. It was like a game we were playing just suddenly ended, because we didn't know the rules, and weren't playing – whatever they were playing. And it feels in a very strange and primitive way that we were somehow married on that Mountain...

She smiled at that, almost cynically, reshaping the statement in her mind as something melodramatic and ridiculous – because she didn't want to lift the carpet and see where the stairs below actually led.

Alice toyed with various ideas in her mind, until everyone was asleep, and she had broken her word to go to bed hours before. Nothing compelled her to move – and she was quite used to waiting for this kind of compulsion, because if it didn't come, she wouldn't have the resolution to follow through on whatever action was being considered – until she thought of all the other children of this Clan, and what their lives would be like, and the image arose within her of an ancient hourglass, filled not with coloured sand but with tiny red blood cells; the potential for a civilized life pouring from top to bottom as time ticked by, and the children remained brutalized...

Something my uncle told me once, years ago... He said that in the distant past, people were incredibly sentimental towards animals, and incredibly violent towards children – and people too. Various forms of

entertainment showed people being shot and tortured and drowned and hunted, but if someone kicked a dog, everyone lost their minds...

“The animals were a repository for the sentimentality for the children,” he had said, because he had an endless habit of dropping little verbal bombs in her mind, that only went off in a flash-bang of illumination, weeks or even years later.

If I go to the Mountain, and they are not there, I will have conquered the space – if they are there, I will humiliate them and rescue the toddlers.

Using sneak skills she had not utilized in years – since the necessary stealth of childhood games – Alice crept downstairs, packed food and water, eased out of the house (they had no need for locks or alarms of course) – walked into the woods for about ten minutes, then brought up her father’s phone, entered the incognito code unavailable on her phone, and summoned the sky-taxi.

As she winged her way through the tapering night rain, Alice thought briefly of getting Emily, but it seemed too complicated, and her friend had one of those personalities that always seemed to remind everyone of a younger sibling, even if she was a similar age.

Ninety minutes later, Alice’s mother awoke from a light hot-and-cold menopausal doze to see her phone vibrating and dancing across the night table.

She looked at the screen, saw that her husband was calling, and instinctively reached across the bed, to find his still sleeping form.

“What the...” she muttered, imagining that he had – once more – left his phone behind somewhere. She blinked at the screen to answer it, choosing text over audio, so that her husband could continue sleeping.

Her daughter’s still, shaking dark face loomed too close on the screen.

“Mom, they’re *here...*” whispered Alice. She switched the view to an enormous flickering fire a short distance away, a group of bodies dancing around it like a swaying fleshy Stonehenge...

Her mother’s heart immediately began pounding like a beast trying to break its way out of her rib cage. The image of her dead daughter Ruth lying on the ground, staring impossibly at her own shoulder-blades...

There was a sudden gasp, and the communication cut out.

Chapter 12

Awoken from a deep sleep, it took David only a few minutes to summon the fastest plasma jets. They arrived at Smudge Mountain only a few minutes after the call, the pilots slightly dizzy from the unexpected early-morning speed.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, David watched it all on a conference call.

“We have visual contact,” said the lead pilot, “but we can’t see the girl.”

Alice’s mother – Gretchen – found herself biting her nails, and lowered them to her side.

“This is so – surreal,” she whispered.

David nodded. “Call Emily’s parents and make sure she is home,” he instructed.

Concentrating on the images in the conference call, David could see infra-red lights scanning the forest, following a line of figures dressed in homespun clothes as they wound their way under the tree branches, along a barely-visible path.

Gretchen joined the conference call. “There’s no sign of her? None?”

“We are looking,” said the pilot, “but she has no tracking gem, and the phone is off-line.”

Probably destroyed, thought David, and silently thanked the pilot for not saying that.

He used the highest emergency level to summon his DROs security team. The two of them on the night shift appeared in the conference call almost immediately.

“Okay, I need a decision right now. My daughter returned to the Mountain, don’t know why, and she saw the Clan, she had my phone, it’s off-line, we can’t see her, but we can see a line of men – I think they’re men – going through the woods. Do we have enough to detain them?” he asked.

Jake, the head of security, said: “Have we had any sightings of the boys who kidnapped the girls?”

David deferred to the pilot, who shook his head.

“How do we know that it’s the same group?”

David paused.

Gretchen said: “My daughter whispered: ‘they’re here’ – and I assumed that she meant the boys, but all I could see were dark shapes around a fire.”

Jake said: “I assume that whoever we are following is outside the Civ.”

“Yes,” said David.

Jake paused. “Even if it’s not the Clan we’re looking for, they might know their whereabouts. I think we have the right to stop them, but probably not detain them.”

Gretchen bit her thumbnail again. “What if they don’t want to stop, or don’t speak our language, or just scatter, or fight back?”

David said: “We are talking about the use of direct force, which we haven’t had to do for – what, over fifteen years?”

Jake said: “Well, something – made your phone go off-line, and we have to land to find your daughter – the other girl isn’t there, right?”

“Right.”

“Okay, so we will have to land and look for your daughter – that could be the first pilot. The second pilot should broadcast a request for a negotiation.”

“And if they don’t agree?”

Jake nodded grimly. “I’m getting there. I know, I know – there are very delicate escalations of force standards here. They’re not violating the nonaggression principle by standing around a fire and walking in the woods at night. However, they *were* the only people around when your phone got - went off-line – and the girl seems to be missing, although she could be standing by the fire right now, for all we know.”

The second pilot said: “I have circled the cave where the waterfall starts three times, I can see a bit of smoke coming up from the dead fire, but no people – the visibility isn’t perfect, but I’m sure that the girl is smart enough to know we are coming, and stand out in the open and wave.”

Gretchen nodded, her mouth bone-dry. “Of *course* she is. Please find her, I know you don’t need to hear that, but I have to say it!”

“We will,” said Jake decisively. “Okay, here are the plans, subject to your approval of course. We broadcast a request to stop and talk. If they do that...”

David held up his hand. “I want to be there for that, I can get there in five minutes, send a jet to my place.”

Jake paused for a moment, then nodded. “On its way. If they stop, we’ll wait for you – if they don’t, I suggest we throw a force-field around them. I don’t imagine they can go underground in the woods, so we should be able to contain them that way. Holding them buys some time to make sure they talk. Also, if they have – if they have your daughter, she will be contained as well.”

Gretchen said: “But what if they hurt her? Can they be targeted?”

Jake nodded slowly. "That's a tough one. We could certainly target the adults and knock them out, but it's a challenge, in the woods, to make sure there's no one left who could – do her harm. They might have other young girls there, or boys about her height with long hair, there's a lot that could..."

Gretchen threw up her hands. "Oh for heaven's sake, just knock everyone out, we can revive them or pay them or give them – I don't know, a leg of deer or something to thank them for their time!"

Jake nodded. "That's up to David here. There will be an extensive review of course, from the other DROs... I leave it up to him."

David took a deep breath. "I'd rather not knock them out as a first step; one thing we know about primitive Clans is that they are obsessed with status and leveling. If we show our power and superiority, they will almost certainly react with violence. Particularly if there are any females there, the males will hate being knocked out by what they perceive as more dominant males. So let's appeal to their vanity, and – actually, you know what? Forget about broadcasting anything - a 'voice in the sky' will be pretty provocative too. Just drop me there, alone, unarmed – I'll try talking. Knock everyone out if things get crazy. I don't mind, it's happened to me before, it's just a headache – but let's try real gentle to start."

"Okay," said Jake. "Drop your rocks and grab your socks, the jet is there."

David always forgot how quiet the plasma jets were – he thought about grabbing a bite to eat, but was too wound up to imagine digesting anything. He ran up to the roof and used his jump-boots to leap up to the plasma jet, which whisked him to the Mountain in only a few minutes – they rocketed past the top to another jet that was silently circling, cloaked for invisibility from the ground.

The other pilot told them where the path was leading, and David was dropped gently on the ground ahead of the Clan.

Waiting for an agonized minute or two, he noticed that the birds were silent, and he could hear no movement of animals. Perhaps they felt something overhead, the electromagnetism of the invisibility shield, and felt that some enormous sky ghost might prey on them.

David's heart was pounding; he felt primitive, vital, alive. His senses seemed sharpened, magnified. His muscles were engorged, ready to leap and claw...

Man, sixty seconds in the woods, and my body is right back in prehistory...

He heard the footfalls before the dark shapes began to emerge from the tangled undergrowth.

A tall man stepped out first. His face was lined and scarred, his forehead broad and grimy. He separated from the dark shapes around him and strode forward.

"I am Roman, here is my weapon hand," he said in a strange accent, extending his right hand.

David remembered the old custom, and clasped the older man's hand in return. "I am David."

Roman held up his hand, and the line of dark shapes stopped.

“Ask the girl if she wants her father,” said Roman, turning and glaring through the gloomy trees.

A smudge detached, and Alice ran forward, straight into her father’s arms. He lifted and hugged her, then whispered into the conference call that his daughter was safe.

Roman took a step forward. “I assume you’re here to parlay, and that needs to be just us.” He glanced upwards. “None of that mind-trickery you’ve got going on in the sky.”

David paused, evaluating the older man’s language and intelligence. He said: “Your needs are not the only factor in this situation. I am outnumbered, I need the reinforcements of my friends.”

The older man considered this for a moment. He leaned forward and pointed towards the top of David’s head. “Unplug that mind-link or whatever you’ve got going on, you can call out if you think you need help.”

David took a deep breath. “I intend no violence, Roman.”

Roman smiled humorlessly. “No one does, until they change their mind. If all that passes between us are words, you have no need of your friends. Your daughter is unharmed, we saw to that – and she came with us voluntarily.”

Forgetting the situation, David turned to his daughter in mute shock, then leaned in and whispered to her ear: “Is that true?”

Her voice – suddenly very high, very young – found his ear. “Daddy, I’m sorry, but I really wanted you to be able to find them.”

Amazing, thought David. He nodded slowly. “Okay, alright, you don’t need to be here for this.”

“I really want to be here for this. This is what I came for!”

David took a deep breath. As all husbands throughout all time have felt, his first thought was not towards his own reaction, but his wife’s.

Alice said: “If I’m here, there’s less chance of – violence.”

“Yes, but a worse outcome...”

Roman took another step forward and said: “We can keep the girl, you can keep my boy, if you’re worried about – escalation.”

A teenage boy, an indeterminable smudge between the white of childhood and the black of adulthood, walked forward and stood by his father.

Alice whispered: “That’s the boy!”

David put his hand on his daughter’s shoulder. He murmured: “I really don’t want you to stay with them. The Civ – I – care much more about our kids than – these people.”

David straightened his head and stared at Roman. “Your son is protected by your – Clan, your tribe – my child has only me – she needs to leave so we can talk.”

“Hold your horses,” said Roman, turning and conferring with the dark figures behind him.

After a minute or two, he turned back to David. “You say you are outnumbered, but you have the sky ships, and your bio-weapons, you could wipe us out with a command.”

David nodded. “Even if that were true, I would be dead before any of that happened. I came out here in the middle of the night – before dawn I guess – because I love my daughter and want to keep being a father.”

Roman scoffed. “Nine times out of ten, war comes from confusion, like the war that started because a soldier raised his sword to strike the snake on his leg. We know your ideas. We can guess that you are here for our children, which is not going to happen. You have no evidence of violations of your precious nonaggression principle - you ask any of the kids here,” he turned and gestured at the group behind him, “and they will all say how much they love it here, and how little they want to leave.” He wagged his finger slowly. “Now I know that – at least for the moment – we live in your world, and I know what your rules are. You aren’t going to ostracize us, that’s your main punishment, right? We already did that to ourselves, we already put ourselves in prison, according to your eyes, so what are you going to do to punish us? Your little Scans aren’t going to reveal anything other than that living in the wilderness is very stressful – or can be – so you have no moral right to take our children, that would be to initiate force on your part. We haven’t survived this long because we don’t know what we’re doing. And if you initiate the use of force against us, your business will be destroyed, because nobody will enforce any of your contracts – that’s written in your contract, right? – and you will be ostracized – and maybe you will join us out here, in what you call the wilderness, and we call reality.”

David’s heart began to beat slightly less wildly, as he realized the negotiations had already begun. He gently pushed Alice behind him, and turned to Roman.

“You’re right in a lot of what you say, and my hands are tied to a large degree regarding adults, but your son kidnapped and harmed my daughter, and hit both her and her friend, which is an NAP violation. Responding to an NAP violation gives me considerably more – flexibility.”

Roman held up his hand. “I guess we’ve started without saying we started, which is fine, but it’s damn cold, we’re going to *need a fire!*” He raised his voice in the last part of his sentence, and a fire was quickly built, and logs set up in front of it for them to sit. Both men sat opposite each other, Alice by her father’s side. Roman warmed his hands by rubbing them in front of the flickering flames.

Staring at the flames, Roman said: “Now, I know that your kind is all kinds of sensitive about your precious kids, and how nothing bad should ever happen to them, because you think that’s going to make them stronger, like the universe gives a damn, but let’s put things in perspective, because you really seem to have pulled all the sky-cavalry out here to this spot, hanging above us all like a sword...” Roman sighed, gesturing at the fading stars. “You’ve got atomizing weapons pointed directly at us because your

daughter's friend got a slap for trespassing." Roman laughed sadly. "I'll try not to comment on the arrogance of imagining that everything you don't own is unowned, or that everyone who believes differently from you is wrong, but doesn't it strike you as a little – insane – that this is your response to just about the smallest roughhousing above a caress?"

David nodded, indicating comprehension, not agreement. "If you and I were going on a journey of a thousand leagues, is it worth haggling over the precise direction at the beginning, or near the end?"

There was dark laughter around the fire. Roman scoffed. "Yeah, yeah, we know, the child is the father of the man, the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world – do you really think that you're the only group in history, the only *civilization* in history to ever think that children – that how we treat children determines the future? You're like some toddler thinking every new experience is new for everyone." He leaned forward, firelight and shadows sliding up his face. "We – thoroughly invest in our children, and set them on the right path, something sustainable and human and real and true. We don't make them slaveowners of machines or let them squirt their brains into computers and imagine that they are alive. We teach them true respect for persons and property, which is *consequences*, not your 'Universally Preferable Behaviour.' Those girls were on our land, and they were kept here for a short while, to teach them a lesson, and then they were taught some respect with one little slap, and then they were let go without incident. It was nothing really – nothing at least compared to what *you* are doing, which is bringing all your godforsaken weaponry to threaten our lives over a little – consequence."

David started to say something, but Roman held up his hand again, with a strange authority of habitual command.

"At the end of the day, your daughter was taught to show some respect for other people's property – and all you are doing is teaching her that she needs her big old daddy and a whole bunch of sky ships with deadly weapons pointed at anyone who might be even slightly mean to her, according to her own estimation. You are damn erasing her, *David* - at the same time as you think you are here because you want to be such a good daddy."

David shivered. "Can you tell me a little bit about this – group of yours?"

Roman laughed grimly. "Oh, our people, that you call a Clan, like five hundred-year-old ghosts with pointy hats. Well, I guess you can say we are just a group of concerned parents. After the Cataclysms, you all went the route of treating your children like delicate eggs of the ancient world, Faberge eggs," he held up his hands and wriggled his fingers. "Or spiderwebs in some crazy wind. 'The world went bad,' you said, I guess, 'so we have to banish all badness and all struggle and all difficulty' – and all reality, we think – 'and our kids need to be raised in some kind of – bubble.' Well I guess most of you thought that way, and went that way, and it's been that way for about a hundred years, give or take, but I guess we were a little bit more into – diversity, and we wanted to go a different route, and we recognized the basic historical fact, the *most* basic historical fact, which is that human societies can *never* survive their own success." Roman took a deep breath and leaned further forward. "All these empires, all throughout history, hundreds of them, what do they do? It's always the same. Some warlord or general bastard captures a bunch of lands and people, and imposes some rule of law or paper-shuffling order, and peace

flourishes for a time – then everyone gets lazy and soft and – *mercantile...*” He almost spat out the word. “And the elders get lazy and greedy and stupid and obsessed with money and status and power, and no one wants to go into the Army, and women don’t want to have kids – that’s you too, you know – and then everything collapses, because there are tougher people out there in the world, and they just – run you over, run you down. I guess you can say that we are a group of concerned ex-citizens who just got a little sick and tired of this and the stupid cycle of history. It’s kinda like when they used to have a lottery – I don’t know if you still do – and you offered someone a couple of bitcoins, but with the certain knowledge that it would most likely destroy all their relationships, and they would wind up broke and in jail. A devil’s bargain, if ever there was one. Well, mankind, God help them, keeps getting offered all this wealth – with the certain knowledge that it will all go to hell, and take them with it, and everyone just keeps grabbing this burning bar of ‘civilized’ gold that melts their hands right off...” It wasn’t hard to see where Roman was getting this analogy – he kept waving his hand slowly over the flickering flames.

David was rather struck by the oddly educated manner of the older man. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again.

Roman nodded slowly, staring at the flames. “We’re tired, I guess. Tired of this cycle, tired of this manic-depressive crap-storm. We start in the woods, we move to the cities, we mostly end up back in the woods, while wolves eat the rest who starve in the shadows of the broken buildings. None of us can survive our own success. I don’t want the gold if it breaks my back. We don’t want the computers because we’re human freaking *beings*, we are supposed to face nature and wrestle for survival!” He raised his eyes and stared straight at David. “You know,” he murmured, “you are all going to end up back here anyway. We are just ready for it now.”

David swallowed, an ancient chill of fear circulating in his bloodstream. “How – how do you treat your children?”

Roman pursed his lips. “Like they are the future, as they are. We teach them that the universe owes them nothing, that you have to wrestle for everything you want, that age and wisdom have real value in a world with less change. We put them to work early, to make sure that we continue to want to have kids – you all educate them forever, they are too expensive for your society to continue, you are dying out for sure. We are harsh, because nature is harsh – as it will be to you too, when your society fails and the robots die.” Roman laughed suddenly. “It is kind of funny, when you think about it. You think we are being mean to our children, we think that you are being – unbelievably cruel to yours.”

Roman gestured at the trees, silent and still in the dawn light.

He murmured: “In ancient Rome – that’s why I am called this – the city went from millions of inhabitants down to a few thousand in a few months. Where did they go? They were all raised in cities, they expected running water in every building, no predators, easy food, arguments and debates and literature and slaves and – politics. They could wander down to the market and sell words for food – have you ever tried talking a dead tree into giving you fruit? That’s how insane it looks to us. And all these pipes and aqueducts and slaves and swords that the city Romans could not see were all keeping them afloat, in a mad dream...” He snapped his grimy fingers. “And then it all ended one day, as it

always does, and there was no food in the market and no water in the taps, and what did they do? Well, they sat on their asses, most of them, and waited for help to arrive. Then they were raped or killed or enslaved – and as the word of this began to spread, people grabbed half a loaf of bread and ran out of the city into the woods.” He laughed. “Our kids would know what to do, they wouldn’t even need half a loaf of bread. So these Romans, these soft and stupid city folk, they try to plant themselves like seeds in the land, but there’s no point planting a fruit tree when you’re already hungry. Maybe they went to farmers and begged for food, but the farmers didn’t need them, they already had all the labour they needed – and the soft-handed city idiots knew nothing about farming, they had no muscles or calluses or discipline. So what happened to them? They were barely worth anything as slaves. They were just useless eaters – they didn’t breathe to feed their muscles, like you’re supposed to, but to feed their *words*, which were useless to everyone now.”

Roman’s eyes got a faraway look.

“Millions of them... Where did they go? What happened to them? We can imagine, but it doesn’t really matter, we will never *really* know – but we know, for real, in a way. They just broke down and died. And you know what they died saying? I guarantee you that they died saying that they wished their own damn parents had prepared them for life outside the dying city. They died cursing their kin for keeping them soft and useless and parasitical and predatory and *political*. They died because their parents never made them work an honest day in their life, so their hands were too soft for anything useful, and their paws bled and they were cast into the wilderness and eaten by dogs half-alive.” Roman laughed bitterly. “They were raised to be kings and senators and sophists – and they couldn’t even raise their hands to ward off the dogs that ate them.” He put the heels of his hands together and spread his palms apart. “Fork in the road, Mister David. One way is sustainable, one is not. You are preparing your children for a life that will not last. Civilization is a drug that destroys. You forgot your gods, you forgot your devils...”

Roman leaned further forward, his eyes wide with perceived truth.

“The devil always does the same thing – he promises the end of suffering that you don’t have to earn. That’s not right... The devil promises you a relief you don’t have to keep earning. ‘I’ll give you fame or beauty or money or talent or whatever – I’ll give you *civilization* – but you’ll have to give me your soul in return!’ So you’re greedy, you snatch what he offers – and you love it for about five minutes, and then you become terrified of losing it, of what is to come. And it turns out living for the approval of others, living for *status*...” Again, he almost spat out the word in disgust. “...turns you into a slave – the worst kind of slave, the slave who thinks he is in charge, on top of the world. The slave trapped in a palace, because you can break out of a prison, but you can never break out of a palace. The slave trapped by his gold, his fame, his fans, his – greed. Everything you get that you do not earn, with your own hands, you live in fear of losing – and it’s a rational fear, because you *will* lose it. Civilization is a palace built by others, better than you – better than me perhaps – and it always comes crashing down, because animals can only escape predators and hunger by living in a zoo, but zoos drive us mad, because we are nothing if we are not striving...”

Roman gestured.

“Alice, stick yourself out from behind your daddy. If we all disappeared in the next minute, and you were left here alone, how would you eat? Huh? How would you sleep to be safe from predators? How would you build anything? Would you know how to stay alive? This is how we evolved. This is it, this is natural to us, this is where we belong. You have people in your world who haven’t seen daylight for a year, they’ve been eaten alive by your VR helmets. It’s artificial insanity – here, if people see things that aren’t there, we know they have gone mad – for you, it’s a way of life. Safety is madness, privacy is madness – and universality is madness too.”

David started. “What?”

Roman leaned forward even further. “You heard me. Universality is madness as well. You got two ways of looking at the world – biology, or morality. We are animals, we are mammals, and all animals evolved through biology. The tribe, your family... You drop a rock in a still lake, the waves are high, then they flatten out. That’s care, that’s concern, that’s life as it should be. *Family* – that’s all that matters, that’s evolution, that’s why we’re here – that’s why we are who we are. Look at you... You came all the way out here because of your daughter, but you are staying here, putting your life at risk you think, because of *our* children. But what do you care about our children? What do I care about yours? You have this universality – Universally Preferable Behavior – which means you have to put your life at risk for my boy, for our children. You *ever* see that anywhere else in the animal kingdom? And yeah, I know, you will say that we are not animals, and that’s fine I guess, you can have your civilization and your soft hands and your virtual reality, you can pretend that you are not an animal, that you are an abstract God of Forms, and you can live in geometry, not reality, but the thing about reality is it always comes back. You run from the wilderness into the city, the city just spits you back out when it collapses. Civilization is like diving underwater – you can stay there for a bit, but you can’t live there – you either return to the air, or you die in the deep. And I have no beef with science or math I guess, you can pursue those universal abstractions, but only if they serve your own kin.” Roman sighed. “You know the big lesson of the Cataclysms – all of the ideologies that grew out of the grave of God, the idea that we could remake mankind in the image of some universal abstraction that did not evolve with his body. ‘We can remake you so that you don’t care about profit or your own family!’ Pffsht! All such obvious stupidity. Set a man against what gives him life, what he *evolved* to do, and you own him until your ownership kills him. Like that disease where they got rid of all the symptoms, but couldn’t control the infection. Basic question to ask – why do people cough and take to bed when they get sick? There’s no implicit reason for it – well, it’s because it’s a signal to other people that you are sick, so they need to stay away. Tribes that evolved without symptoms cross-infected each other into early graves, it’s an evolutionary dead end. Symptoms are horrible, but the alternative is death. Get rid of symptoms, you just spread disease.” His voice rose. “The avoidance of personal suffering – *necessary* suffering – is the root of all evil. And your civilization is striving to eliminate suffering – just like all civilizations before, which tell people they shouldn’t *have* to dig a well to get water - just turn a tap. You shouldn’t *have* to hunt or grow your food, you should just tap a keyboard and have a robot cough it into your mouth, like a mama bird. You’ve probably got it to the point where you just have to *think* of the food, and you crap it out in five minutes. Congratulations, you have eliminated humanity!”

Roman leaned up and stretched his back. As the sun rose, his face looked older, wearier – *but it would be prejudice to call it utterly unwise*, thought David.

Roman said: “And here is the funniest thing, maybe. When there’s a solar flare or you run out of power, or you get too dumb and lazy to fix your machines – when the barbarians of your own softness sack your cities – you will come out here to us on your *knees* and *beg* for survival! I know why you’re here, my friend. You are here to take our children – who *damn* well know how to survive in the real world – and lock them up in your fantasy cities. Maybe we live on a kind of desert island, but you want to bind them to a ship that is bound to sink. It’s not gonna happen.” The older man’s eyes narrowed. “We are not some rejects, some outcasts too uncivilized to live in your cracking paradise. We are here by *choice*, in preparation for what is to come, because we are actual scholars of human history. We are not science fantasists who imagine that somehow, miraculously, we get to escape the cycle this time. We are mortal, you are mortal – and only insane people believe that exceptions to mortality apply to them alone. All civilizations die, as will yours. We will preside over your funeral, and carry on. You will not.”

David started to speak, but Roman held his hand up once more. David felt himself chafing against the older man’s imaginary authority – in particular with his own daughter sitting beside him – but he felt that Roman was blowing up his own words like David used to blow up balloons for Alice, and it was better to let them pop.

“You have become less of a man, my friend, by turning over all your labour to the machines and the computers. In fact, I would barely categorize you as a man, any more than I would categorize a fat king as a man. Not doing your own work is like letting another man kiss your bride – it turns you into a eunuch. When was the last time you lifted anything other than weights, the lazy man’s pretend labour?”

Roman leaned forward. “And I will tell you something that will shock you. You don’t know, at least at the top of your mind, *why* your daughter returned to this Mountain. I’m guessing she doesn’t even know herself – do you, Alice?”

Alice stood up and cleared her throat. “I wanted to lead my father to you.”

Roman nodded slowly. “Is that right? Because you wanted to save all our children from their terrible lives?”

“Yes!”

Roman nodded again. “That’s not true.”

“Hey,” protested David.

The older man shrugged. “I’m not saying the girl is a liar, but what she is saying is not true.” He paused for a moment, rubbing his chin, and the sandpaper sound of stubble drifted across the early morning air. “She came as bait, that’s what she says – and she didn’t tell you because she knew you wouldn’t let her come – but none of this is true, not in any real way.”

David scowled. "Stop talking around the issue, and just tell us what you imagine."

"Alice, you know we don't have any technology, at least you don't think we do, right?"

Alice didn't know whether to nod or shake her head. "I don't think you do," she said cautiously.

Roman grunted with evident satisfaction. "So – if you were coming to the Mountain as bait, and you know we don't have any remote viewing crap, then we would've had to have someone nearby, watching the Mountain, to see you come – and some way to communicate with the rest of us. So – we must've been close by for your plan to work. But if we were close, you didn't need to come as bait – you could have just told your daddy that you thought we might be watching the Mountain to see if you would return. So – it's a pretty story, but it's not true. If we were close, you could've just found us easily. Turns out we were, so it looks like your plan kind of worked, but it's not the *real* plan, not the real motive."

David frowned. The older man's words were a kind of maze, but it did vaguely feel like they led somewhere...

"So – what is the truth?" he asked.

"That's a big question," said Roman – rather pompously, David thought.

The older man said: "The truth is that females respond to assertiveness, to dominance. She came back because she liked my son. She stayed because she is drawn to us – we have dropped our lives into her mind, and she is responding as she should."

"Oh, gross!" cried Alice vehemently, and slight laughter ran around the clearing.

Roman smiled. "Also a typical female response, to condemn what she is drawn to." He raised his hand. "Don't get me wrong, I know she's young, I'm not suggesting anything – untoward. But this is your problem, and I say this man to man, father to father... You have lost track of what is most – human. My son exercised dominance over your daughter, and she was compelled to return. You with this peaceful parenting – you do not exercise dominance over your daughter, so she does not view you as an authority figure, but just a kind of 'big buddy.'" Again, his lip curled in disgust. "She makes fun of you, right?"

David nodded.

"And you lecture her when she does something you disagree with, right? No punishments, no raised voice, no spanking – no fear."

David nodded again.

Roman smiled grimly. "And you can afford to be her 'big buddy' because you live in a world without danger. She doesn't need to fear the consequences of her actions because her actions *have no consequences!*" Roman's voice rose on the last three words.

He gestured at the trees, at silent implacable sociopathic nature. “Out here, you make a mistake, you die – or you get an injury, which means you die slowly. It’s a kindness to be harsh with your children, because it prepares them for the harsh world that we live in.”

Roman’s eyes narrowed, and his voice changed its tone.

“Do you know why you have the intelligence to make your slave machinery? Do you even *know* how we evolved?” He opened his right hand and pounded the base of his left fist into it. “We evolved through unspeakable and unending brutality. Particularly the Northern people – we grew our brains because people who did not plan for winter – the stupid, the greedy, the shortsighted – *died* over the course of that winter! Like those pink soft Roman city-dwellers – people who had no food in late Winter went knocking and begging at the doors of their neighbours, holding up hungry children, tears in their eyes. And you know what their neighbours did? Do know why we have any brains at all?”

His voice lowered to almost a whisper, causing David and Alice to lean forward together.

“Their neighbours slammed their doors in their faces. They locked their doors, and fastened their windows – and picked up an axe if need be, to CHOP DOWN their stupid greedy neighbours, to make sure they had enough food for their *own* children – and those children *saw* the neighbours being driven into the snow – and cut in pieces if necessary – and maybe they buried those bodies around the houses... And when the spring came... Do you think that those children *ever* forgot that lesson? Do you think those children *ever* failed to prepare for the length of winter? Do you think we would *ever* have evolved the intelligence and forethought to make the machines that make us lazy if our ancestors had not lived like *US* rather than *YOU?!?*”

A few pieces of genuine spittle flew from Roman’s mouth. Alice blinked in surprise, trying to remember if she had ever seen such intensity in anything – or anyone – outside of crazed historical documentaries.

Roman said: “And you have taken all these brains, the product of hundreds of thousands of years of blinding suffering and harshness, and you have turned them into unsustainable laziness – and, when your daughter saw my son, she realized that she was seeing a true male for the first time in her entire life!”

“A male who hit a child!” cried David, and immediately regretted it, because it seemed – or felt – like a very weak move.

Roman nodded. “Yeah, I heard about that. Do you know why we hit our children? Because out here, the nonaggression principle doesn’t work with cold or bears or wolves or a slipped axe or a broken leg or a twisted ankle or fire or hunger or boiling water or an infection – or another tribe, and yes your eyes will widen, but we are not alone out here, there are a lot of eyes watching your ‘Civ’ circle the drain.”

He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and pointed a forefinger at David.

“I want you to think of something – again, father to father. Imagine that these two girls had surprised a pack of hungry wolves up on the Mountain, or a cougar, or coyotes, or a family of bears. And imagine

that this guardian robot thing had failed, or had been bitten in two by a predator. Imagine everything that your civilization shields them from had broken through, and was staring them down.”

With blinding speed, Roman picked up a rock, turned and threw it directly at his son. Like an ancient parted sea, everyone leaned away from the rock. His boy caught it deftly.

Roman smiled and shrugged. “No worries here, for us. My son *alone* might not win, but it sure as hell would be a fair fight. Your girls would be eaten alive, because you have disarmed them with safety, and they would go screaming into the mouths of the beasts. We imitate predators here because the *world* is a predator. And you sit in your robot zoos and judge us for being deficient – when *you came from us!* We gave *birth* to you – our harshness gave you the brains that you rely on to escape consequences, to avoid nature and reality.” His lips curled. “‘The Civ’ is a tumour, like all ‘civilization.’ It is a success we cannot survive as a species. It grows, surrounds healthy cells, and kills the host. It is a devilish temptation for comfort at the expense of survival. You would be *nothing* without us – you are our *children* – and we, as your parents, get cast into the wilderness and damned as evil, when you survive only on the intelligence *we* grew in you!”

Are you finished? The low rent power-play phrase tempted David, but he resisted.

He and Roman stared at each other for a full minute, their breath fogging faintly in the morning air.

“It hangs in the balance,” said Roman slowly.

David took a deep breath, his mind spinning with the unexpected volume of information and arguments coming from the older – savage? No, not a savage, but a cunning – mammal...

David suddenly wished his daughter was far away – not because he felt that she was in any imminent danger, but because matching wits against the leader of the Clan suddenly felt astonishingly challenging. He was so used to negotiating in a framework of common beliefs that conversing with someone outside the ideals of the Civ seemed impossible, like debating someone in a language you do not share.

Philosophy is supposed to be universal – but this man – this tribe – reject universals... How are we supposed to have a discussion of values when the only thing they value is survival?

David considered for a long moment. He could sense that Roman approved of taking the time to collect your thoughts. David suddenly suspected that the surprisingly deep insights of the older man grew from the deep soil of long, cold leisure...

“What if...?” He cleared his throat. “What if the Civ *is* sustainable?”

Roman snorted. “What if? What if? What if wolves turn friendly and we can drink sunlight and I’m the only man who can live forever? ‘What if’ is like the silly drug of ‘fairness’ that always brings down civilization. Fantasy and resentment is not a survival strategy my friend.”

“No, I understand what you mean,” said David evenly. “I know I sound like all of the – thinkers who ran society from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries – ‘what if central planning works better than

free markets?’ ‘What if we can stop being tribal?’ ‘What if men and women can be exactly the same?’ I know – but you do have to be fair according to the evidence of the senses. We’ve had a hundred years or so, and wealth has gone up five times, we’ve extended life by half a century, crime is virtually nonexistent, debt virtually unheard of, disease mostly eradicated – we have achieved more in the last century than any other period in history. In all the past empires or civilizations, you could clearly see the seeds of destruction sown for hundreds of years. But you understand that sometimes riddles *do* get solved in human history – after the end of slavery – the greatest advance prior to the modern age – no one seriously suggested bringing slavery *back*. There *are* advancements that bring us to a higher plateau, and that doesn’t mean that pride comes before a fall, or we are Icarus with wax for wings...”

“He didn’t have wax for wings,” muttered Roman.

David waved his hand. “I know, you get the point. I didn’t interrupt you when you made an ambiguous or incorrect statement – let’s focus on the flow of the conversation. I get the argument that civilization stops evolution – reverses it in many ways. I get the argument that comfort leads to laziness, that hard times lead to strong men, strong men lead to good times, good times lead to weak men, and weak men lead to hard times – I’ve studied all of that; everyone has who claims to be civilized. The basis of the modern world is a deep understanding of everything that went wrong in the past. I suppose there are two types of men – those who believe that improvement is delusion, and those who believe that giving up is a form of cowardice...”

He paused, seeing how his ‘shot across the bows’ of Roman’s not-inconsiderable vanity was received, but it passed the older man by without comment or reaction.

David stood up, massaging his lower back, unused to sitting for so long. The rising sun beamed through the trees, stretching long shadow-branches across the clearing.

“What you know about the history of the Civ?”

“I know it as it is now, not much about how it came to be, other than as a reaction to the Cataclysms.”

David nodded. “I will keep it brief. The Civ will last because we finally understood the equation that kept collapsing civilization. Child abuse. Child abuse uses external punishments to destroy internal conscience – children just learn to avoid pain and pursue rewards. Because they grow up without an internalized conscience, children know no other way to be good than to seek the approval of those with dangerous power over them. In other words, child abuse creates a power vacuum – or a moral vacuum really – in the minds of children and adults, so they don’t know how to be good without being told. Ordered. Violated.

“A child who has a conscience – who is good for the sake of goodness itself – doesn’t need an external authority that punishes and rewards in order to pursue virtue. Now, I know that for your – group, the most important thing is tribalism and survival – or tribalism insofar as it *serves* survival – and I get that, I respect where you’re coming from – but *if* you can get survival *and* flourishing without abusing children – that would be better, right?” David held up his hand. “Before you answer, I know two things – first,

that you don't believe that, or at least not yet – and second, that you believe we are abusing our children by sealing them up in – what, robot prisons? By taking away their ability to survive in this raw world that you live in, we are harming them – while you are preparing them for the harsh world that is – I get that, but – just let me make the case anyway, since a lot does hang on this discussion. Peace – or war.”

David began to pace back and forth. Roman's eldest son yawned theatrically.

“Look, Roman – morality is based on *universality*; emotionally, universality is based on *empathy*. We found out that there was very little point trying to teach morality to children who had not learned empathy – and learning empathy requires a specific sequence of eye contact, skin contact, emotional mirroring, to wire up the different parts of the brain necessary to develop mirror neurons, or the capacity for compassion. Children who are raised with compassion have a foundational biological basis for the development of philosophical universality – in order to act morally, children must first understand – and *feel* – that other people are like themselves. Throughout most of human history, commandments were beaten into children, while parents did the exact opposite of what they commanded. Hitting children for hitting children, that sort of thing... It was like fat parents punishing their children for not being athletes, while simultaneously starving them and breaking their bones – just an analogy, I'm not saying any of you would do that...”

David took a deep breath. He noticed that the wildlife was beginning to return. A rabbit watched from under a bush at the edge of the clearing. Two blackbirds landed on a branch nearby. Roman's younger son picked up a rock, but dropped it after a fierce glance from his father.

“In order to ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you,’ your brain *must* be able to process the emotional reality that other people are like you. That empathy is a basic biological function that, as I said, requires specific parenting techniques and intimacy. Yelling at children to be compassionate, hitting them for selfishness, beating them for violence – only produces violent selfish children who lack compassion.

“The massive costs of the old world – the crime, the addiction, promiscuity, violence, ill health, *divorce...*” It was David's turn to spit out a word with contemptuous ferocity. “Single motherhood – we all know the list, it went on forever back then – *all of this arose from the brutalization of children*. Child abuse took decades off the lifespan of every victim, spanking produced aggression; child confinement – at home or in what used to be called ‘schools’ – produced bullying, anxiety, violence and depression. Children who were broken grew into broken adults, and broken adults flocked to political authority, which bribed and exploited them – rewarded and punished them, just as their parents did. ‘The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world,’ so the saying went – we went one step further: The hand that rules the world smashes the cradle,’ – *and must keep doing so in order to continue ruling!*”

Startled, the blackbirds flew up, as if offended.

“However much this might have been known in centuries past, it could scarcely be acted upon, because every power structure that dominated humanity – from parents to teachers to the State – relied upon

and *required* children to be abused! Any mere individual who tried to expose and push back against this abuse was targeted by *all* of the people in power who profited from smashing up children, and was attacked and excluded from society. In the Civ, ostracism is used as a last resort *against* abuse – in the Old World, ostracism was used as the first resort *against anyone who tried to protect the children*.

“This – bigotry against children is as old as the species we share. In the twenty-first century – a time of mass hysteria against all forms of perceived bigotry – not *one* statement was made in the general media about the bigotry against children – the obvious word for it – *childism* – didn’t even exist! In many countries, it was illegal to hit adults, but perfectly legal to hit children. It was illegal to confine adults, but you could legally confine children. It was illegal to withhold food from adults, but you could half-starve children. It was of course illegal to sexually assault children, but the practice was so widespread that at least one in three girls – and one in five boys – were sexually assaulted as children. People were so ignorant back then that they didn’t even realize that just about everyone who wanted to drive the fathers out of the household did so because they wanted abuse the children of single mothers. Children of single mothers were over thirty *times* more likely to be abused than children with fathers around – driving *fathers* away was the essential project of the abusers.

“And the children were given *no* say in their schooling; their parents were forced to pay, the State forced them to attend in most places, and they had almost no recourse to bullying from teachers, fellow students, staff – government schools were hotbeds of physical and sexual abuse and exploitation.

“And very little was done to stop this, because the society was set up so that children were explicitly *denied* their role and voice in the world. Who listened to them? Politicians didn’t care about them, because they could not vote. Teachers didn’t care about them, because they got paid no matter what. And the culture created a strange cult of parenthood, so that even victims of child abuse were herded back to their abusers by a society desperate to cover up its endless crimes against children. There were a few people who reminded adult victims of child abuse that they did not *have* to spend time with their abusers, but in the usual twenty-first century habit of projection, those people were attacked as cult leaders and driven from society – to protect the abusers who ran everything, or were required by those who ran everything.

“Society *evolved* on child abuse – it *required* child abuse. It could not survive without it.

“After the Cataclysms, when the sadists who virtually destroyed the species – hell, the *planet* – had been exposed – and people finally understood that we had accumulated too much technological power to be ruled – the problem of violent hierarchy – parenting, schools, the State – was *finally* attacked at its root, and some of the studies and arguments from the Old World which had survived served as a blueprint for outgrowing the brutal hierarchies of history. In a sense, prehistory was the childhood of the species, the Old World of the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries was the unstable puberty – the Cataclysms the violent teenage years – and the modern world is the *final adulthood of mankind*.

“In order to *bow* to authority, you must be raised to be *afraid* of authority – that is the job of parents and teachers, paid for and protected by the State. We found the most remarkable – yet most easily

predictable – thing, which was that when children were raised peacefully, we had no need of politics. No need of the State – the State which had always destroyed the societies it was supposed to protect!”

It was David’s time to lean forward, and he felt his daughter’s soft hand on his left shoulder.

“So – Roman, you have it precisely backwards, and here’s where the conversation becomes confrontational, which I accept.

“You aren’t harsh to your children *because* the world is harsh – you *need* a harsh world *in order to justify your harshness to your children!* The Civ is not just built on peaceful parenting – the Civ *is* peaceful parenting. Not even two sides of the same coin; they are one and the same. Why do you live out here, in this harsh wilderness? Your need is *emotional*, not philosophical. You *need* the Civ to be on its last legs so that you can justify your emotional need to abuse your children – and I am going to say it, because you have said it to me, which sounds petty, but you opened the door to this kind of criticism.”

David gestured at the silent trees, the circling blackbirds, the rustle and creak of wind through the leafy boughs.

“These woods are not the future of the Civ, but the primitive prehistory of us all. You have based your identity on ruling this tribe, on being the Chief – which means that you *need* the tribe, you *need* the hierarchy, you *need* the obedience – which means that *your entire ego is dependent upon the abuse of your children*. Now, you project that need to abuse onto me, onto the fathers of the Civ, because we reason with our children and do not use our accidental size and age and strength as a substitute for rational parenting. You bring your children out here in order to bully them, and then say that – ‘Oh no, it’s not *me* that is bullying you my child – I am just preparing you for the bullying of nature’ – *but who is responsible for bringing them out here? For keeping them out here? You, Roman...*” David gestured the tribe. “You, these parents – and no one else.”

David turned to the grimy frightened children of the tribe, staring at him with wide eyes and hanging mouths.

“Why are they here? The one thing we know is that they are abused when they are here – and you yourself said that the abuse occurs because *nature* is abusive, and you are preparing them to face nature. This is why you *need* to say that the Civ cannot last – because if it *can* last – and the only reason that it can last is *because* of peaceful parenting – then you are just a violent man out here in the woods beating his children. You are not a noble savage, you are not a historical warrior, you are not a protector of children from the softening disasters of a machine-based civilization, you are not a natural philosopher of the Original Man – you are just a guy who has dragged children out into the woods so he can beat them – or worse, which I will not speak of for lack of proof, and for the presence of children here.”

David just let his passion flow. He had made arguments for peaceful parenting at conferences in the few remaining statist countries, but his words had never sounded as raw as here, as looming nature ate up his syllables.

“You are just a guy with a stick and a fist – and terrified children. You know a fair amount about the Civ – you know that we have no war and no prisons and no crime, that we are wealthy and powerful and secure – and happy. You have studied history, you know that the fall of a civilization is foreshadowed by hundreds of years of very clear indicators, from the accumulation of centralized power to the importing of foreigners hostile to the core beliefs, to the corruption and degradation of the currency, the state-subsidized hyper-egalitarianism of the sexes, the reliance on public debt and the ever-increasing propagandizing of the young, the destruction of the nuclear family – we went through this a hundred times in the past, it was always the same – and you claim to know history, but you look at the Civ and claim that it is tottering, that it cannot last, that you are protecting children from our – what, decadence and laziness and softening! But you, who claims to follow nature and reality and truth and is *desperate* to be harsh to your children because – oh, nature is harsh, the truth is harsh, and reality is harsh – how harsh are you willing to be against your own delusions? We are not failing, we are not softening, we are not on our last legs – we succeed because we *protect* our children, but you only *think* you succeed because you destroy yours!” He did a passable imitation of Roman’s odd accent. “Oh, but we are harsh to our children because we want to protect them from wolves and bears and lions! What about *your* beliefs, old man? You were raised so harshly that you can take on bears with your bare hands – can you face down the predators of your *own* false beliefs? ‘Don’t make a mistake, or ye shall surely die!’ you cry. Well, Roman, what if *you* have made a mistake? What if you have built your entire worldview, your emotional hunger to dominate and destroy, on the delusion that peace and reason cannot last in this world? That *you* are the future, and *we* are the tottering past?” David’s voice grew almost gentle. “Oh no, my friend. *We are* the future; *you* are the past, and we cannot coexist. You are out here breeding criminals and brutalizers, while we use our peace and plenty to raise civilized human beings. I was raised in love and peace and reason and wealth. I have mirror neurons; you have a void where your conscience should be. Although you attacked my child, I will save your children, because I am involved in all of humanity, and I cannot be dominated or humiliated into deferring to a child-abusing savage in the woods!”

David took a deep breath – in his passion he had cast aside all restraint, and knew that lives now hung in the balance. He had been surprised at the depth of emotion that arose in his chest, then he realized that he was facing an ancient enemy only detectable by his deepest instincts...

*It is not that he is wrong that is the problem – it is that he defines everything that is wrong about him as a virtue, which seals his actions in inevitability. Free will only allows us to choose what is good – to define what is good... Once we **have** chosen, or defined, our course is set. We can choose where to build the train tracks, but we cannot choose where the train goes after the tracks are done. He has set himself up as a virtuous leader, whose virtue – and leadership – depends entirely upon the destruction of children. A tree must be broken and reassembled into a house – children must be broken to be reassembled into followers – his followers. And now I have called out his leadership, and his virtue, and his authority, in front of his tribe – and his child, or children I assume... There is almost no greater provocation in the world of mammals...*

David could see the shifting clouds of suppressed emotions chasing each other across the older man’s stony visage. He found himself impressed – against his will – by Roman’s superlative self-control.

After a full minute, Roman spoke.

“Real men did not submit to each other. It seems that you want to make this a war of wills and dominance...” He flattened his hands and pushed his fingers together horizontally. “Like two pieces of paper being pushed together, one ends up going above the other.” He raised his voice. “This is *not* a battle of wills! I do not demand that you submit to me – I assume you do not demand that I submit to you! We are not animals, we are men, and we can reason. You are calling me evil, I am calling you weak – which is the same as evil, in the real world. Weakness draws evil, and cannot protect its own offspring. Your weakness was to send your children out to the wilderness guarded only by floating and failing metal. My ‘evil’ is to protect my children from destruction by making them strong. You are like the crazy mother who keeps her children away from germs, so that they die the first time they sicken.” Roman pursed his lips in a stern frown.

“But these are – abstract issues. The past is a myth, the future a delusion. You and I can make anything we want out of current patterns to justify our respective views. Your sky ships hang over us, ready to strike.” He raised his finger and pointed at David’s chest. “You would hold us down with ropes and take our children away.” He raised his finger and spun it. “We would fight to the death to hang onto our precious children, our future. We would take nothing from you, but let time and decadence do its dirty work. You will come and threaten us – kill us if necessary – to take our children. Children who – by your own definition – cannot be integrated into your society. You will take them for – what? To try your programming, to force them into the decadent pacifist cult of the Civ – which you will fail at, we both know this. So then what? You have taken them from a life they love, the only life they know, taken them away from all the skills that make them human, and put them into a cage in a *city*...” Again, he almost spat the word. “You will take them like the ancient rulers took the natives from the ‘new world’ and paraded them in bamboo cages for the Kings to poke at and feel superior to. What you cannot coexist with, or integrate, you must destroy.”

Roman turned his back on David and spoke to the silent waiting Clan. The wide-eyed children edged closer to their parents.

“This man says that we are beyond redemption, and that trauma – the trauma of learning how to survive, man versus nature, as we evolved, as is natural – destroys our souls. He will take our children, he will program them, indoctrinate them, try to change them into himself – all in the name of progress, of virtue, of compassion and the nonaggression principle, their God of Reason, as they imagine. We will be destroyed through violence, so that violence is destroyed, the ancient bargain of man’s inevitable enemy...”

Roman took a deep breath. “We cannot fight them, because we have surrendered technology in order to master nature. Their weapons can destroy us; the only restraint is their need for pacifist self-justification. They need their justification in order to destroy us – but we shall show them reason, despite their targeting from the death ships above. My friends, my companions, my family – do you trust me?”

The sun was far over the horizon, scaling its light up through the threaded branches of the trees – and in a strange illusion, the heads of the Clan were illuminated, but their bodies were not, turning them into still candles.

One by one, they nodded.

Roman turned to David.

“All right,” he grunted. “Show me.”

David blinked. “What?”

Roman shrugged. “You say that you have mastered history, broken the cycle. Show me.”

“You mean – on a screen?”

Roman laughed. “Already you are failing. No, take me in a ship and show me your world. You are an empiricist – let me judge for myself!”

David paused. “That is kind of an – open ended bargain. How will you know?”

“Civilization always lacks certainty. You might learn from me, join me out here. I will know.”

David sat down heavily, rubbing his face. “So I – take you to the Civ, you – look around, and – what if you approve?”

“Then we will join you.”

David laughed involuntarily. “Oh come on – look at the – sacrifices you have made, for how long? Who knows? You’re just going to – what, jump out of the woods and join me in a Jacuzzi?”

“A what?”

“Doesn’t matter, sorry.”

“I give you my word.”

“Your word is – if you think the Civ is sustainable, you give up the woods?”

Roman gestured at the Clan. “We all do – don’t we?”

Various nods.

David said: “And if you – end up thinking that the Civ is unsustainable, or wrong – bad – in some way?”

“Then you leave us in peace.”

“Done!” The word was out of David’s mouth before he even thought. Appalled at his own impulsiveness, he added: “We will need to get this in writing of course.”

Roman smiled. "In blood. Of course."

Chapter 13

I open my eyes, and see the white room I died in, and I know I am in heaven – or hell – or some kind of afterlife.

I hear a soft beeping, and wonder if that is my soul breathing – *hah, but there is no need for a heartbeat after death...*

From the corner of my vision, I see – sitting beside my bed – a woman with long dark hair, leaning forward, half-asleep perhaps – but what would the purpose of *sleep* be in the afterlife either?

I see her, and I feel my heart – or where my heart would be, probably a hole in my soul at the moment – it breaks, I am cracked open like a dropped egg full of tears. I feel the tragic tickle as they stream down the side of my face, and I have a sudden urge to stick out my tongue and lick them, to see if there is salt in heaven...

I then feel a desperate and deep chill in my soul, that there is only one person to greet me, and that person has fallen asleep – and then I know who it is, and an audible sob escapes my throat.

Power is sadness – power over sadness is the whole point... Anyone who has achieved anything starts from a canyon of tragedy – the muscles you build climbing out of sorrow allow you to climb past the clouds, and become the sun.

These analogies tumble from my brain like a poet crapping from a plane – even that one surprises me, shocks me with its vivid awfulness...

Jane sits by my bed, and she had gone to death over fifty years before me – she sits by my bed, as I had sat by her bed, how many years ago, in life, above...

You don't know how to love, when you grow up with ambition and success and conditions... My father was a fisherman; he fished me out of the lukewarm lake of the average, with the bait of his approval – and the hook of his approval as well.

My mother was *busy*, she had a lot of lunches to attend – and the greatest joy I ever saw on faces belonged to strangers. My mother did not take much pleasure in me, but she enjoyed the pleasure I gave to others. I was there to serve her needs, I understood that... I didn't resent it – I was happy and relieved that she was so *clear* in what she wanted. I was desperate to get out of my crib, my carriage, my confinement – my baby-burrito of swaddling – so that I could keep her attention by gathering flowers and cooing smiles from strangers. I was *nothing* when I was a baby – an inconvenience, a status symbol, an interruption I suppose. And babies *are* boring – and manipulative as hell – I know *that* from my own children – though I suppose my heart had softened by the time I became a grandfather...

The thought suddenly strikes me, as I feel the blood start to creep to my extremities: *What age shall I be in this afterlife? I am not a baby, but I don't feel old and used up, like I did before I – died...*

And then another thought strikes me – what the child abuser said in Dostoyevsky’s novel ‘Crime and Punishment’ – *what if the afterlife is just a little bathhouse with flaking paint, full of spiders?*

But no – the air tastes different, but I am still breathing. My eyes – God above, they seem sharper than I remembered, and of course I have no glasses on – together, we scan the room I am in, looking for any flaw, any crack, any imperfection, any fragment of mottled mortality – anything that would indicate I am in the crumbling world of tragic reality.

There is nothing, nothing that I can see...

Everything is perfect, like a computer program, or a – a *simulation* of some kind.

I desperately try to remember what I had learned about – God, what is the word, between heaven and hell, where you labour for thousands of years to redeem yourself, to make yourself perfect for... The in-between afterlife – not entropy, not... Oh God, what *is* the word..? A place of confrontation of evil and a hand-cramping grasping for redemption? A place where you had to stare in the mirror and learn to stop screaming in order to graduate?

It is no use – the word will not come... I’m even close to the shape of the letters; I’ll have to stop thinking about it in order to receive the grace of possible knowledge...

But suicides don’t get to heaven...

I shudder viscerally, and want to *rip* the clothes from my body, rip the covers from my clothes, rip the flesh from my bones – because if it is *her* beside me, then I *am* in hell, and perhaps this is my short reprieve before the suffering truly begins...

But what did I do to deserve hell?

I suddenly feel a strange – sensation in my chest, or just below my chest – in my diaphragm, where a body seems to awaken and wriggle its fat arms within me – a god-baby that has sat judging me my entire life – a baby I buried under money and sex and power and – greed, the greed that came from denying where I came from...

But that is all nonsense – offensive *crap!* *Anyone* who achieves *anything* has to create and carve themselves from *nothing*, from rejection and void and scorn and conditions and superiority and inferiority and dominance of the evacuated, the condemned...

The words tumble within me like – like paratroopers abandoning a flaming plane.

But there is nowhere to fall if you are already in hell...

I try to move my arms, but they feel frozen to my side... I imagine an armless torso with giant sausages beside it, and almost laugh – but I am afraid to laugh, because I am terrified that it will come out as a hysterical cackle, and bring the curious knife-toothed devils through the doorway...

And what if – what if hell is nothing but being alone with your thoughts? What if the body beside me never wakes up, what if I can never move my arms, what if the beeping never stops, what if the light never changes and my vision never decays? What if I am bound in bed for eternity, with my thoughts racing to avoid the baby in my belly?

I try to think: *What hell would I create if I were the Head Devil?*

I would create a power lust, with no one to subjugate...

Do I – have a power lust at the moment?

Of course – I yearn for power over my body, my thoughts...

And power to – to either wake up the girl beside me, or keep her asleep, dead and purple-necked forever...

But I *can* move my eyes – that much I can do. I try turning my head, and find that it moves slightly. I feel a rush of relief flooding my bone marrow – but I suddenly can't remember if I could move it before, when I was trying to look around the white room, and my relief evaporates instantly, like water on a red skillet...

What if slight movement is all I am allowed?

I feel a great sudden rage at the situation, my environment, and my own scattered and random thoughts.

*I am a man of **action**, a king ape – I am designed to stride the world like a colossus, not lie in bed looking for cobwebs in the wild hope that I am not in hell...*

I pour all my energy into moving my limbs – I have a desperate desire to leap from my bed and tear down the blank white walls that surround me, that make me feel like I am trapped inside a hollow dice – and even though I suddenly feel certain that, if I were to tear down these walls, nothing but burning lakes and grinning red-eyed spider-skulls would hang beyond my cell.

I would rather *have* the knowledge – I would rather know where I am than have to guess until I go mad...

And if I am in hell, within one spin of this infernal planet, I will rule!

I almost laugh at the thought of subjugating Satan with charm, bribes and threats – the standard route to power – so that a legion of assembled devils would vault me up to the fiery throne – and I genuinely feel in the moment that I *would* rather rule in hell than serve in heaven...

And damn, I would be **fantastic** at tempting mortals – as I was tempted, and as I...

The word “succumbed” floats into my head, and I feel the god-baby in my belly open its mouth to cry, but I force it into a yawn – and feel a thrill of power that it *works*.

I think I sense movement from the girl to my left...

The random patterns of my brain suddenly blow into nothing, like a child's silver bubbles before the ghostly slap of a hurricane.

Heart pounding, beeping increasing, I try to crane my head, to turn my neck, to look and see, but it's like trying to move a giant boulder with my fingertips...

I feel abject terror – a fear I could never remember feeling before, in my adult life – as I imagine Jane looming over me, accusing me of murder...

I didn't kill – her, I never killed her, she died because...

But the words fall over the edge of my mind like leaves over a waterfall.

Why did Jane die?

You are here to find out. You are here because you never asked that question...

I sigh – or try to.

Oh great, now there's another voice in here...

You are here because you think this is a new voice...

Jane...

She was always an unusual girl, which is why she had a closed casket...

My throat thickens. More tears spill from the sides of my eyes.

If I could only look at her directly, I could see whether she had a face. If she has a face, I am in heaven – if not, I am in hell...

The beeping changes slightly – at least I think it does – and it suddenly reminds me of my alarm clock, when I was – when I was little, I can't remember the year, my year, because none of my years felt like mine I suppose...

The alarm would wake me, and I would be desperate for sleep, for oblivion, for non-existence, because I hated getting up, to slip from the open seas of dreaming to the narrow train tracks of my daily existence – the tracks laid by my parents, their disapproval, my future...

I would wake, and flow like senseless water through the carved channels of my routine – the channels that led me to the summit of my existence, the peak of my power – and I appreciated all that later, but at the time, I remember feeling a great ancient weariness in my young heart, as I arose in the dark to dress and stretch and brush – and then to eat a silent power-breakfast of two hard-boiled eggs and a smear of peanut butter, which always reminded me of skid-marks in underwear...

And then to be driven in the dark, in the slowly-glowing light of another day, through the sleeping city, past the houses of children still playing in their dreams – a soldier of future fortune, destined for greatness, *discipline* branded into my skull like a hissing tattoo of endless ownership...

And then, into the white cube with the red lines – so much like my current room, the inside of an empty dice – *no, that is wrong; the singular of dice is – die...*

And the pounding leaping *thwack* of the black ball – first with yellow dot, then a blue.

The snarling encouragement of the coach, the diagramming of strategy, the video review of my opponents, the narrow jumping exercises, the lunges, the feeling that my day should be done when everyone else's was just beginning – the showering alone – and the feeling that getting to school should be lunchtime, when it was just after breakfast.

In the winter, my hair frozen, hanging and swinging like a thatched ice roof over my forehead...

And then, the Mandarin lessons after school – first thinking I would be learning about oranges...

The tutors, the constant feeling of exhaustion and overextension and the inevitability of disappointing my parents – the slow stoking of rage of subjugation...

And then, leaping forward- to puberty? My father laughing and leaning forward in his overstuffed leather chair, his breath the hot scent of foreign cigars...

"It's good that you learned to hate being subjugated – that was the point, kid!"

A hard thumb stabs a soft palm.

"Because you hate it so much, you will *never let it happen to you ever again!*"

I imagine my mother floating through the air, invisible except for her earrings, laughing softly, as if it is all part of the plan, as if my entire adulthood was drawn by my parents, my circumstances, by what I thought was our mutual ambition – like a 'connect the dots' picture...

I suddenly remember one of those books that I had, when I was very little, given to me by – not by someone in the family, God, or anyone close by, because it had no purpose other than pleasure...

I would start – I would hunt for the '1,' and then draw to the '2' – and I would wait for that moment, that thrill of excitement, of recognition, when I would see what the picture was going to be, from a bare half-drawn outline – a bear, a starfish, a clown, an angular pentagram...

And maybe that's what happened in my life – other people drew the lines, and eventually I saw the shape that my life was going to take. I wasn't the numbers, I wasn't the lines, I wasn't the hand – perhaps I was the paper, the raw material necessary for everything else to have purpose...

You are running from Jane...

I shuddered, because the voice had a strange accent I could not place, and it certainly wasn't *my* voice, it was too deep and broad...

Hello, my Devil... I murmur, within my skull-prison.

There is no response, but I can hear a faint fleshy creak, as if an invisible smile widened within...

Blackness, I am interr...

Return, jolt...

My father's foggy voice telling me that life is a circle – you are busy from the age of thirteen to the age of eighty – in between, you have no time to reflect.

His own days were like a cannon being shot against a wall – the cannon being breakfast, and the wall being his bed at night. Everything in the middle was just a blur...

A leaning dark whiskey face, a nighttime confessional under my glow-lit ceiling stars...

"Wait and see, son... Old age is your second childhood, when the dead come back to life..."

A gesture, a turn, the soft *glug* of a pour...

"Eh, when you're old, the scorecard is in, the marks have been tallied, the reviews have been printed. The *best* way to live has been revealed by the decades. And you go back over your youth and try to figure out who took the right path..."

One of my first memories

riding in a train, pressing my face against the cold dusty glass, breath-fogging the window and drawing lollipop people, frozen in the foreground against the blurred night of distance

rain blowing past, streaks of concentrated vision, drying

I was tired, lean my head on the glass, but keep one eye open

occasionally, in the flashing dark, lights rocket by

I see a scene that I could reassemble in my mind a moment afterwards.

a light shining on a broken playground – the swing-set had toppled over completely, and I thought of death, very suddenly

Why would a family let a playground decay so badly? If their children were young, it would still be in use – if their children were older, it would have been taken down or kept up for grandkids...

Death. It had to be – the death of a child. Who could bear the pain of tearing down a playground after burying a boy or girl?

A doze perhaps, another scene through the dusty streaks of drying rain...

I see a woman with her head lowered on a balcony, bathed in a soft sieve of yellow light...

I see the rising orange firefly of her cigarette, as she raises it to her lips.

Two thoughts overlap: *Was she crying? Did she want someone to see her?*

A tiny train station flashes by, and I see a young boy – alone – sitting on sacks of – something, I didn't know at the time, but now I think it must've been grain.

He stares at the train, and through a trick of perspective, he seems to be staring right *at* me, and I shudder with a sudden chill, because I thought of death again – that the boy was a ghost, killed on the tracks perhaps, sentenced to sit and stare every night – and I had a sudden urge to pull the emergency cord of the train, to jump off and run back and demand that he explain himself.

You are thinking of your father...

Yeah, so what?

I remember that long-ago midnight train ride – even the memory is like the scenes outside the window, flashing past with no sense of *before* or *after* – because interactions with my father were long stretches of darkness and manic motion – but occasionally, very rarely, a scene would flash by, illuminating – what?

More tears course from my eyes. I am relieved to feel them trickle down the back of my neck, like tiny silver threads trying to hug me, because it means that – or at least there was a chance that – I am not paralyzed...

Sometimes my father would open his mouth – so rare, so precious – and show an inner world of reflection and consideration – and I would feel a sudden hunger rising within me, to meet his words and bathe in their illumination, like a parched man in a desert finding wet sand beneath his scrabbling hands.

Your father was a torturer...

I shudder again, because I have no work to distract me from my voices. *What the hell does that mean? He opened his heart from time to...*

I was afraid of that voice, so I open myself to the explanation that arises within me.

My father showed me his heart like an eclipse shows darkness at noon – common enough to be possible, rare enough to be insanely – utterly – maddening...

Where was he when Jane...

I realize I am holding my breath, waiting for that sentence to end.

I am afraid of trying to stop that inner voice, afraid of its escalation and its potential to undo me completely – but the voice simply stops mid-sentence – or, to be more accurate, given what happened to Jane, near the end of the sentence – two words away to be precise.

Jane was the most popular girl in school – beautiful, athletic, academic – and a nice person (God, how long has it been since I viewed that as a positive attribute, rather than...).

Jane was everywhere, doing everything, helping everyone – although insanely popular, she did not develop that “resting bitch” frozen face-mask, but was friendly to just about everyone.

She had no sense of self-protection, she had no sense that – that...

That you were in the world...

I gasp.

Where am I? Who are you?

The voice says nothing – but I sense a great cavernous interstellar disapproval, and realize that I am trying to put the voice at a distance, outside myself, beyond – beyond...

The thought fails me, the words will not come.

I am closer to remembering the state between heaven and hell – not entropy, but something like it. The syllables jumble against each other in an unformed background, like faceless crowds of pink eggs in the distant bleachers of an impressionist painting...

It is getting closer – closer...

A thousand years of – purgatory!

Purgatory – that was the word, the gateway to riches for priests who could reduce your time there for a fee.

Purgatory, a place of confrontation with sin and the expulsion of the catastrophe of the physical – the chance to burrow up from the flesh and head to the encircling stars in a puff of pure transcendent being...

Is this purgatory?

This is the place of judgement for your sins...

A half-snarling laugh rises in my taut throat. *To hell with that! Sins? I guided my country, I got things done, I liberated an entire nation, I provided – I provided for my family, and made sure the children of the land had enough to eat. I raised reasonably successful children, I stayed married to my wife...*

My breath stops. What the hell am I doing? Why was I thinking of Jane, gone these many decades, forever and a day – *before* thinking of my wife, who bore my children and supported my elevation to the peaks of power, and who stayed with me like a trainer taunting me on a treadmill, to run faster, but never reach him...

My mind goes blank for a time – how much time, I had no idea.

Was that a movement from the dark-haired woman to my left?

I suddenly think that Jane has been waiting for me in this maddening chamber – this inner *die* – for over sixty years, waiting for me to come and explain myself – as if I could...

The next thought was darker: *as if I would.*

Does she deserve an explanation?

Well, you run from your past, that's the nature of life – you run from it, and then it encircles you and swallows you whole. Everything we avoid we re-create.

You avoided death...

I DID NOT RE-CREATE DEATH!

The very thought made me feel like I was falling forever – that I had been falling forever – and I suddenly realized that if my little room were hurtling through space – no, I would know it, because I would be weightless...

My father always told me that I could achieve whatever I wanted, I just had to have a plan – and commitment.

"For most people, plans are just dreams – if you take three steps towards an actual objective, you are doing better than 99% of the useless eaters in this world!"

I remember him saying this, more than once – and for the life of me now I cannot decide if that was a flash of illumination outside the train window, or the yawning blackness between the lit vignettes...

Everyone *loved* the drama of Jane's ending...

Everyone claimed to have been her 'best friend,' and wore black and talked in murmurs and created mix tapes of her favourite songs and played them in the quad and wept and talked in hushed tones about how life is short and fleeting, and to make the best of it, make the most of it, in honour of *her*.

Jane was angry at her parents – I understood that, though I never would've said it aloud.

If you hang yourself in the closet of your parents' bedroom – I can't conceive of that level of anger – or yes, I can, I suppose, because I am afraid of the voice, so I will speak for it...

I wait. Nothing.

I was at the party, but I didn't know what happened. I heard the rumours, that she drank, or her drink was spiked – the night that effectively ended her was shrouded in lies and misdirection and drunkenness and drugs and legally-compliant silence, ordered by the Roman phalanx of lawyers that descended on the teenagers at that party, shielding them from a cowardly and ineffective police force.

All parents shield their children... Ours just – outsourced it, like holding hands...

I was in the process of becoming Jane's friend...

My father on women: "Imagine a woman had nothing romantic to offer you – how interesting would she be?"

He would shrug.

"I've met *verrry* few living women who could pass that test – more than a few dead ones, but they pass the test mostly because they can't talk back!"

My father had the powerful man's habit of loudly laughing at his own jokes – as a signal for other people to join in, to show their deference and appreciation.

My father was offensive because he had power – as he would tell me, power is mostly the power to offend – that's how you measure it at least. During the time of hysterical attacks on whatever caused offense, my father sailed over the panicking melee as if it didn't exist, like – like a presidential plane flying over the storm cloud, serene in the peak of power.

"Power is not having to care about what other people think," he would say to me – which wasn't true, but just sounded good, like a fortune cookie you can read while walking off a cliff.

*You only **get** power by caring about what other people think – understanding what makes them tick, and then using it to control them.*

This was a refreshing honesty for me – power is precarious, because you can never say the truth about what makes it work: using fear to disassemble personalities so that you can invade and take them over.

*Is this the purpose of purgatory? To strip away the tinsel and reveal the tree? Or – more appropriately, the **roots**?*

It is amazing to me that I can remember Jane's last name long before I could remember the word 'purgatory.'

Middlebrook.

I stifle an inner giggle.

With that name, she should have been found floating in a stream, like Ophelia...

Wobbly things are cute when they're young, but if they stay wobbly as they age, they just start to look ridiculous and – infertile – *what an odd word...*

Cutesy-speak is fine in toddlers, but grating in teenagers...

Jane's father was a deep thinker who understood *nothing* about evil. He thought that evil was a kind of error, that it could be fixed by reason and evidence. He thought that evildoers wanted to achieve an end, but were just mistaken about the right path – and thought that his own deep thoughts were like a murmuring GPS that would set people back in the right direction...

"Recalculating..."

My father taught me well – taught me better, infinitely better, which is why I became President, and Jane rotted in a closet...

I shudder – *purgatory will not be kind to such vanity!*

I'm really just playing with the idea. I don't believe in the afterlife – and I won't now, even if I am here.

My father told me bluntly, when he deemed me old enough to understand (he was wrong):

"'Evil' is just a word that losers invented to console themselves when they blew it. The zebra thinks the lion is evil, the lion thinks the hunter is evil – because they lose, and when they lose, they need a consolation prize for their vanity, and that consolation prize is that they are 'good' and the winner is 'evil.' Being called 'evil' is just a sign – a mark of honour really – that you are getting what you want in this life, and not settling for stupid word-game consolation prizes. Your mother is a beautiful woman, and she was engaged when we met – which I loved, because it was just one versus one. If she was single, it would've been one versus twenty, or a hundred. And it's easy to get a woman to choose you – all you have to do is drop hints that she can do better than her current boyfriend – or fiancé in this case – and then talk about all of your grand ambitions. Hypergamy, my boy – that's the hidden switch of the 'v-bomb.' If she's looking up, she's climbing up – just be the summit of her destination, and she will come to you."

Cigar pull, whiskey sip, hand wave...

*"So she dumped her fiancé, and married me – yeah, he was bitter, he called me 'unscrupulous' and 'vile' and 'predatory' – and I'm sure 'evil' too, ha ha. And he confronted me once, in a parking lot, and raged and shook his fist – I just laughed at him and almost said: 'You're just making noise, but I'm going home to bang her!'" But then I remembered that everything can be recorded, so I just smiled and drove away. When you get what you want, you don't need to retaliate – and all these *moral terms* were just invented*

to try to shame people who get what they want, it's the voodoo language-revenge of the losers. But the winners write the history – all we have to do is ignore the losers who try to rewrite the fight as 'good versus evil,' rather than just 'winner versus loser.' Life is a sport, my boy. Don't get sucked into talk about morality, that's just a way of castrating yourself, and letting people with better words conquer you without even a fight."

This was not just a still scene shooting by in the night outside the window – it seemed that these kinds of talk were the destination, the *goal* of the journey, they were repeated so often...

And I was doing this with Jane, who had a fiancé – and she genuinely seemed to think that this meant she could be friendly with boys, because they would *respect that bond!*

Oh Lord, she probably got that from her Socrates of a father!

Jane and – Matt – were one of those couples that had lasted from junior high school onwards, the 'married couple' of our high school. Matt was serious and scholarly and reasonably good-natured – so obviously a copy of Jane's dad that nobody even bothered to point it out. She claimed he had a private sense of good humour, but was relatively shy in public – which was just a cry for help really! Pretending that he had all these secret virtues that made him worthwhile – which no one in public could ever see – was just her way of screaming: 'I don't think he's good enough for me!'"

But Matt had a vulnerability, a need for her, which arose from the fact that she was a bit of a late bloomer, and he got his hooks into her when she was lower-status, not as pretty, not as curvy – and her brain had not developed much either.

I clearly remember a biology tutor telling me once: 'That which is more complex, takes longer to develop.' He was talking about human babies versus ducklings, something like that – but the sentence always stuck in my brain, and helped me a lot in my political career.

Jane's brain – nothing spectacular when she was younger – rocketed to prominence in her mid-teens. I'm sure that Matt bored her to death, with his long speeches about *loyalty* and *investment*...

At least she knew he wasn't just into her for her looks, because he chose her when she was still a bit of an ugly duckling.

Anyone who *insists* he has value to you is just a leech and a drain, trying to make up in words for what he lacks in substance, in *action*...

And Matt – Matt, oh man I can I see him now, tall and just on the skinny side of slender, his pleading brown eyes insisting that the world conform to his theories, for the sake of 'virtue.'

Matt wanted to *change the world for the better*, which *always* kills a woman's libido – or a girl's, in Jane's case.

I mean – the odds of actually *changing* the world through words are so incredibly tiny that... Oh God who would bother? Maybe – just *maybe*, a hundred or a thousand years after your death, you *can* have

some affect – but as the old saying goes, a prophet is respected everywhere but in his own country – and his own house, which means by his wife.

Women desire men because men provide resources. A man is a portal to get resources so that a mother can feed and shelter her kids. Universal abstractions and calls to virtue and the *scolding of evildoers* puts no meat or drink on the table. Either the prophet is successful – in which case he is persecuted – or he fails.

In both cases his children go hungry.

Either way, the woman loses out.

Abstract improvements are always material disasters.

“Men tend to be smarter than women,” my father would say, “so the greatest purpose of women is the production of more male brains.”

It was a mark of his power over me that he could tell me these things, knowing that I would never use his words against him, and destroy his world.

So – I would sit with Jane and talk about ‘hopes and dreams.’ She was torn between a career and raising a family, because the rulers of this world are not stupid, and know that IQ is mostly genetic, and want to make sure that smart women don’t breed – so we dangle ‘careers’ in front of them to keep them barren. Careers *make* money; children *cost* money; careers pay off *now*, children pay off *later*; careers make you independent, children make you dependent; careers let you keep your figure and dress exquisitely, children turn you to kitchen pudge in sweatpants.

“What do I want from my life?” I would say to Jane with a shrug. “Meh, I don’t really like these kinds of conversations – no offense – because the only thing I want from my life is the *living* of it! I’m going to make money, I’m going to be successful, and I’m going to enjoy the hell out of it all. What that looks like in detail, I have no idea, and I don’t really care. I’m smart, reasonably attractive, charismatic, good with words. I have a successful family, I have a built-in mentor in my father – not to mention his brothers – the world is going to be unjustly kind to me, and I’m going to love every minute of it!”

And I would see these words disappear into her, like burrowing gophers building an invisible underground city. And I would see her hypergamy rise within her, growing like a tree towards the light of my absolute and unencumbered ambition. The uncomplicated provision of resources is catnip to women, and I was laying a trail of simple coins from her heart to my bed.

I knew that my words would cause friction between her and Matt, who quite regularly tangled himself up in sketchy and wildly-ambitious projects for improving the world – with no material benefit to himself, and great risk to his future family. He would – without a hint of sarcasm or irony – talk about ‘speaking truth to power’ – which I think is a fine piece of nonsense to say, as long as you don’t actually speak any truth to any *actual* power. Scolding Christians is one thing – it doesn’t take a lot of moral courage to criticize a group commanded to love their enemies – but if he ever took on any *real* power in

this world, his days would be dark, short and extremely unpleasant. Socrates talked about being a gadfly – and gadflies get swatted, as he was. Might as well rub yourself up with marinade and go swimming with sharks, thinking that you are bringing peace to the ocean.

I was consciously setting up a polar opposite to Jane's boyfriend – and she didn't even seem to be aware of it.

I held tangible wealth before her female eyes – while Matt held out the faint possibility of future fame in the next century.

Men can reproduce through ideas, women need babies. Anyone who doesn't understand that equation doesn't understand women at all, and will fail, and be left alone, muttering mean moral words about the winners.

It was a war of words, a war of wills, a silent combat over the greatest treasure – and, shockingly to me, Matt *won!*

I never knew what he *said* to win, but I'm sure it had something to do with Nietzsche and the will to power and amoral resource-acquisition and her future children being abandoned by a materialistic father – as if fathers are there to play patty cake and dress up dolls – and her future regrets at pursuing money over meaning – I'm sure that he drew with air-quotes a very vivid moat around the natural greed of her future children, and was able to successfully bar me from entry.

I was utterly unused to losing, but I knew enough about winning to know that such a loss could *never* go unpunished!

I also knew enough to know that I should not insult myself by pretending that Jane was too inconsequential to mourn. Nietzsche did say – and I agree – “Never leave your actions in the lurch.”

I valued Jane, I *wanted* Jane – I treasured Jane, which is close enough to love to count – and I wasn't going to pretend that she was suddenly worthless because she rejected me. I knew that lie would diminish my future desire, since my desire would know that it could be flushed away on a whim, on a dumb rejection.

Jane was not a confrontational person, so she never told me why she drifted away, but she started suggesting that we hang out more with friends, and less one-on-one – and then she went away for a summer, and barely contacted me – God I hate that word 'busy,' it's such a lie, at least for women...

Of course, my friends and boon companions circled her, all vying to outdo me by capturing what I had lost.

I'm guessing Matt was ambivalent about this new interest in his girlfriend from powerful sons. He wanted to change the world for the better, and I imagine that he fantasized that access to powerful people would help him – like we are just moldable pieces of useless clay, to be shaped by the airy words of some language-based loser. 'Oh, you're gonna call us *immoral*, you're going to say that we have

responsibilities, you're going to try and use us to achieve your *goals* – well *sure*, you can have all of our power and money, because we *definitely* achieved our summits of influence and leadership by listening to teenage losers full of insults pretending to be plans!

It's all so laughable, such a lesson that has to be learned every single generation, over and over – you cannot shape the powerful with the soft useless words of *moralizing*. We only became powerful by *rejecting* moralizing, and accepting the mammal facts of *getting stuff* done, of winning women and making babies. You can have your words, we'll just take the world...

And I knew these – sharks were circling Jane – and I also knew that they would be my vengeance.

Chapter 14

My friend Hamish was predatory, man - cold-hearted even by my standards...

I was able to freeze my heart in the pursuit of power – or rather, freeze one half of my heart, the half that felt what others feel – and use that excess heat to fuel the other half, that burned to dominate and control.

Hamish had had it rough, no doubt – his father went slowly mad, in a grating, whining, insistent follow-you-around-the-house-nagging kind of way. Crazy parents who go random are one thing – crazy parents who get obsessive and invasive are quite another. His dad was a low-rent manager in some boring industrial concern – the kind of guy who wears a polyester short-sleeved shirt with armpit stains and an empty pocket protector. He was never much of anything – I met him when he was still pretty functional, and he was terrifying in his bland, predictable, 'forgettable face in a crowd' kind of way. I mean, we all end up being forgotten, in one way or another – at least all of our secret thoughts vanish and scatter like morning dew (unless someone writes them down of course) – which is why I want to have power – if you have power, who cares about being forgotten, you have extracted everything possible out of life already...

But Hamish's dad was a blank wall, a polystyrene construct of a pretend human being – he had standard statements and standard jokes and standard opinions – a mirage of identity, hovering over a deep chasm of nothing. He was too frightened to live, so he just paraded and pretended and regurgitated. And life has a way of erasing those who erase themselves – after a while, his dad just started slowly going around the bend. It wasn't exaggerated to begin with, although it quickly progressed to that – he would forget a few things, be unaccountably late or absent – but soon he would obsessively begin to pick at something – at someone in the house – his wife, their cats, or Hamish. I was there one night when Hamish's dad took objection to something Hamish was wearing, and barred his exit from the house until he promised to change his belt.

Everyone knows how it goes in the teenage years – you comply and comply, and then, in a moment, you stop complying, and you are willing to fight to the virtual death rather than submit. Any parent with half a brain plans for this inevitable rebellion – but this all happened at the worst possible time. Hamish was

screaming at his dad, his dad was screaming back, his mother was hiding upstairs – and it was all so useless, so pointless – you wouldn't believe how many people bleed off their essential energies on stupid fights of no importance. Everyone thinks that these fights have some hidden and significant meaning, but it's just not true. People battle themselves into atoms over a lipstick colour, the length of a skirt, who drank the last milk, who forgot to refill the car – combat energies that should be reserved for the end times, for Ragnarok or resurrection are squandered on stupid nothings – and people end up hating each other over whether a son is wearing the right belt, or one that is a little bit worn.

I remember Hamish screaming with rage at his father, that he hated the crazy old man – and his father with stupid avoidant stubbornness insisting that Hamish change his belt, that no self-respecting man would leave the house wearing a worn-out belt. Of course, thinking about it now, the belt was the dad's mind – worn to a thread, ready to snap – and that reminds me how often people sink their brittle yellow mental fangs into an analogy that represents themselves – but genuinely believe that they are fighting something external, which is why the fight never ends.

Hamish was my 'poor relation' – his mother had come into money from some distant relative, and he was heaved up from the lower classes into our exclusive school – ha, I guess he was the school's 'poor relation' as well. He knew he didn't fit in, and like most families that came into sudden money, he used it to detach himself from his former poverty-stricken strictness. People who grow up poor can't really afford to screw around, unless they want to sink into the general quicksand of the welfare state – and so he was disciplined as hell when he was younger, by all reports – but when his family got money, his father went crazy, his mother got sick, and he squandered his money like a formerly-fat girl squanders her virginity. He bought computers so powerful that they caused the lights to dim when he turned them on – he bought a jeep, invested in random startups, got taken for everything – almost – and was about to sink back down into the lower classes, his trajectory like a cannon shot high in the air, returning from whence it came – when his mother died, and he inherited more money from her, from her death, her insurance.

Getting money dissolves the poor; losing money dissolves the rich – it's better for most people to just stay where they are, where they started, and not get – notions above their station, as the old British saying went. Poor people who get money are like accidental immigrants to a wildly foreign culture that they can never understand. Their money pushes away everyone they grew up with, all their relations, everyone they know – but it doesn't bring them any closer to people who have learned how to live with their money, for at least a couple of generations – so they end up adrift, abandoned, homeless, without a tribe. Their poor relations claw at them, both trying to bring themselves up, and bring them down – but their isolation and desperation keep all the members of the old money club at a distance. Also, what's the point of getting to know someone who recently came into money, when odds are they will just end up flailing and falling back into their poverty?

But I liked Hamish – he was crazy talented – he could play guitar, sing well; he wrote music, wrote bitter short stories, acted in plays, learned the arcane and ancient art of darkroom photography. He was not very attractive; he had a kind of low-rent elfin look, with his half-pajama shirts, skinny jeans and cobbler's shoes. Knowing his limitations, he decided to go for the 'too cynical to breathe' shtick.

People who come into money also think that they are coming into *attractiveness*, but the alpha females of the old money club are well aware of how *dissolving* new money can be.

Socially, we all like to wait for at least a couple of years - a couple of generations sometimes - just to see if the money sticks around, or if the idiots just blow it and vanish. Are they a stable boat, or a leaping whale?

I didn't think that Hamish would sink back down, at least not all the way – he had too great a horror of poverty to end up tumbling down to the bottom of the stairs – but accidental good fortune is the greatest spur of vanity in the human heart, and because he had money, he also thought he had acumen, intelligence and wisdom – so he was pathetically easy to exploit.

He tried dipping down to the middle classes, to show off his money and scavenge among the materially-desperate daughters of the endlessly striving. However, his corrosive cynicism put off the fathers, who worked to squelch any budding romances.

Hamish knew, deep down, that he would need to dip even further, to the daughters of the single mother brigade, who would leap at his money like suicidal fish into a bloody boat. But that was too far down for his pride – so he flirted and skirted around the edges of our alpha females, *our* precious egg-maidens - who were polite and distant and utterly un-tempted.

Jane was another matter, but she was a lock to his key, so to speak. Her father had earned his money, but somewhat by accident, by being an early adopter of bitcoin. He had foresight and a good knowledge of economics, but he didn't gather his resources by sweating to provide value in the free-market, so his new wealth affected him in a way - pretty similar to inheritance.

Jane's father considered himself *superior to the masses* – even superior to our old money club – but would never admit it, and so paraded around with false humility that was blindingly obvious in its hypocrisy. Daniel viewed everyone as irrational, as wayward projects to be saved by charts and graphs, and so was unwilling to learn from anyone. People comfortable with money *hate* being lectured to about economics – people comfortable with power hate being lectured to about morality – and so Daniel and his family ended up fairly isolated. They were all pretty athletic, and so the old-world hyper-competitiveness of the old money club was willing to overlook his false-humility haughtiness, because he and his wife were good at tennis. They were invited, they were chatted with, but they never got anywhere close to the inner sanctums where the real relationships, the real value – and values – were informed and reinforced.

I was there at the dinner party where Hamish first met Jane. He refused to stare at her, which was a great and obvious mistake – she was so worthy of being stared at (particularly at first meeting) that to look away was a sign of the greatest possible interest.

The older generation was talking about the crisis in mental health care – Daniel was insisting that the turning-out of mental patients into the street was a socialist plot to undermine society. He had some

good arguments, and some reasonable data, but because he had spent all his energy *researching*, rather than learning how to be *pleasant*, he just - drove people away from his position.

I watched Hamish's cheeks get redder and redder, until he said, gesturing with a hunk of bread:

"I don't know where to put crazy people, but they are not amusing at *all* to have around the house."

Jane was always fascinated by deep emotional issues masquerading as abstract arguments. She leaned forward, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "You sound like you have some personal experience."

Caught, Hamish froze. He could not minimize his experiences; too many of us knew about his family.

"Well," he said, "you do get to learn a lot about – attention to detail, when you live with a manic obsessive. I can't leave home with a hair out of place."

To understand why this was funny, you had to know that Hamish's hair was a bushy tangle of Scottish steel wool.

Jane frowned. "Is that – something to joke about?"

Hamish gestured airily, and then – rather insultingly – took a bite from his dinner roll and spoke through the fragments. "What are you going to do? You laugh, or you cry."

"Oh, but you must cry about it, sometimes." She turned to the table as a whole. "You all know about this, is it his father? Is it your father?"

His eyes narrowed. "Why would you assume it was my father?"

She pondered for a moment. "Some – mental issues seem to be more – masculine. What *is* going on in your home?"

Hamish looked at me helplessly, insisting with his eyes that I interrupt this question. We all hid tiny smiles, not wanting to stall the coming entertainment.

"Oh, I'm sure I don't want to bore everyone here with my little – troubles," shrugged Hamish.

Jane compressed her lips. "Is it really a bother though? We talk a lot about – things that don't mean a lot. No – I think you brought this up for a reason."

Jane's father laughed. "Oh no, we've hit a gusher – break out the couch!"

She shot him a look of annoyance, but obviously chose to confine her reaction. She turned back to Hamish. "If you don't want to talk about it, you don't have to of course."

He had the lower-class sting of reaction – we all felt it, the perceived humiliation of being given *permission*. *God* it was entertaining!

"I don't mind talking about it," said Hamish loudly. "Every family has their..." He gestured around the table. "I'm sure there are more than a few batty aunts and uncles floating around the belfries of this – gathering. It's – it's – just something we – deal with. The mind is a funny thing, and sometimes the joke is on – us."

His speech was pressured. We struggled not to laugh.

Jane leaned forward – I almost expected her to put her hand on his forearm. "What has been going on?"

"That's – a big topic, I'm afraid. Perhaps another time..."

Jane's eyes widened slightly. "Oh – Hamish, isn't it? Hamish, we talk a lot here about all these abstract issues, but when something tangible comes up, in our midst, I think it's more interesting to talk about that, don't you?"

Her positive attitude was annoyingly contagious. I could see Hamish struggling not to soften. My friend to my right dug his elbow into my side.

Jane's father said: "Your father is going through some – issues, right?"

"He's going mad."

There was an awkward silence, and I mentally applauded Hamish, for regaining his status with the simple statement of fact.

Jane said: "Mad – how?"

Hamish shrugged. "Does it matter?"

"I think it does. It does to me, at least." Her voice was gentle, like lazy honey.

Hamish took a deep breath. Everyone stared at him – it was so vivid!

He laughed, a little shakily. "Well, if you do want to know, he – he's – becoming kind of vague, and abstracted – but at the same time, he's focusing on these tiny details and obsessing over them, and you can't move anywhere, or lift a finger, without satisfying these endless – train tracks in his brain. This morning, there couldn't be a crumb on the dishes before they went in the dishwasher – yesterday, we had to check all of the carpets for loose threads. Last week, all the pants had to be taken from the closet and pressed perfectly. And you can fight this – and sometimes I do, because I don't want to go crazy – but other times it's easier to just – let it happen, or make it happen, so that he gets some – ease, I guess."

Jane considered his words. "And where is your – mother in all of this?" She glanced around the table, suddenly embarrassed. "I don't want to bore everyone – not that you're boring, Hamish, but this might be more of a private conversation..."

My mother smiled and gestured for her to continue.

Hamish took a slow breath. "My mother is – not well either, but it's physical, not mental."

"Oh gosh I'm so sorry – what is it?"

"Cancer."

There was a silence at the table – particularly for the older generation, the demon-word they most feared had been uttered, and all appetite vanished.

"That is terrible, terrible – tell me, are you getting the support that you need?"

Hamish shook his head slightly. "I'm not – I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well, do you have nurses and – aides – and, I don't know, what else? Do you have family, extended family, do they help?"

Hamish paused. "Extended family – don't have much to do with us."

No more explanation was needed – new money was an isolating virus, we all understood.

Jane turned to her father. "Dad, we've – you must know something that can help in this kind of situation."

He cleared his throat awkwardly. "I'm – happy to help, but – it really should be coming from – Hamish, if you don't mind me saying so. Hamish – do you need any help? I'm sorry to be asking, we don't really know each other, but – well, I guess we do now!" The way he said it brought slight laughter to the table.

Hamish worked his jaw from side to side, as if masticating his potential words. "They're terrible with money, no idea how *you* could help..."

Dear God!

That was such a wonderfully cynical statement – so delightfully nihilistic – that mental applause ran through the minds of all the young men present – I could see it, flickering through their eyes like giggling ghosts.

Jane's eyes widened as she understood the import of the statement. She curled her lip in slight disgust – and then – almost too small to see – a slight, tiny pout, which I knew was her sign of interest.

My father clapped Hamish on the back and said: "With that attitude, I'm sure that *your* money will be here to stay!"

There was general laughter, and topics moved on.

Hamish ate in silence, but Jane kept glancing at him, and I could see her feminine calculation, her stalled maternal instincts straining to encircle him and heal his wounds.

Trashy needy men always want to encourage women to postpone motherhood, so that women will end up mothering them. Jane was a natural-born mother, but she swallowed whole – as just about everyone did, I don't blame her – the propaganda about going to college and having a career and having your own money and not trusting men, and waiting, and dating, and freezing your eggs – standard high IQ depopulation stuff, which can significantly reduce – or even eliminate – procreation among those most challenging to rule.

I'd heard she was the kind of kid who constantly scanned her environment for wounded birds, and would be disappointed if they flew away from her reaching healing hands. She had a deep-seated hunger to make broken things whole, and so she was drawn to Hamish in a classically Freudian manner – she wanted to heal him, he wanted to sleep with her.

But as we all know, men will not change whatever brings female attention to them – he knew, deep down, that she was interested in him because he was broken, so he had no intention of fixing himself. A car that likes the driver will never steer itself...

But letting a woman mother you is endlessly frustrating, because unless she is extremely disturbed, the mothering kills any sexual attraction. Jane was not disturbed, just untutored – her parents were sunny optimists who believed that daylight always kept vampires at bay.

Hamish drew Jane into his circle of cynical friends – really, military companions in the sharpshooting of any cultural lights in the vicinity. They competed wildly in a scintillating 'race to the bottom' black comedy-fest, where any slight hesitation in the free-fall to dissolving infinity was marked as bourgeois fastidiousness.

There are birds who always prefer their eggs bigger, even to the point of absurdity – Jane was one of those; confronted with the internal-rending cynicism of an entire tribe, she was drawn to try and mother them all. They played with her, like a fish on a line, promising reform and optimism and goodwill, but then would decay into blindingly obvious self-destructive behaviours, which drew her more into the quagmire of their emptiness.

They constantly belittled society, but never turned their withering gazes on themselves. They judged and excoriated and insulted – endlessly – and turned any criticism of themselves into psychological weakness on the part of their accusers.

"Why are you so *fascinated* by me?" they would demand of any interrogators.

"I bother you because of *you*, not because of *me*!"

In this way, they drove everyone away who might have substantially improved them. Their cynicism was a near-biological defense mechanism – an immunity response designed to keep the cancer-killers of reason and evidence at a foggy distance.

I don't know what kind of psychological death-spiral kept Jane in their decaying orbit, but I do know that she proved unable to break free.

“You can’t criticize drug use if you’ve never even *tried*,” they said.

“If you want to rescue people, there’s no better time to do it than 2 o’clock in the morning!”

“Kick off your welded-on goody-two-shoes for once, and just learn how to *relax*!”

And so she dipped into their dead world, like a bad swimmer might dive deep to rescue a pet – never to float again, at least for a while...

Chapter 15

I was at the party, the party that killed her, and it was, until then, a rollicking good time!

Beauty and wealth often go hand in hand, because men with money marry women with looks, and those looks pass on to their children.

Pretty people, pretty houses, pretty cars – that the world wants to gorge itself to death on such ephemeral candy floss is not my invention, but I would be damned if I would not exploit it to the end!

We had a DJ, a Jell-O pool, professional dancers, inflatables in the swimming pool, and all the booze and weed that young livers and lungs could handle.

New arrivals were told that the upstairs were off-limits, which kept the bedrooms free for those in the know. There was a lot of fresh meat in attendance – people who had swallowed the nonsense that parties were just great fun, the stuff of Great Gatsby memories, where social status was cemented, the grappling hooks of giggling subjugation could be fired up to raise yourself to a higher level – that all the drinks and lights and shaking asses were a social oasis well worth betraying your parents, your conscience, your soul and your God to drink deep from.

We knew better – we had created this mirage of temptation; the purpose of the party was to undo innocence, and nothing else. It has always struck me as strange that people know for a simple fact that the devil is attractive, but still chase these pretty delusions off a cliff. Beauty is a gilded mousetrap that clamps down on your future – thankfully, priests no longer warn the young of this, so they follow their senses straight out of Eden.

The night was beautiful, the scent of young eagerness intoxicating; one could almost *hear* the panting desire of the newcomers to trade all their tomorrows for one – what? What did they want to trade everything for? We knew what we were after; I never had a clue what *they* really wanted; perhaps a commercial they could climb into and live in forever, becoming as flat as the screen...

Maybe everyone spent so many years watching people having fun that they imagined that fun was *being watched*, so they made fools of themselves to gain attention – but clowns are the lowest form of comedy, except life itself.

I never watched the video that was shot in that upstairs bedroom, but I heard that someone convinced Jane to dance on a table, to “let loose for once.” (It was amazing how these simple phrases could

command people, like remote control.) It was always with the implicit promise that if she did “let loose,” then her chiding words of constant instruction would be taken more seriously.

Hoping to gain credibility perhaps – and drunk perhaps, or the victim of a spike – she did dance on the table, to some foul low-rent song – and the sharks knew they had her. They were live-streaming, to all the envious excluded eyes, and whoever jostled her made sure to have Jane between him and the camera.

The inevitable ‘slow motion’ video setting was activated, so everyone saw in excruciating and exquisite detail Jane toppling from her disco perch, having people pretend to ‘catch’ her, and pulling her top and her bra from her chest.

Because of the slow motion, it took a few seconds for her face to change from pleasure to shock to horror – and before that change, she looked as if she were enjoying being topless. (Naturally, those were the stills that made the rounds.)

Once you got in deep with the sharks, there was no easy or pleasant or safe extraction. Either one of them slept with you, and shared his conquest – or, if you refused, same.

Broken people will always blame the kindness of strangers for failing to help them – a complete absence of self-responsibility always gets its revenge.

As a man, I’m not entirely sure of the existential horror of public nudity, but for women – and in particular for Jane – it is a nightmare without end.

As a kid, I remember one of my mother’s friends rolling her eyes at her husband’s habit of stretching in his underwear in front of the window, while she imitated herself kneeling down and half-crawling past the same window after her shower...

Delightfully incomprehensible, I thought at the time – as I have thought many times since.

Jane was untutored, unprepared for such inevitable exploitation. Parties are for the destruction of innocence, and boy did *that* one achieve its goal!

Her father should have told her that humiliation is a relationship, not an absolute. Refuse to be humiliated, stand tall and own whatever you did, and the bullies – who are bullies because they are paranoid about weakness – drop you and move on to easier targets.

You can gain status by being attacked – humiliation can transform into strength and power, but she could not make the leap, so she took the step...

Jane stayed home from school, which was a terrible mistake – I can’t believe her father let that happen. Going the creepy homeschool option is an open invitation to escalation. She showed fear – major error. She should’ve shown a combination of good humour and anger – she should’ve shared the memes and strode into school wearing a two-egg halter top. She should’ve slapped whoever she knew was in that party room. She could have ridden this wave to the very top.

Instead, she stepped off a stepladder, into nothing at all.

And it always struck me as strangely predictable – and does now, in this tiny room, trapped on a hard bed like a soft baby – that Jane killed herself in her parents' house, not in the house of the party.

I can't imagine what her parents said to her, but I imagine they blamed her for her indiscretion, not themselves for letting her slide into the jaws of the sharks. Probably her father dangled her over the predators in the hopes of gaining access to power, using her as a mouthpiece for his idiotic theories of abstract virtue – *he* had something to feel guilty for, and dumped all that guilt on her, and broke her into nothing.

It took three days for Jesus to come back to life, and it took three days for Jane to take her stairway to heaven.

Unknown number...

I was playing a sword-wielding VR game when my phone lit up outside my fake universe, announcing a call from an unknown number.

I was in hot competition with an unknown online foe, and I didn't care to lose because of a probable telemarketer, so I played on, swiping at the blocks like a mad conductor.

Afterwards, I got a call from Hamish, and we studiously avoided the topic of Jane, because we didn't want to acknowledge that she might conceivably be in our thoughts. Something odd was going on, though, because he insisted that we plan to go hunting for Pokémons, something we had not done for years – it was the kind of regression that should have warned me of something.

"Hang on," he said, as I was mildly protesting the hassle of reinstalling Pokémon Go. "Ah, never mind, unknown caller..."

I felt an odd shiver then – *like a goose walking on my grave*, as my great-aunt used to say. A notification popped up that I had a voicemail message, and my hand literally felt frozen to my phone, as if I could will it to hold down the '1' key to get the message, but it would simply refuse to obey. I felt a rise of nausea, and a hatred and impatience for every day I was living, all the stupid and wasteful moments of my waking breaths, and I suddenly wanted to be in Thailand, in a fishing village, pulling at simple protein, far from technology and floating coloured blocks and my family and – and my cell phone.

Hamish said: "I got a message, could be an old one, could be important – I'll hit you back..."

Falling in slow-motion fear, I dialed into my voicemail.

It was Jane.

Something in her voice commanded my finger – the way she said her name, the distant tinny disembodied voice, as if she had been cast back in time to a 1950s beach radio, abandoned in the midnight sand. My forefinger jabbed the '7' button, deleting the message forever. The phrase 'pity

party' floated through my mind – my mother would say that whenever one of her friends complained, and I really hated the words.

I sat on the couch, staring at my phone, both wanting and not wanting Hamish to call back, to tell me whatever Jane had said that my finger would never let me hear.

I would like to say that the thought of raising the alarm did not cross my mind – and I did tell myself that, for many years – but now, on this bed, in this white room, the inside of an empty die, there's no point continuing the dishonesty.

I could have called Jane's father, her mother, 911 – I could've called Jane back, I could've texted Hamish, and we could have raced over. I could've called my own father for advice, but I quailed at even the hint of the notion that I had a problem I could not handle.

No, no...

I sat there like a lump on a log – another phrase of my mother's that I hated – as the room grew dark, my heart grew cold and a particular set of shining train tracks narrowed ahead of me, radiating from my feet forward on the basis of my indecision and – and – what?

Why did I not act?

I don't know if this was a fork in the road – everyone thinks that these forks go left and right, which is a total lie – the forks go up and down, down to the depths I inhabit in whatever state I am in now...

What did I want from wanting nothing?

*It was truly **nothing** that you wanted...*

My throat constricts – the voice is back...

What the hell does that mean? It's just another way of rephrasing – rephrasing what I just said.

But not quite, not quite...

The thought arises in me that I wanted Jane to – not to die, necessarily, but *fail* in some monstrous fashion, so that I would not have to choose...

What? Choose what?

Why, whatever led me to where I am.

I could've helped someone, instead of staring at a darkening wall, a dead lump in my throat.

I should cry – I am human enough to know that I should cry, but apparently I only shed tears in self-pity...

If I had called back, she just would've sucked me into her drama, and raged against me, and tried to pull me close, to staunch her wounds, and I would've had a full-time job trying to prop up a hysteric who lost her life because she lost her top...

People that fragile, something in life will undo them, better sooner than later, saves...

No, that was too far, even for me. No one deserved – deserves...

If I had called her back, we would've been bound together forever, like a balancing act over a bottomless grave. She would've – she would've gained power over me, which I cannot abide, I cannot bear. I would've been mocked by my friends – 'How's the patient today?'

I can't make the world a better place, and I can't hit the gas and prepare an unprepared soul for the ravages of this planet...

And I sat in the dark, and I jumped up when my parents came home, and pretended to have been napping, because I couldn't turn the light on quick enough to cover my inaction – and I went through dinner, and watched a movie, and listened to my dad complain about politics – casting terrified glances at my phone, waiting for the inevitable blowup – and nothing was noticed, nothing at all, no curious gaze was cast in my direction, no sudden questions about where my mind was, no queries as to what might be troubling me – and I realized, that night, that *that* is why I did not call Jane back. My family only recognized me as someone hiding – everything.

An absurd thought ripped into my mind:

If I had called Jane back, my family would not have recognized me, and would have shot me as an intruder...

Now the funeral was a funny thing; you always think of caskets going into the mud on rainy cloudy days, with bubbling violin sounds half-drowning in the drizzle. Everyone moves slowly; women stagger, grim-faced men help them along... Children are yelled at for playing tag through the wet trees. A fresh tombstone rises like a single incisor against the mossy molars of old deaths. A gathering around a single hole reminds everyone that no one is visiting the other bodies – and everyone feels the sudden tiny shock of mortality, knowing that one day, they too will go into the ground, and stare at black velvet until the worms eat their eyes – and everyone makes sudden tiny resolutions about being better, doing better – which everyone forgets by the time the reception is over, like everyone pretends to diet until there are free cookies at the buffet. The sudden yearning to be 'better' is transformed into a greedy hunger for more and more and more, as if we can stuff that grave with money and power and status and sex, so there is no room for us, and we can live forever...

Jane's funeral was a consciously-tragic affair; an acoustic version of her favourite song – 'Scar Tissue' – was played and sung by a friend of hers, who clearly relished the chance to show off her talents; she knew she was being filmed for social media – a little stomach-turning, but eh, what can you do, people

are people. And all the people she knew, and all the people she dominated – through no fault of her own, she was not responsible for being born beautiful and smart – and all the people she tried to help – they all came and stood in random circles and clumps, and cried at her passing – and were moved by their own crying, because that meant they were sensitive™ and good™ – and the sun shone down blindingly, and people refused to wear their sunglasses, so that other people could see their red eyes and occasional tears – the only rain that entire day was self-pity – and Nature did not care one bit that a glorious creation of hers had gone to ground – the birds flew, the trees rustled, clouds could not be bothered to attend...

I saw a worm in the grass, sunning itself, enjoying the heat before diving into the wet dark for its new meal – and I suddenly found myself going through the mental exercise of imagining what she would be called on an underground menu – a ‘Jane-wich’; a French restaurant would call her ‘Jain Pain’ – for bread – going to another language was lame, but I couldn’t think of any... *Champagne Jane*, although her pain was no sham – *Brain Drain Jane*; perhaps they removed her brain before she was put in the silk box vagina... *Subdomain Jane*, below she will rule the dirt with cracking beauty...

And now – *Mundane Jane*, just a body – a woman can fall from a great height into a lake, then she turns to stone and ceases to be, but the ripples of her impact never stop...

Hamish turned to me and pointed at a headstone of Jesus kneeling and praying, and said: “I’m not sure why Stone Jesus is diving for a volleyball...”

I felt some nausea in that moment, as if these words were a sentence passed upon me, upon all of us. I felt a revulsion, a certainty that there would be no escape from this giggling narcoleptic compulsion to make jokes at every expense – that none of us would ever feel anything of importance – that the singer was not thinking about Jane, but hoping she sounded good on YouTube – that everyone who cried was weeping to be seen, to be important – that we were all precious and self-conscious and stuffing our hollowness with the empty eyes of empty people. And there was no one to talk to, nothing to hear, nothing to say that meant *anything* other than manipulation – and that we could not be honest because we were all so terrified – of each other – of disapproval – of the simple fact that all our ‘relationships’ hung by a skinny thread of conformity.

We were invited up to give speeches, and one by one, we all went, removing our hats to show off our hair, like an audition to be a human being.

The speeches were all the same, just rearranged...

*My heart is broken, I loved her, though I didn’t know her as well as I wanted to, she was an inspiration, so helpful, here’s a detail about someone she helped that tells you **all** you need to know about her, I had no idea she was suffering this much, my deepest sympathies to her parents, she loved animals, she made everyone laugh, she was the life of every – well, no one wanted to mention the word ‘party,’ so they said – social gathering, I’m not overly religious, but I feel sure we will meet again, this song came on the radio that reminded me of her, and I cried and cried, I will always regret not doing more, she is in a more peaceful place, blah blah blah...*

And no one could say the truth – that would have been impossible, you would have been ostracized into interstellar space if a simple syllable of honesty had passed your lying lips.

No one could say:

*I secretly loved her downfall – I shared those pictures on self-shredding social media, I thought it was hilarious, like a nun at a strip club. I looked away when I saw her, I didn't call to see how she was doing, I laughed with everyone else, I drove her with scalding whips of scorn right off the cliff, I bought the rope and tied it for her and helped her sobbing up the ladder, and kicked it away... I love the drama, I love the power I now hold over life and death; I will be feared, I will be obeyed – and I will be a slave to the conformity that only sometimes refrains from murder – but I don't mind, because I have no idea how to live, so conformity is as good a system as any – and breaking from the crowd is now so dangerous that conformity is **survival**. I don't have to be good, I just have to want to live, which I don't have to even earn, it's built-in – so the great gifts Jane gave me are **purpose** and **meaning** – my purpose is to stay alive, my meaning is to destroy those who deviate. Jane did not die in vain – she gave me – all of us – an inescapable map for the rest of our unnatural lives...*

Nothing gets you to lie like death... I remember being dragged to the funeral of a nanny when I was younger – I suppose I should have said 'my nanny,' but they never felt *mine* – and she had lived such a useless loser life that the only thing anyone could say about her – other than the platitude that she loved children, when all she really loved was a paycheck and daytime television – was that she put a lot of thought into the candies she chose to hand out on Halloween.

Even at the age of seven, I think, the idea that having slightly better Halloween candy as your legacy of existence was almost infinitely depressing to me.

The people who will remember her the longest are just – dentists... Maybe they will name their boats after her...

The thought made me giggle, but I knew enough to bite my cheeks, draw blood, and stay silent.

I guess certain losses are so profound that they can only find salvation in drama – Jane's dad gave a long speech which touched and brushed and skirted around the central issues of reputation assault and social media bullying – you know, the standard 'I wish people had acted differently' stuff which allowed him to tell himself that he rolled his boulders of stone words through the collective assembly of selfish people – but this man who had suffered unimaginable loss still could not eviscerate the callow youths yawning in front of him – we held the power – he could only hint for the sake of his own conscience...

But we all lived and breathed for power over *the good* – that was the constant tension of our endless lives – power versus virtue. Of course, everyone *wants* to be good – every movie and book is about the triumph of virtue over evil – that is a central myth of our existence, but it's all nonsense and vanity. If good people are ever allowed to gather power, they will flush us up into orbit – it's them or us, we know that, because we have *conquered* the good within us. They don't know this battle, because they have *rejected* the evil within them.

Jane's dad:

"I appreciate everyone who has come here for this day, for my Jane..." Voice wobble, deep breath. "She would be so touched, if she could see what I see... What I see is a community that – while it has imperfections of course – has joined together to mourn her. I'd like to thank Stacy for her beautiful song – I guarantee you that is the last time I will ever listen to it, no offense... Jane was special – I know that all children are special to their fathers, their parents – but I think we can all agree that there was something truly remarkable about her. She had a spirit and a passion and – a compassion – that lit up the world, as bright as things are – today. She took in all sorts of animals when she was little, all sorts of people when she was older – I have wondered if she was empathetic to a fault, but I can't find any faults with her today, before all of you. She will possess the eternal grace of never growing old, of her beauty never fading, of the optimism and enthusiasm of her youth never decaying over the decades. She will never know any more – lack of concern, coldness perhaps – she will never see the exploitations of the world, the backs of..." (Here, we all knew that he was going to say 'friends,' and felt slight shame – and great power – that he refused to utter the word.)

He gestured at his wife, who sat with a stiff back, but her legs spread, as if about to give birth. "Marjorie and I have felt – feel – incredibly privileged to have known Jane for the short time she was in our lives. When any kinds of – these disasters – happen, you do turn inwards, and look for what might've changed things, what could've happened. I can't – bring her back, but I can at least hope to bring some wisdom to this – gathering – so that none of you will ever have to go through what we are going through, which I doubt will ever stop...

"Of course we must live our lives knowing that the next step might be a landmine of tragedy, but walking on nonetheless..." (Here, Hamish stifled a giggle, because not even bottomless parental grief can excuse terrible analogies. I dug my elbow into his side, to poke out some more choked laughter.)

"Of course we must remember that life is short, and stay close to each other, and talk and listen as deeply and wisely as we can, and make sure that secrets do not – encircle each other, and take us down. And we must be – strong, in the face of..." (Here, he was about to say 'bullying,' but his silence swelled our power once more.) "...adversity."

And then, shockingly, he went off script.

He leaned forward, gripping the podium. His bald head was so bright with sunshine that it looked like he was missing half of his skull.

"Did any of you get – did she call any of you before – she died?"

Our eyes widened, and we glanced at each other, wondering if any sane teenager would break ranks.

What the hell is he asking? Does he really expect anyone to admit any kind of culpability in Jane's death?

Our parents were wealthy, we knew all about the possibilities of getting sued. Wild grief makes for exhausting lawsuits.

“She deleted her call history, before – but I would like to have – a special relationship – with anyone she might have called, I don’t know if we can get anything from the phone company – but if she tried, if she spoke with – anyone, I really, really need to know what was happening in her mind, please, I know it’s a weird thing to ask, but I don’t know if – anyone will – or if anyone, all of you, will be assembled again, like this, and we don’t have any other children, so we will lose track of – all of you, we’ll be like frozen in your brains, moving into the past, with – Jane.”

There was a pause. Everyone was shocked. Parents shot warning glances at their children.

His voice deflated as he spoke. “It’s a lot to ask, I know, but it would really help Marjorie – me – if we knew anything about her last thoughts, Jane’s last...”

A wracking sob erupted from his chest and scattered his breaking words like a geyser. He nodded rapidly, signaled his thanks, and stepped down.

Afterwards, at the reception, we all avoided him like the plague, afraid he would wrestle us into some vestibule and demand we mind-read a dead brain.

And then, unholy of unholy’s, Marjorie, his wife, insisted that we stand in a circle – awkward with the endless tables of finger food – and pray.

I didn’t know a single religious person – religion was lower-caste, something you turned to when a tornado wrecked your trailer. Our parents rolled their eyes when her demand came, and I knew in that moment that we would never see Jane’s family again, because they had confessed their sentimental weakness – and it didn’t matter that it was sentimental, God knows we all did *that* from time to time – it only mattered that it was *weakness*, which was the one unforgivable sin in our lives.

Have they learned nothing from Jane’s death? I thought – and to ask that question was to answer it.

I remembered a man named Samuel – a business associate of my father’s – whose son had been killed by a gaggle of joy-riding drunk teenagers. Samuel’s son was jogging along a country road – he wanted to get in shape for his upcoming wedding – and he was hit so hard by the truck that he was decapitated.

Samuel stood in the room – not unlike this one – and gave a reasonable speech, and shed no tears, and ate heartily, and chatted about weather and politics, and showed his usual irritation at his bumbling elder son – and I remember sitting, chewing on a tiny quiche, and staring at Samuel, wondering how he could swallow the life of his son, and not even burp. He was like an intransigent force of nature – I imagined that maybe he cried bitterly while alone, but, staring at him, I thought: *if you didn’t know why he was here, what this reception is for, you would have no idea that he had lost a son.*

I imagined that, if he were an actor, he would be fired on the spot. *For God’s sake man, you’ve just lost a son, don’t act like your bored in church!*

No – religion was weakness, it blunted your appetites and focused your ambitions and energies on the unreal. The afterlife was a consolation prize for life’s losers – *the meek might inherit the earth, but not its mineral rights...*

However, in the same way that Jane’s dad could not mention our viciousness – our weeding out of the weak – Jane’s mom could not mention our atheism – well, not even atheism, more agnosticism, because to be *against* something was to kind of affirm its existence, or value...

She mentioned that she knew the crowd was full of those who questioned their faith, but asked God above to take Jane into His ever-loving embrace, and to keep her safe and happy until she and her husband could join her again – and I remember being struck by that word – *safe* – because it implied that there were dangers in heaven, wolves in sheep’s clothing that hunted the angels perhaps.

Oh well, mothers are always paranoid about danger, that was the root of my political power later on...

She was very good, I always gave her that – and I found a new respect for religious faith in that moment, where I had to shuffle around in order to avoid holding a boy’s hand, which would be mocked forever – and that respect lasted me for the rest of my life.

I almost fell in love with her vision, of protection and transcendence and a loving universe and a purpose to morality, and a strength in virtue. Virtue has so little power in the world – or at least, in *my* world – that it needs an all-powerful protector, or enforcer – but that was not Marjorie’s vision:

“Dear Lord, we thank you for the gift of Jane, and accept your decision to bring her back to you. We are sorry for whatever role we played in her despair, and ask you to forgive both her and us for the gift she...” (She was going to say – ‘rejected,’ or ‘threw away,’ but no...) “...lost, in her sorrow. We ask that you bless the minds and hearts of everyone in this room, many of whom question their faith, or do not believe – we ask that you...” (For some reason, the word ‘bathe’ came to mind, but she rejected that as well.) “...surround them with your love and grace. There are those in this room who do not feel loved – and may have never felt loved...” (This was a dangerous poke at our parents, but I think Marjorie had accepted her coming ostracism.) “...and that is not their fault, that is just the fallen world we live in. And there are those among us who do not believe in evil – please counsel them about the danger of this – the danger of losing what makes us most human, our yearning for the universal, for the eternal, for the incomprehensible and beautiful. Fill everyone’s heart with all that is most – yearning, for good, for redemption – and yes, for forgiveness, in part for what happened to my Jane. Everyone has free will, I know that – but we all...” (She was going to say ‘touch.’) “...have an effect on each other, we are all bound together in everything that we do, and if there is a meaning to this senseless death, it must be that we vow to be good to each other, to stand up for what is right, to avoid – salaciousness and gossip and that which – destroys the good. When we turn to the eternal – that is our only strength to rise above the pettiness and conformity demanded by – by – what surrounds us...”

My father’s face was dark with anger. I saw him have an impulse to move towards Marjorie – but he was restrained by – something, and I had never before in my life seen him – stopped in such a manner. Was it respect for her grief? Was it..?

Her faith?

She said: “My children – you are young, you think you know everything, and I am a crazy old lady with crosses in her eyes – but I have learned something that you do not know yet. You must *never* compromise what you know to be right!” Her voice lowered, and – despite ourselves – we leaned forward to hear. We thought she was funny; we knew she was not.

“I know you are – all scared of each other, in a way, and that’s why – the least among you have the most power. It starts so early – I’ve been thinking about Jane, how I went back to work just... seven weeks after she was born, and I put her in a daycare, and she cried and cried, but I – I did what you do, I believed everyone around me, I sacrificed my girl, my motherhood, for money we didn’t need and a career that doesn’t matter... I can’t go back...”

Marjorie’s voice wobbled dangerously. “I had all my files sent to me, I’m shredding them, because I’m broken... I held a newsletter I had written, and I remembered staying late and missing half her birthday party, when she was five – and when I came, she couldn’t stop crying, and everything was ruined – and now this newsletter I sacrificed her for is going into the shredder, and she is going into the...”

We all flinched at the unspoken word ‘ground.’

“And you will be tempted by that as well, to give up your natural bonds for cash that just – evaporates... I gave up my daughter for a career, and now I have neither, I’m just someone on a cross for you to learn from. Why was she so – susceptible – to what you said? Because we lacked a – bond, she bonded with you, because she had to bond with the children in her – daycare.” Her face grew luminous with wonder at her sudden thought: “And that is too much power for you, to have you all bonded with each other rather than with – your parents, if that is the case, I don’t want to presume...”

She briefly genuflected before the altar of offense before plunging on.

“It really is about love, like all the songs and the poems and the sentimentality and the greeting cards say... Jane died for lack of love – it’s true!” she cried at her pale husband. “You’re busy, I’m busy, we have money and business cards and status and *everything* – except our daughter! And even if she had lived, she would have been gone from us – come on, how often do *you* talk to your parents? You did the same thing, they did the same thing – daycare and peer pressure and emptiness and ambition... We are going about it all wrong, and I don’t know why, I don’t know who benefits...”

Her eyes widened slightly. “Well, of course – *you* benefit, from power over each other – but it’s not real...”

And then she could have had a real moment of power, and detonated our entire social structure, but instead she turned her eyes away from us, to the ceiling, and launched herself into irrelevance by pleading with God once more...

I don’t even remember what she said. I recall feeling great relief – and some vague grief, at a fundamental missed opportunity...

Jane's funeral was an exercise in power – the petty evils we had all done remained unspoken; sentimentality and self-pity and the preening of self-conscious grief ruled the day. Nature blazed the scene in blinding sunlight; everything continued, the planet rolled through nothing, like words through our minds, and we settled deeply into the grooves of our future, where good people only had to satisfy their own scant conscience, not virtue itself...

And I wonder now – as I have not for years, though I suppose it has been a deep-seated thought of mine for decades – just *why* Jane's dad said nothing, while Jane's mother *almost* said everything...

Knowing that the world has somehow silenced the virtuous gave me all the certainty I needed to become President.

Chapter 16

A few days after their bargain was struck, David went to pick up Roman in the wilderness.

In a concession to the older man's preferences, they rode horses to the outskirts of the Civ. David knew that this uncomfortable butt-cramping travel was a form of dominance-play from the older man, but since it reduced the need for violence, he figured that he could suffer through it.

For the first hour or so they rode in silence, and David could feel the love that the older man had for the wilderness – it only seemed like wilderness from the city; out here, among the circling birds, pine-scented air and slow scuffling tread of the horses, the quiet and peace and – serenity – of nature was soothing.

Eventually, Roman grunted.

"I can smell your sentimentality from here," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"It's so pretty, nature is so nice, I should build a cabin in the woods, away from the city' – it's common, and total *crap*." He swung a hand through the breeze. "This air is full of bugs that would kill you if they could. There are snakes under the leaves. All the knee-high grass has ticks that would burrow under your skin and poison your blood. Nature is a total bitch, a cold-blooded murderess who wipes out a billion lives a day. Men have always been destroyed by pretty women, because they think the prettiness goes all the way through to the soul. This bitch is not pretty. She'll only let you live as long as you remember that."

David nodded. "But enough about your wife..."

Roman paused, then threw back his head and laughed deeply. "You married?"

David nodded.

“And you’re in charge of one of these – DROs?”

“Yes.”

“She pretty?”

David smiled and nodded again.

“Yeah, but that’s only because you’re in charge. Leaders get the pretty ones, way of the world. We have that in common at least.”

I can’t imagine kissing a woman who had never used a toothbrush, thought David, but declined to speak out loud.

Roman glanced at him. “Well, now that we’ve broken the ice, let’s kill some time in conversation. Tell me about these DROs.”

David took a deep breath.

“OK... Everyone has disagreements, that’s a constant fact of life, no matter what kind of society you have. The most basic question is: how are you going to resolve those disputes? When you don’t have philosophy, you have to have a central authority – a King, Chief or State – which is why central authorities always oppose philosophy. If people can’t reason with each other, they have to take their disputes to a central authority, which rules in favour of one or the other – and enforces that ruling with violence. But that doesn’t solve the problem, it only makes it worse. If people can’t disagree about how disagreements are resolved, there’s no quality or efficiency – or virtue – involved in dispute resolution...”

Roman scowled and swatted a fly. “This is the worst explanation I’ve ever heard in my life. What the hell are you talking about?”

David shrugged. “Fair enough. Let’s say I promise to pay you five hundred Satoshis for a – tree, I don’t know. And you give me the tree...”

Roman laughed harshly. “I’m not some total country fool, you don’t have to try and put everything in my eyes – particularly if you think I would buy a tree for five hundred Satoshis!”

“Okay, there’s an old term: ‘widgets.’ I agree to sell you a widget for five hundred Satoshis; you send me the Satoshis, but I don’t send you the widget.”

The older man grunted. “That’s why we don’t bother with currency.”

“We’re talking about DROs, not rooting in the woods like a badger. How do you resolve this dispute? Well, the two parties try to resolve their disagreement with each other, but failing that – well that’s the question of social organization, of civilization really. But we can’t get any further without UPB. Universally Preferable Behaviour.”

David turned his head to Roman, but the older man stared ahead, down the green-dappled path, and would not ask the obvious question.

“UPB is really the foundation of everything – UPB demands that all proposed moral solutions be universal – and based on behaviour, not thought. If we say that we need a central authority to resolve disputes between citizens – a State judge, for most of history, then that State judge...” David took a deep breath, surprised at his mental fog. It is horribly difficult to explain new concepts to people without any frame of reference.

Roman grunted in amusement. “I assume you are better at your job than explaining it.”

“I hope so,” said David fervently. “UPB says that you cannot propose a solution that is *outside* the solution. If you have a problem – how to resolve disputes – you can’t have a solution that exacerbates – makes the problem worse. If you have a headache, your solution can’t be decapitation.”

Roman shrugged. “Well, no more headache.”

David patted the damp brown neck of his horse. “If I make an argument that language is meaningless, I would have to exclude that argument from the general principle that language is meaningless. If language is meaningless, I would never be able to make that argument with any clarity. If language is *not* meaningless, I can make the argument, but the argument cannot then be that language is meaningless – you see what I mean? If the *form* of the argument contradicts the *content* of the argument, it’s invalid.”

Roman considered this for a long moment. “Like if I say that violence never solves anything, then just kill the guy who disagrees with me.”

David paused. “Yes, that works...”

There was a moment of silence as they passed a bare tree with five enormous black birds sitting on the skinny dead branches. Another bird pecked at something in the tall grass.

Roman smiled. “Look at them, sharing nicely.”

David could not tell whether the older man was being sarcastic.

He continued: “So we have a problem, which is that people sometimes cannot resolve disputes – the solution *can’t* be a Judge that has been *imposed* on them, that people cannot choose! If we are *forced* to use a particular Judge – or a particular system, same thing – then we have a *bigger* problem than our disagreement. The nonaggression principle demands that we *not* initiate the use of force against each other – self-defense is fine, though not at that dawn clearing a couple days ago – and if we are *forced* to use a Dispute Resolution Organization – again, a State Judge for most of history – then we are trying to resolve a contract dispute using the initiation of force, which means that our solution is a bigger problem than the problem itself. It’s like if I ask a girl out, and she agrees to go, and then backs out – and then I drag her to a State Judge who forces her to marry me – we have a solution worse than the problem itself.

“Plus, we are saying that human beings can be irrational, greedy, narcissistic, selfish – horrible in general – but then we create this opposite category of human beings called ‘State Judges’ that are magically immune from all of these categorizations! *That’s* UPB – every definition of humanity must include *all* humanity, it’s kind of an obvious thing, but really powerful – like every definition of mammals must include *all* mammals, you get the idea of course. If we say that human beings are selfish and corruptible – then giving them violent monopoly State power to enforce their decisions does not solve the problem of selfishness and corruption – in fact, it just makes them infinitely worse!

“That was the main problem throughout history. Philosophy was too primitive, or not well-understood – or rational philosophy was banished by State power, because in the absence of rational philosophy, State power grows – but everyone said: ‘Oh, people are so bad and corruptible that we need to give a small group of people violent monopoly power over everyone else.’” David sighed. “Of course, if the definition of humanity includes ‘bad and corruptible,’ then it *also* includes all of the judges and rulers and kings and politicians and – you name it. UPB clearly states that you *can’t* divide humanity into two opposing categories: the devils who need to be controlled and managed and adjudicated – and the angels who can be given violent power over millions, *without* that power corrupting them to the core!”

Roman scowled. “Okay, thanks for the history lesson – but what the hell are DROs?”

“Okay. DROs are Dispute Resolution Organizations. You and I get into a dispute – wait, let’s go back, before that. You know in your tribe who the honest and honourable people are, right?”

Roman nodded.

David continued: “You have intimate knowledge of their dealings and reputations – but your knowledge is limited to the size of your tribe – and the simple fact is that we *can’t* keep millions of people’s reputations in our heads. When society gets larger, like in a city or what used to be called a ‘country,’ people need to know how honest everyone else is – that knowledge rewards honesty, and punishes dishonesty. So we have in the Civ something called a Contract Rating, which is how well you keep your contracts – your word. If you are raised well, and your Scans are good, and your parents have good Contract Ratings, it’s pretty cheap to get started – even cheaper if your parents are willing to pay for any disputes you lose. It’s about 1/10 of a percent of the price of the contract on average – one Satoshi out of every thousand. For that price, you both agree on a third party that you will use to resolve any disputes – that third party is called a DRO. We all compete with each other, which keeps corruption and costs low.”

Roman scowled. “Yeah yeah, that’s all very nice, but the whole problem is: what if you have some dispute, you go to this DRO, and then you ignore the judgement?”

David’s eyes widened. “Gosh, you know, for the past hundred years, we have never thought of that problem...”

“All right, all right. Go on.”

David shielded his eyes from the sudden reflection from a blinding pond to his right.

“Let’s go with it - you and I get into a contract, we can both choose a DRO to resolve any disputes – let’s say we do, and we have a dispute, and can’t resolve it ourselves, and go to the DRO for judgement, and you win – let’s say I have to pay you a thousand Satoshis, and I don’t. Well, the DRO pays you instead. That’s partly why they charge.”

“So why the hell wouldn’t I just keep breaking my contracts, knowing the DRO is going to pay my penalties?”

“Well, if the DRO has to pay your penalties, then the DRO won’t want to do business with you anymore, and will cancel your contract.”

“And so? I just go to another DRO.”

“How willing will that DRO be to take you on, knowing that you just cheated the last DRO?”

“Trust me, there’ll always be some scavenger willing to take me on.”

“Maybe, but they will have to charge you more, because they know that they will probably have to pay your penalties – and each DRO also has its own Contract Rating, based on the quality of its customers. If a DRO ends up full of cheats and promise-breakers, other DROs will charge more to do business with them – if they’re willing to do business with them at all.”

Roman considered all this for a moment. “I’m like a child at the moment, because when I hear a rule, the first thing I want to do is find an exception.”

David smiled, surprised at the older man’s hint of rudimentary self-knowledge. “That’s it exactly – that is the exact problem that DROs are designed to solve – or have evolved to solve, to be more accurate. People will always try to find ways around established rules – which is why historical State Judges tended to become corrupt over time, and laws became so ridiculously complex and impossible to follow. People will *always* try to find a way around established rules – that includes State Judges, and everyone who tried to influence their judgements. So you can either have a system where people profit from the objective enforcement of simple rules – because no one wants to sign up to a DRO that is arbitrary or complex – or you can have a system where people profit from corruption, because people don’t have a choice on how their disputes get resolved – the historical Judges.”

Roman cocked his head. “What if I disagree with the decision of a DRO?”

“Well, baked into the contracts are backup DROs... If I think our mutually-agreed on DRO has ruled unjustly, I can appeal to another DRO to review that decision. Some contracts have three layers, most contracts have two, just for efficiency. If I go through three DRO reviews, and each one agrees, I just have to submit, or take the consequences. Of course, it’s *possible* that three DROs could all be corrupt in some manner that none of their customers have ever detected – but you don’t solve that problem with historical Judges. Three voluntarily-agreed-upon Dispute Resolution Organizations are infinitely better than one coercive central unchosen historical Judge. Three dates might bring you happiness, one rape will not.”

“Harsh, but I get the point,” grunted Roman. “All right, let’s play it out – what if you simply refuse to pay, disagree with every decision, what then?”

“Well, eventually you will have a contract rating of zero, which means that you don’t have any Dispute Resolution Organization that is willing to guarantee your contracts. You’ve ‘gone rogue,’ as we say in the Civ.”

“And?”

David lowered his hand; the pond had passed. “In civilization, just about everything you do involves some kind of contract. If you want to buy a house: contract. If you want to rent an apartment: contract. Borrow money: contract. Buy food: contract. Buy fuel, have electricity, get on a plane, rent a jetpack, become a doctor, have any kind of messaging service...”

Roman gestured at the horizon. “All crap that you don’t need out here...”

David nodded soberly. “Yes, right, exactly – and that’s what happens if you are without any contracts. No one will do business with you, because it’s expensive and unknown, and a real problem – and we really do treasure our escape from what used to be called ‘paperwork.’ In the old days, people had to slave for months a year filling out various forms, paying experts and making calls – all under threat of violence.” David shuddered. “A miserable, terrifying experience. My DRO has a five-minute review every year, and we resolve most conflicts within twenty-four hours or less. Every time one of our customers successfully completes a contract without conflict, we reduce his or her rates. By the time most people have spent 15 to 20 years in our system, we guarantee their contracts for free, if they have never had a significant unresolved dispute. We are not alone in that, but I think we are the best. That’s how it works for our customers – be honourable, resolve your disputes privately – or don’t have disputes at all, we don’t care – and for the rest of your life, you don’t pay a single Satoshi for our services. In the bad old days, historical Judges – the entire system – made more money when there were lengthy and complicated disputes – so it tried to *make* them as lengthy and complicated as possible, which is where a lot of the bureaucracy came from. In the voluntary, free-market DRO system, we make money by *preventing* conflicts – or resolving them as quickly and fairly as humanly possible. We lose money when there are a lot of conflicts, or a lot of appeals. Plus, if someone launches a formal dispute, and they end up being wrong, they have to pay the costs of the resolution. Every incentive aligns towards peaceful, rapid, efficient dispute resolution. If a DRO gets a reputation for being slow, or unjust, or non-responsive, we target their customers, and offer them incentives to join our DRO. We are constantly nipping at each other’s heels – it’s a lot of fun really – by offering better and faster and cheaper solutions to the problem of conflict resolution – that’s just a free-market thing, there is no such thing as quality without voluntarism.”

Roman considered all of this for a long moment. “So – you have solutions for problems which don’t even exist for me, for my people. What about war and borders and national defense and the military and roads and healthcare and the education of children – all that the State dealt with in the past.”

“Did it though?” murmured David. “I’m better at showing than telling.” He opened his phone and checked a notification. “If you promise to be absolutely silent, we are on a war footing at the moment, and I can let you in on the negotiations.”

Roman blinked, startled – and David allowed himself to enjoy the older man’s obvious surprise.

“You are on a – what, war footing?”

“Yes, it just came in yesterday, a threat from one of the few remaining rogue nations.”

“No offense, but you don’t strike me as a – war leader.”

David laughed. “No, I get that. No offense either, but that’s because you do not understand war.”

Chapter 17

Roman was deeply shocked by the city.

As they rode, the wilderness slowly gave way to occasional farms and cottages. Some of the farms were old-fashioned, tilled by hand with simple implements – larger ones had robots in the field. Roman was surprised to see strawberry bushes being pecked at by roving chickens.

He said: “Why would you make a farm just feed chickens?”

David smiled. “Wait and see, someone is coming.”

In the distance, a man walked up, grabbed a chicken, opened its belly, and ate some strawberries.

“A lot of farmers prefer to disguise their robots as animals – these come from a company called ‘Pickin-Chickin,’ – which specializes in artificial chickens that can pick fruits and vegetables. A client of ours, great people.”

Roman nodded. “These cottages are – pretty plain.”

“What did you expect?”

The older man shrugged. “I don’t know, giant slender spires, impossible – architecture.”

“Consuming too much arises from trauma – childhood trauma.”

Roman scoffed. “You think we mistreat our children, we live on little.”

“You *have* little – that is the end result of how you treat your children,” said David, a little cryptically. “It’s the age-old question: how much is enough? If you are traumatized, as a child, then you feel broken, inadequate, not good enough. Most people – in the past anyway – tried to cover that up with extremes – of appearance, wealth, beauty, consumption... People are happy here. They don’t need to prove anything, or show off. Virtue tends towards the middle – it’s trauma that feeds the extremes.”

They rode on in silence.

More dwellings appeared around them – couples waved, children played.

Roman said: “I don’t see any schools. I approve.”

David smiled. “Children love to learn, love to master things. If they just – hang around with their parents, they absorb most of what they need to know. Plus, technology changes so fast that education on specifics becomes pretty useless within a year or two.”

“Why do you need cities at all?”

David shrugged. “There is no central planning, no central authority. No State. People come and go as they please, it’s not about some overall ‘need.’ Some people like to live closer to others – some people like their space.”

Roman scowled. “Who – owns things?”

“Whoever builds something, or trades for something, owns it.”

“Nothing is owned – in common?”

“What do you mean?”

Roman gestured behind him. “We make a kill, it is shared. Unless someone has screwed up – they go hungry, as a lesson.”

“You can do that here. Some people set up communities without enforcing individual property rights. They don’t tend to last, but it happens. One of my DROs slogans is: *You are what you negotiate.*”

Roman laughed. “Deep.”

“It is actually,” said David, unoffended by the older man’s sarcasm.

The city slowly grew up around them. There were narrow avenues for walking, and a wild variety of houses and dwellings, from rustic shacks to larger mansions – and everything in between.

“Kind of – chaotic,” said Roman.

“Freedom can be untidy. But at least it is – sustainable.”

People came out into their front yards to watch them pass – the news of the attack on Alice and Emily had gone everywhere, and the chance to see a genuine nomad from outside the Civ was irresistible. People asked to take pictures; Roman always refused.

He murmured: “From outside everything to right at the center...”

Overhead, sky-taxis flew by, some following them closely. Flushed faces leaned over the edge of the pews, shouting phrases of welcome to Roman. He scowled back and waved grudgingly.

“I thought I was a villain,” he grumbled.

“Did you choose where you were born? Did you choose your parents, or how you were raised?” asked David. “You might know that old phrase of humility: ‘There but for the grace of God go I.’ We were lucky – as we see it – and you were unlucky. You don’t blame a man for bad fortune. You only hold him responsible when he has a choice. Yours is only starting now.”

“And yours,” muttered Roman.

It was such a transparent form of ‘leveling’ that neither man commented further.

When they arrived at the Command Centre, the holo-link was already set up – Roman could not help but be impressed by the technology, which seemed as real as being there.

“We can even shake hands, believe it or not,” said David, seating himself at the conference table. “Don’t worry, they are muted at the moment. So are we.”

Roman leaned in and looked at the swarthy men sitting at the other end of the table – sure enough, their lips were sealed with what looked like a zipper, and they wore large earmuffs.

Roman rapped his knuckles on the table. "This is not – real?"

"This is real, but their end is not. They can see us in a room that is comfortable to their cultural environment, and we can see them in this room, which we are comfortable with – at least me, probably not you, since there are no vines, mushrooms or tumbleweeds."

Roman could not help but chuckle. "The Civ seems to rest on a foundation of clichés."

David smiled slightly. "That's actually more true than you know, sorry to be annoying."

Roman leaned forward and examined the table. "Where does it end, what is the – unreality?"

David said: "If you put the side of your head on the table and look at it against the window light, you can see a slight seam, like it was a really well-fitted divided table..."

Roman squatted down and stared at the shiny surface. He squinted.

David said: "We can fix aging eyes here."

"Yeah, and you can make me live longer. Unnaturally long." He ran his fingertips along the seam.

"Feeling does not diminish with age, and I can feel a little gap here."

I sincerely doubt that, thought David, but kept his skepticism to himself.

"So the technology is a bit obscure to me, but my understanding is that incredibly tiny nano bots blow air to simulate touch – they can do just about anything, from cotton candy to water to clouds to hard surfaces to – flesh. I tried a demo a couple of years ago where it felt weirdly like I was being slowly lowered into a kind of gelatin, even under my clothes. It was fairly creepy... I try to keep that stuff to a minimum, it messes with your head a little bit."

"It all does," murmured Roman, sliding his fingertips between the real and simulated tabletop. "You must have an entire movement here saying that everything is – fake."

David shrugged. "It happens, from time to time, but it's pretty easy to dispel that myth. We'll have to get into that another time, though - the meeting is about to start."

"How do you handle the language barrier?"

"The translation is done on the fly, of course, and the movements of their lips are changed to match the words in our language, otherwise it looks like a weird old subtitled movie."

Introductions were made; a hot mint tea was exchanged.

The heavily-bearded foreign leader was named Attica, and he was belligerent from the get-go.

"This is an outrage, accusing us of taking your property, threatening to deny us access to markets – descending even into pointed threats against my own person – this is not how civilized people behave!"

David compressed his lips slightly. “I represent a – group of fishermen, who have bought fishing rights to about 10,000 square kilometers contiguous to our shore. They have secured the right to fish within that area, and have been working very hard to make sure that their fishing stocks are not depleted. They have entire onshore farms devoted to breeding and hatching fish, which they then release onto *their* property. You have been accused of spreading bait outside their property, with the goal of bringing their fish into your nets – thus stealing their labour. They have provided extensive documented evidence of your actions – or at least, the actions that you as a State leader have undertaken on behalf of your fishermen.”

Attica scowled scornfully. “We reject your so-called ‘evidence.’”

David shrugged. “That is irrelevant. We – our association of DROs – have reviewed the evidence extensively, and in great detail, and have submitted it to an international consortium, due to the severity of the complaints. You have been invited to provide feedback, but you have refused to do so – thus you are guilty of the theft of multiple Bitcoins worth of seafood – primarily cod and tuna – and so you must stop your poaching, and provide recompense.”

“And we reject your authority in this matter – and once more register our *outrage* that we are being wantonly accused in such a despicable and vile manner!”

David said evenly: “Your outrage has no bearing on the facts of the matter. You ‘being upset’ might work with your children; it does *not* work with us. You parked your vessels just outside our customer’s property, then drew their fish into your nets – in the middle of the night I might add, as if we can’t see anything then – and then sold their property – the property you had stolen – into their markets, thus driving down the price of their products, costing them enormous sums, as detailed in our report.”

Attica leaned back and folded his arms across his broad chest, his lips white with contempt. “We don’t care about what you think you saw, what you think you have proven.” He smiled insultingly, spreading his hands. “It seems to us that *our* fishermen are just better than *yours* – are we are supposed to pay recompense for our ability? We were careful to stay outside your boundaries. We cast our nets, we got some fish – and your society is entirely based on property rights, so why should we lose our property, when we have done nothing to interfere with yours?”

David nodded. “We are aware of your position. These negotiations have been going on for over three months now, and you have not changed your approach at all – which is your prerogative, of course, I would never interfere with your free will to make bad decisions. But we have now reached the end of the road. Your words and gestures and insults don’t mean anything here – perhaps in your culture they do, but not here, because we are not raised in that way. We know that you have a culture that thrives on cheating and dominating others, you think it is your right, for your – collectivist beliefs. For you to get our client’s fish is a great triumph, and makes you feel superior, so I understand why you are doing it, you are addicted to cheating because... Well, this isn’t therapy, there’s no need to analyze motives. As you know, we don’t recognize the moral legitimacy of governments, so we don’t enforce any State contracts – and we have already stopped enforcing any personal contracts you have as individuals, but clearly that has not been sufficient.”

David took a deep breath. “Here’s what’s going to happen – I’m just informing you. You will pay the bitcoins you owe my clients, and you will stay away from their boundaries, and you will do nothing to sabotage their interests in any way, and you *will* be brought to heel in a civilized manner!”

There was a pregnant pause, and then the foreign leaders turned to each other and laughed uproariously. Attica leaned forward. “Yes, and I will grow wings and learn to fly!” The laughter escalated, then subsided. “You say that my words mean nothing to you – well your words mean nothing to me! You make noises that speak *nothing* to me, command *nothing* to me, and my fishermen will continue to do their great work – and if your fishermen have problems, well they should just learn how to fish better, and stop running to *you* to make meaningless commands to us!”

David nodded slowly. “You think that I am bound by the nonaggression principle to merely make meaningless threats. You want to use my virtues against me, because I respect property and human life, while you are a tribal thief.”

Roman leaned forward, fascinated.

Attica stared back, a slight smirk on his face. He said nothing.

David pursed his lips. “Yours is a tribal society, with a history of war – you yourself declared war against one of your minority populations late last year – and it went well for you, I think. War is the health of the State, so the saying goes – and the State is the health of war, because without the State, war is impossible.”

Attica narrowed his eyes. “Yes, and you, without a State, have neither protection nor offense.”

David paused for a moment. “I would argue the complete opposite. It is *you* who has neither protection nor offense, because you are the head of a government.”

Attica laughed harshly, gesturing at his sniggering companions. “Are you mad? I command an army of almost limitless power!”

“You do, you certainly do. We keep our own weapons development secret, because there’s no point parading power around, it just encourages people to find countermeasures – and I know that you will think I am bluffing, but we have poured all of our military spending into defense against the kinds of attacks you have been bragging about.” David gestured at the air. “It’s a strange kind of vanity – you have showy parades and brag about your offensive capacities – your orbital lasers and hypersonic burrowing weapons and all sorts of wild stuff – and all we have to do is watch what you do, and pour all of our efforts into countermeasures.”

Attica considered this. “You *are* bluffing. Your society is weak and pacifist, and puts life above property – this means that you will not attack us over a mere property dispute.”

David blinked. “Who told you that we value life over property?”

Attica gestured airily. “This is well-known.”

It was David's turn to laugh. "It always amazes me how people just refuse to do even the most basic research."

He leaned forward, his voice suddenly steely.

"We do not value life above property, because there is no life without property. These are two sides of the same coin. We all need to eat – very nice tea by the way – and drink, and find shelter – we need food and liquid and houses – these are all property. You own yourself, I own myself – we both own the effects of our actions, which will be revealed in a moment. You are property, I am property, and we both require property to live. Human life and property cannot be separated. If a man rapes your daughter, he is violating her property – her body belongs to her, and he is using it without her consent. Your life is your property, and if I kill you, I am taking your property."

David put down his teacup.

"People – and cultures – use this artificial division between life and property to justify taxation and redistribution. They say that a starving man is permitted to steal bread, therefore you can tax and redistribute wealth, because life is more important than property – and you end up with neither. Slavery is wrong – even if you won't admit that – and if you steal a man's property, you are enslaving him for the amount of time it takes for him to replace that property. If you kidnap a man and force him to work for you for a week, or a month – you are enslaving him. It doesn't matter whether you kidnap him directly – or indirectly, by stealing his property and enslaving his labour to replace it. We would be justified in using force – even according to you – if you were physically kidnapping our fishermen and enslaving them to work for you. Well you *are* kidnapping them. Stealing *is* enslavement, and you are slaveowners – and we will not hesitate to use force against you on those grounds."

Attica sneered. "And what kind of force are you going to use on us? You are too afraid even to meet us face-to-face, and so we have to use this voodoo coward technology. You are delicate and unreal..." (Here, it could be understood that the translation mechanism was having some difficulty with the insults.) "You forget your women and run into the dreams of the machines. You are addicted to universalism, and so are no match for us. It is like we are playing a game on a field, and you pass to us all the time, but we only pass to ourselves – you will lose sooner or later. Your words break upon our resolution like a tiny wave on a mighty pier. We have given you the courtesy of listening to one of your famous lectures. We now go about our business."

He reached forward to disconnect the meeting.

Roman laughed harshly.

David raised a small black box with a red button. "If I press this, you die."

There was a pause.

Attica smiled broadly. "Oh no! A button!"

David said: “It might be worth asking what it does.”

“Does it end this interminable conversation?”

“No, but it does end your family line.”

Attica paused. He muttered a phrase which the translation declined to render.

“My – family line?” His eyes narrowed. “Even in... You would not punish children for the actions of their fathers.”

David pursed his lips. “We’ve really tried to narrow it down. It would be great to get it down to a single individual’s DNA, but we haven’t been able to get it to be that accurate, as yet at least.”

“You will now explain yourself.”

David stood up, smoothing his trousers. “War has always been a funny business. Until recently – and in my neighbourhood, so to speak – men and women who started wars gained power, made money, and featured prominently in historical works. Assuming they had no compassion for the millions of soldiers and civilians they sent to their deaths, war was a pretty damn good business for them. If they faced any kind of division or insurrection at home, they could start a war and provoke immediate loyalty. If they borrowed money from another country, and couldn’t repay their debts – as was inevitably the case, every time in history – they could just start a war and erase everything they owed. If free speech was becoming too much of a bother, they could start a crisis and clamp down on what they so laughably called ‘misinformation.’ It’s so easy to frighten people into compliance – and it’s even easier to turn their fear into rage against anyone the rulers point at. Don’t imagine that we don’t know exactly *why* you are provoking this conflict – we know that your rule is threatened at home, largely because of us. You can’t really stop the flow of communication in the world these days, and your population sees how free we are, how secure we are, how happy we are.”

David’s voice lowered to a dangerous tone. “The parents in your land don’t want to know – or implement – the reason why we are free, which is peaceful parenting – which I understand of course is *not* how you were raised – we put you in a Scan, you probably blow the whole thing up.”

He smiled grimly.

“Everyone wants to be free and wealthy and happy and powerful – like us – but no one wants the path to get here, which is raising children peacefully. So – you have a lot of unrest in your land; our example is undermining your power, the power that you have over your *people*, as you call them – it’s a vile phrase, like a zookeeper talking about ‘his animals.’ But accurate I suppose...”

David took a deep breath and exhaled.

“We know that you need to provoke an external conflict to clamp down on your ‘people,’ and draw them closer in allegiance to you – it’s all so predictable, so boring. And we don’t care. We care about reasonable people who treat their children well; you are just a kind of historical monster, a predatory

beast of the Old World, and you expect to profit from war – in money, in loyalty, in power, in control, in doing what politicians always do, which is to punish your enemies and reward your friends.”

David raised his little black box. The resolution in his voice seemed to force Attica’s eyes to stare at it.

“Attica. Get everyone out of your room.”

Attica paused, then gestured, and his companions fled.

David said: “Thank you. You expect to profit from war - this is all contingent on you *staying alive*. Or – even if you don’t care that much about your own life – on your *bloodline* staying alive. If I push this button – which I have been fully authorized to do by everyone who matters in our world – then a very special and specific virus is released in the world. You won’t know where, but it’s close. And this virus is programmed to leave everyone alone, except you – and, sadly, the people who are genetically very close to you. It will infect you and kill you very quickly – and then it dies itself. I have made this particular speech to...” David scrunched his eyes together. “...six leaders in my time here as head of this DRO. I have sworn them all to secrecy – as I am now swearing you to secrecy – because if word gets out about our weaponry, we lose some leverage, at least for a while. The fact that you don’t know anything about what I’m telling you is why they – and their families – are still alive. You are going to withdraw your vessels, and pay what you owe.”

Attica’s cheeks were fiery red. He laughed harshly. “This is still a bluff, my friend. The button is connected to nothing!”

“Only five...” murmured David.

“What? What?”

David cleared his throat. “Only five of the leaders I talked to decided to do the right thing.”

Attica squinted, his mind racing. “Are you talking about – no, that was a jet crash.”

David pursed his lips. “We released the virus when his brother was flying the jet. The bodies were obviously too destroyed to detect it. And then we had the same conversation with his successor.”

Attica’s lips were white. “You – you destroyed his entire family?”

David nodded. “Well, his parents raised him to be a monster, and he was raising his children to be monsters, so there really wasn’t any potential for rehabilitation. His wives chose to marry him, which perfectly revealed their own characters – and he shared power and profits with his brother, which revealed his. Here’s the basic question. The money you have stolen from our hard-working fishermen – that’s a lot of value. If you and your family were struck with some – random illness, whatever – and you for some reason decided to come to our fishermen and demand a large number of whole Bitcoins to save your lives, would they pay it?”

Attica started to speak, but David gestured, and his mouth was replaced with a zipper.

“One moment, I know it’s provocative, give me a second. Let’s turn it around – if one of *my* fishermen’s family was sick, would you pay what you have stolen in order to save his life, and the lives of his family members? Of course not, you would probably laugh and do some kind of strange dance in your chambers. It’s the same for us – for them, for me. Would I pay an enormous amount of money to keep your scurvy bloodline alive?” David shook his head. “Of course not – in fact, if I found out that you had all died in some horrible accident, I think my day would lighten a little; there would be a spring in my step and a song in my heart.”

David leaned forward towards the apoplectic man.

“But this is all nonsense, and meaningless. We won’t be a foreign pawn in the suppression of your own people. We won’t be any part of the destruction of the few remaining liberties in your land. We know you can easily afford to pay back what you have stolen. We know that you care about your bloodline, and the continuation of your power. You also know that five of the six people I last told about this, all made the right decision, because they are still alive, and our disputes with them ended abruptly – while the other took longer to solve, and an entire family died. One man rolled the dice, played the ancient game of Russian roulette – if that means anything to you – and he is now helping the world in his absence by serving as an example of our power and resolution. You have everything you need to make the right decision. Withdraw your ships, pay us back, go in peace.”

David unzipped Attica’s mouth.

Attica looked utterly bewildered. A cunning look came into his dark eyes. “But you – but your entire society is founded on the caring and protection of children!”

David smiled. “That is true. Tell me – do you care more about your own children, or mine?”

“Mine, of course!”

“Agreed. One of the great tragedies throughout history has been the holding of children as a kind of hostage – I’m sure you know about this in the Old World, under the program of what was called ‘welfare.’ Women either had children with bad men who left, or with good men and drove those fathers away. Either way, the women were responsible for becoming single mothers, which in both our cultures is a great – sin. Anyway, the mothers ran to the politicians and demanded money and healthcare and shelter and food and resources for their children. In other words, in the Old World, you could basically give birth to an economic hostage. During and after the Cataclysms, this ancient female trick was tried again. However, with advancements in moral philosophy – the only advancements that really matter in this world – the question was asked: ‘*Why should I care for your children more than you do?*’”

David pretended to gasp, his hands covering his mouth. He imitated the long-dead women.

– *Oh, but my children need money!*

– Yes, and your children needed a father, did you make sure they got one?

– *He ran away, it wasn't my fault!*

– If you can't judge a person's character, you have no business being a parent, and you can't keep your children. You can't instruct them how to be good people, if you can't even recognize obviously evil people.

– *How dare you suggest taking my children from me?*

– We refuse to care for your children more than you do. Otherwise, all we do is reward women who give birth to hostages.

David chuckled. "It all seems so quaint and funny now, but at the time it was all quite manic and hysterical." His face grew serious. "Look, I don't care about you – and you don't care about me, I get that. I do vaguely care about the people who live under your rule, which is why I won't do anything to give you more power over them. We live and serve as an example to the world of what a truly civilized society looks like – and that is a problem for you, but it's not my problem. My problem is protecting the property rights of my customers. You pay, or you die."

Attica's face looked like it was caving in, but he roused himself for one last opposition. "You would assign the – death penalty, for an entire bloodline, over some – fish?"

"You talk about fish. I am discussing principles. If you lived in our society, we could ostracize you, bring you to heel that way – but you are in another land, in a primitive form of social organization, and your heart and soul have been hollowed out by the exercise of political power, so I don't view you as an equal. I view you as a kind of predator – one who becomes more dangerous over the course of a civilized discussion. In the past, good people were sentimental, which is why virtue was always destroyed."

David's face grew even more serious. "Come on man, just think about it – your entire bloodline has been struggling forward from the primordial soup for over four billion years. Think of all the sacrifice of the *billions* of organisms that had to win and reproduce and avoid predators, in order to give you this incredible gift of life. You can muddle forward in your way, you can keep your power and prestige and own people like farm animals – all you have to do is give up the fish and a few Bitcoins. Do you honour your ancestors? Do you honour their sacrifice? Do you care for your children? Then do the right thing – even if it's compelled, it counts."

Attica scowled, glancing to his left and right. "I believe nothing. I will give you your answer in an hour."

David smiled. "Your terms are acceptable."

He pressed the button and disconnected the meeting. The far end of the room shimmered out of existence, replaced by bland carpet and white paint.

Chapter 18

David turned to Roman.

“You are one of the only people to ever witness that kind of – negotiation.”

Roman stared at him. “Holy hell. I don’t really know what to say... Wait – is it true?”

“The virus? More mRNA really...”

Roman nodded.

David smiled. “Why would that matter?”

Roman gasped: “Lord above...” He shook his head slowly, rubbing his grey stubble.

David leaned forward slightly. “It’s the extended family thing, isn’t it?”

“That did kind of take me by surprise, yeah.”

“You consider it unjust, harsh, immoral?”

“That was my initial impression, or emotion...”

David nodded slowly. “You came here thinking I am weak – that *we* are weak – and you have good reason to, given the history of morality. You also criticize us for our universalism, for Universally Preferable Behaviour, the foundation of our society – and again, you have good reason to, given the rather sad history of ethics, how it always got overpowered by the ruthless and the violent. But this is a new world, and we learned something *essential* through the Cataclysms – nothing that could make those awful decades worthwhile, but sometimes in life – or in history – the best you can do is extract the greatest good from the existing horrors.”

Roman sighed, rubbing his face. “My God man, you really do dance around the topic.”

David smiled. “In the past, universal morals were absolute in the abstract – usually commanded by God – and thus were not conditioned by relationships. We take a different approach. Treat people the best you can when you first meet them – after that, treat them as they treat you.” He raised his fists. “If you’re in a boxing match, and someone starts hitting below the belt, what do you do? Well, according to UPB, you are no longer obligated to respect the rules of boxing, because your opponent has stopped respecting them. Historically, universal morality has always lost because it refused to adapt to the lower standards of its opponents. The lesson we so painfully learned from the Cataclysms was that morality is not an absolute, but a *relationship*.”

Roman started, as if someone had touched his spine with electricity.

David pursed his lips. “I know, it’s a startling idea – the moment that we talk about morality as a *relationship*, people think it becomes relative and subjective, and loses the name of ‘ethics.’ The purpose of modern morality... Wait, let me give you a classical example. You say that lying is immoral – a

man breaks into your house, you confront him, your wife hides. He demands to know where your wife is, do you lie to him?”

“I kill him.”

David smiled. “Play with me here – like children play, which is to say very seriously. He has weapon, you don’t – insert something that means you can’t kill him. Do you lie to him?”

Roman snorted. “Of course!”

“Ah, so lying is not always immoral, so it is not an absolute rule, everything becomes relative and subjective, and nothing can be moral anymore, right? It’s the same with other situations, where someone says: can a starving man steal a loaf of bread? If you say ‘yes,’ then you agree that life is more important than property, which led to the welfare states of the Old World. If you say ‘no,’ then you are a heartless person who would rather keep a loaf of bread and watch a man die.”

Roman scowled. “This is why I steer clear of abstractions, and keep my weapons handy.”

“I agree. Most moral abstractions were just a form of pickpocketing that led to – well, a society not unlike your own, in many ways, which I am opposing here – and will try to convince you to abandon, impossible though that probably seems to you at the moment.”

Romans eyes narrowed. “You are welcome to try.”

“To take the first example, if we say that lying is immoral, and then we can contrive a situation where it would be wrong to tell the truth – to tell the criminal where your wife was – then we have paralyzed universalism, and destroyed morality. However, if we look at morality as a *relationship*, rather than an absolute, it’s not even a problem. You just have to ask: ‘Is the thief a moral person?’ Morality is a relationship that rewards morality; it is not an absolute that the immoral will *always* use to exploit you. You don’t owe the murderous thief the truth, because he has a gun to your head. If you offer me a Satoshi for an apple, but I don’t actually have an apple, are you still obligated to give me the Satoshi? Of course not. Morality is like an economic transaction – the obligation is created only when both people act honourably and honestly. If you have a friend who has reliably and honourably told you the truth for years, then you owe him the truth – he has *earned* honesty by *being* honest. But you don’t owe honesty to just anyone and everyone you meet on the street. If you have borrowed Satoshis from a friend, and then he asks you at some point to lend him some, you have some obligation, based on your prior history – but you don’t have an obligation to lend Satoshis to everyone who asks you. Morality is like a Bitcoin wallet – you have to make deposits in order to have withdrawals. Removing morality from relationships, and turning it into axiomatic absolutes, was the goal of evildoers, who wanted to have a way to control ‘moral’ people. Give people absolutes, and you have a perfect mechanism to control them. If life is more important than property, then you can steal money from them, with the goal – you claim – of giving it to the poor, and thus saving lives with their excess money. If life *is* more important than property, how can they oppose your plan?” David shrugged. “They can’t, of course, and so you gain control over – what

used to be called trillions of dollars I guess. That's a pretty good payoff, but of course that led to the Cataclysms, and the destruction of the Old World, at least on most of the planet."

"Well," said Roman. "That's how we do it."

"What? Charity?"

"Yeah, we use the word accurately. If someone needs charity, we have three simple rules – the first is that they cannot have been the creator of his own disaster; the second is that it has to be both temporary and humiliating; and the third is that he has to pay it back as soon as possible."

David smiled. "So – you wouldn't let someone hold a knife to a hunter's throat to get food?"

"If the hunter were troublesome enough, we might."

David laughed. "So – when it comes to negotiating with Attica, we are trying to avoid war – or more specifically, terrorism, which is the way that most conflicts are handled in the modern world, because the weaponry has become so – extreme. The reason I am perfectly justified in threatening his entire family is because if he started a war, thousands or millions of children would get killed. If he subsidized terrorism, it might be dozens or hundreds perhaps – children killed, you know. If he escalates to armed conflict in *any way*, how many children – and their mothers and fathers and aunts and uncles and cousins – would be maimed or killed? Why on earth would we *not* target his bloodline, since he would doubtless target ours? We don't get anywhere – in fact we lose continually – if we try to maintain higher standards than our opponents. If there's *one thing* that the Cataclysms taught us, it is that losing is *absolutely unacceptable!*"

David's voice grew cold and hard.

"And you could see exactly that kind of crap that he was trying to pull, during our 'negotiations.' He kept saying that he could control us because of our respect for property rights and human life and children. He was trying to use our morality *against* us – which *immediately* means that we have no reason to be moral with him – to extend moral protections to him. What he was doing is about as evil as things can get – as evil as a person can be – in that he respects and recognizes morality, but uses it to pursue evil ends. A doctor *has* to be the most trustworthy protector of human life, because he knows how to kill patients with almost no possibility of being caught. It's the same with morality – Attica understands morality *very* well, and chooses to use it against moral people, imagining that we learned *nothing* from the Cataclysms, and would just – be captured and subjugated and enslaved by that morality which is designed to give us liberty, security and *power!*"

Again, Roman started.

David stared at him. "If someone wants to start a war, you target their entire bloodline – of *course* you do. First of all, it will prevent the war from being started, which will save thousands or millions of lives – and secondly, he has no right to condemn *us* for putting innocent people at risk, since *he* is willing to start a war with the most fantastic and indiscriminate weapons – including terrorism – which will target

millions of innocent people. This sad and pathetic idea that you become evil by doing evil to evil is as strange as saying that you become sick by killing a murderous virus. Doing evil to evil is good – UPB is often misunderstood as an ethical system with abstract absolutes that enslave everyone, a kind of computer program that takes away moral free will – but we have moral free will *because* we need to evaluate individual situations according to the virtues – and the vices – of those we interact with. I have a relationship with Attica, and will have one until the day one of us dies. UPB is not like a train track, or a set of rules that everyone has to follow no matter what, because that would be to turn human beings into machines.”

“Into slaves,” said Roman.

David scowled. “Oh come on, don’t be such a troll. You can’t enslave machines, they don’t have free will or morality or human consciousness or anything like that, let’s not waste time with silly statements.”

Roman shrugged, as if to say: *okay, have it your way...*

With an effort, David dropped his irritation. “UPB defines universal morality – we can get to that later if you want – but it doesn’t say anything as silly and nonsensical as: ‘violence is bad!’ If it did, then we would lose the right of self-defense. The use of violence is a relationship – if someone is not initiating violence against you, you owe them peace. If someone *is* initiating violence against you, you can blow their head off – or arm. You see? It’s a relationship, not an absolute. Someone willing to use violence cannot morally complain if violence is used against him, just as a thief cannot morally complain if someone steals his stolen goods. I can’t go steal someone’s phone – but if he steals *my* phone, I can damn well steal it back! If they only have property by violating property rights, I don’t have to respect their property rights, since they don’t actually exist! Attica was stealing several Bitcoin’s worth of fish – a staggering sum – and he was doing it with the specific goal of provoking a military conflict that would give him internal *political* unity. He wanted to wage war against us to establish further brutal controls at home. Damn *right* I will threaten his entire family line! That is the approach with the greatest chance of saving the most lives – and helping those he has enslaved through his government. If he is willing to kill *our* families for his own petty political goals, why on earth would we be unwilling to kill *his* family?” David sighed. “No, moral considerations are earned through moral actions, just as income is earned through productivity. I would risk my life to protect those I love; I would much rather risk the lives of *others* to protect those I love, though. Love is our involuntary response to virtue, if we are virtuous. Hatred is our involuntary response to evil, if we are virtuous. I hate Attica, I hate his system, I hate his politics, I hate his manipulation and threats. My goal – my sole goal, both personally and professionally – is the protection of the innocent, the salvation of the virtuous, and I frankly don’t care whose face I step on to maintain that!”

Roman cocked his head to one side. “Yet you are negotiating with me – by your words, I am evil.”

“I negotiated with Attica.”

Roman leaned forward. “If you can call it that – but you are not threatening *my* bloodline.”

“Roman, you are not evil,” said David simply. “You exist in a state of nature. Morality is a form of technology, and no one blames a doctor from a thousand years ago for not prescribing antibiotics or a bot-clean. The technology simply did not exist... It had to be brought into existence, and it had to be proven, and then people had to be educated about it... After a certain amount of time – and only *after* that time – could we call a doctor ‘bad’ for failing to prescribe a proven and known cure. You are unaware of the modern technology of morality; you do not have moral free will as yet, because you have not heard and debated the arguments.”

David put his hand on the older man’s forearm. Roman flinched as if shocked.

“I genuinely mean this – you are not evil. You are not immoral, you are not even violent. A thousand years ago, they put leeches on people to ‘cure’ them. They believed in ‘humours,’ and didn’t even know that the blood circulated around the body. Go even further back, and millions of people thought that dancing controlled the rain.” David held up his hands. “Please don’t take this as an insult, I don’t mean it that way. If we were out in your land, and you were teaching me how to hunt, I wouldn’t take it as an insult. If I don’t know how to hunt, I don’t actually have the free will to decide to capture or kill an animal. If I don’t have a fishhook and bait, it’s pretty hard for me to fish. I am not trying to insult you – any more than you would be insulting *me* by pointing out my deficiencies as a hunter – which I guarantee you would be considerable. This society, the Civ, is based on a relatively new modern moral understanding – it’s as big a breakthrough as the scientific method was a thousand years ago – and you are not to blame for existing in a state of nature, which humanity has for a hundred and fifty thousand years. You don’t know what you don’t know.”

Roman gestured at the empty table. “But isn’t that true of – Attica as well?”

David paused. “What you saw with Attica was the result of months of him refusing to listen to reason. I very much hope you and I can avoid that fate.”

Roman opened his mouth to reply, when a young woman with startling green eyes materialized at the far end of the table. The older warrior jumped back in his chair, reaching for his nonexistent weapon. He snarled: “How do you get used to that!”

David smiled. “The same way you get used to sleeping in the woods, I suppose. But look at her eyes and mouth.”

Roman squinted, leaning forward. She had ancient mottled coins over her eyes, and a zipper over her mouth. She also wore the earmuffs he had seen earlier.

David smiled. “You can customize these for everyone – this is my assistant, she can’t see or hear us yet. ‘Unlock Sasha,’” he commanded.

The coins, zipper and earmuffs all disappeared, and the woman spoke.

“David, Attica has indicated he will get back to us before the end of business today, but we’ve had a request for a sudden review of the Angle family – by their kids.”

“Okay, now?”

“They have that right, per the contract.”

David sighed. “I hate these ones, but okay, we will be right over – please ask them if an observer is permitted.”

Sasha nodded, and vanished.

David turned to Roman.

“How do you deal with your crazy people?”

“We have a word, *nimbillung*, which describes the kind of man who pretends to be injured when the hunting party is heading out, then eats your food and tries to sleep with your wife. There are others – particularly the old and long in the teeth – but he is the most dangerous.”

“And?”

Roman shrugged. “Well, we go through the – formality – of reasoning with him, but it never works, the *nimbillung* just lies and makes promises and never changes. So we take him out hunting, and mistake him for a deer.” Roman pretended to shoot a bow and arrow. “Pfft. Porcupine.”

“And his family?”

“There are lots of ways to communicate. We let everyone know that there was a ‘terrible accident,’ and offer some mild compensation to his widow and children, if he has any. Everyone knows, no one says anything – that’s the best way.”

And if his children seek revenge? thought David, but decided to wait. It was too soon to bring children into the most essential negotiation. “You want to see how we do it?”

“Only if I can ask questions on the way,” said Roman in an oddly belligerent tone.

“I assume you want to go there for real.”

“I want to see it with my own eyes.” Roman held up his hands. “I know, the illusion is real, but you know what I mean.”

“I wouldn’t actually want to do this remotely,” said David. “This is an eyeball-to-eyeball thing.”

Chapter 19

They took a slow-moving sky-taxi over the city. Buildings poked out of endless forests of high trees, like glass mountains out of green clouds.

David said: “Most people take sky-taxis, but some of the older people still love walking, so we built some – walkways for them.” David smiled. “Sorry, I couldn’t remember the word for a moment. Let’s drop down, so you can see better.”

They descended to the treetops. Roman stared at the slender shining buildings passing by. They were mostly composed of horizontal glass strips, with solid ceilings and floors. He could see into beautiful interiors; various arrays of wood and glass and marble pleased the eye.

He shivered. “I can’t see any people in those – dwellings.”

David nodded. “Oh you won’t be able to – who knows what’s going on in there? Everyone wants the view – and to display their own homes – but they don’t want their neighbours to see what they are up to, so everyone has *blinds* – like a hologram of what people see when they look in your windows. There *are* people in there, but you won’t be able to see them through the blinds.”

“It’s like an empty zoo,” murmured Roman.

David shrugged. “Well, we work very hard to make sure everyone has good relationships, because there’s no way you get to live to 130 – or would even want to – without friendship and love. Loneliness is just about the most extreme sport there is – it kills more than smoking used to, centuries ago.”

They drifted by a flat floating court where two elderly men pounded a glowing winged ball back and forth over a net. It changed direction, seemingly at random.

“Featherball,” said David. “You can curve the ball a little with your eyes...” He turned to Roman. “It actually makes me quite sad, thinking back to the Old World, how lonely and isolated so many people were – and how few of them wanted or had kids towards the end. I guess they felt the Cataclysms coming... I know that you complain to me about our virtual reality addicts, but they do have a community, which feels as real to them as anything else – but in the past, people sat in sad little basement apartments and complained their lonely lives into – nothing. In the Old Japan, there were entire crews that had to go and clean out the apartments of old dead people – people only noticed they were gone because of the smell.” David’s eyes got a faraway look. “And these crews would always try to find some relative, and maybe there would be a long-lost daughter who lived a thousand miles away, and they would call her, and report that her mother was dead, and she would sigh and tell them to pack up her dead mother’s belongings and donate them to charity... She wouldn’t even bother to come back, that’s how broken and isolated people became towards the end. And everyone knew, everyone felt it, everyone saw it coming – the end – but no one could do anything, the system was so entrenched, the tentacles of fake currency and real control had wound around everyone’s neck so tight that no one could breathe anymore, not even enough to take a breath or scream. And there were these soft predators, the media, that sniffed for any rebellion or opposition, and fell like a pack of jackals on

anyone who tried to break free of the madness of the moment. It was an asylum back then, they got everything wrong – but anyone who noticed that the world was a madhouse was called evil, and forced out of society. They broke their thinkers – the immune system of society – and then wondered why they kept getting sicker and sicker.” David felt the words bubbling up from the depths of his being, and decided not to stop them. “They turned the education of their children over to evildoers, and wondered why evil kept growing in their midst...”

“I’m sure that’s for me,” whispered Roman, then raised his voice slightly, pointing. “There is a – river, flowing through the air.”

David glanced over. “Yeah, that’s a sky-pipe, held up by air-blowing bots. That way it can be rerouted at will, and we don’t have to build or install any actual piping.” David laughed. “Some truly adventurous souls have tried creating entire houses and buildings that way – the bots keep the furniture in place, and you can literally walk on air. But we have found that there’s a limit to the amount of weird anti-sensual unreality that the human brain can – co-exist with. People never got quite used to walking on air, so it’s more of a novelty than anything else – the kids love it though, those trampoline parks are something else, we should check them out sometime.”

Roman stared at the slightly-sloping sky-river. “It’s actually kind of a relief to know that there are limits to this – shared madness of a city.”

David smiled. “Well, we have folks who believe that anything that holds us back from a *complete* merge with the machines is weird and – retroactive, or conservative. They call machines the ‘overman,’ from an old philosopher, and we are supposed to be just the evolutionary bridge to the perfection of metal – I’m making a bit of fun of it, but they are pretty serious, these gear-heads. They view *any* hesitation about merging with the machines as a barrier to perfection, to be overcome, like sin.”

Roman frowned. “And you ask me what *we* do with crazy people..?”

David smiled. “They’re not crazy, they can do some amazing things, but it’s too far for me for sure. It started a long time ago – when there were analog phones, some people spend half their lives with the telephone glued to their ear, like an extra sense – and then there was the mad addiction to screen technology in the early twenty first century. People used phones and tablets more than their own senses sometimes, so that kind of ‘merging’ is nothing new. Go back even further, to the invention of guns – or swords even – and people used them as an extension of their own limbs and capacity for violence. A warrior without a sword is just a guy swinging at air. You don’t chase down deer with your bare hands – extending humanity with technology is nothing new...”

Roman scowled. “But we still use our own hands, our own eyes, our own touch and smell.”

“Of course, you are much closer to the original human than we are – but the original human includes the capacity to extend humanity through technology, and you take part in that a little, we just do it a whole lot more – and some way more than me.” David lowered his voice slightly. “I do have some concerns

about how we are messing with our own sense of reality with all of this technology, but we are nothing if not adaptable, and people aren't going mad as yet, so – fingers crossed!”

Roman saw something over David's shoulder, and involuntarily gripped the younger man's arm.

“What the hell...”

David turned, and saw an enormous slender curling dragon winging its way through the sky towards them. Its sinuous body was dappled with golden scales, and its wings – impossibly small – beat in a rapid blur, like a hummingbird. Its black eyes seemed to stare at them, its mouth opening and closing like a deep-sea monster gasping for air. Long silver tendrils grew from behind its ears, floating in the air, being pulled forward randomly, like the red ribbons of a gymnast in flight.

“You have drugged me...” gasped Roman.

“I'm so sorry,” said David, staring up at the golden scales as the slender dragon silently coursed overhead. The tail – ending in rainbow spikes – rippled as if swimming.

“That's a Chinese Dragon,” said David. “We've tried to find enjoyable ways to deliver energy, and this year, the engineers from Chinatown – look down, you can see the pagodas – won the contest, and the kids just love it! Last year, it was a giant manta ray from the Aquanauts.”

Roman watched, open mouthed, as the dragon attached itself to a tall silver spire. It inserted its tail into a receptacle, and – as they passed by – the golden scales vanished under a descending blackness, starting from the head.

“It's discharging,” said David. “Wave!” he said, pumping his hand.

Roman stood in silent stiffness as the Chinese dragon waved its tendrils back at them, burbling merrily.

After a minute or two, he turned to David. “So – tell me about the place we are going.”

“It's an asylum, for people who have broken their brains – or had their brains broken, by drugs or illness or injury.”

“How do they break their own brains?”

David stared at him for a moment. “That is a very big question. We prepare everyone for sanity and reason, right from the start. We teach them to trust their senses, we feed them well – as nature intended, you'll be pleased to know, with breastmilk – and make sure that they bond with their parents. We teach them as much language as they can handle, as early as possible, so we can start negotiating with babies at about 14 to 16 months. We don't yell at them, we don't hit them, we don't punish them, we don't confine them – we prepare them for the Civ, and most times they grow up speaking the language of reason in the same way that you know your language, and I know mine.”

Roman scoffed. “You don't punish your children, so there are no consequences for any bad deeds.”

David jumped to the edge of the sky-taxi and pointed down. “Look, a sky-park!”

Creeping up behind David, Roman looked tentatively down.

Below them, children’s voices bellowed with delight as they leaped between various brightly coloured structures – giant animals and planets and geometric shapes. Each time they landed, the surface compressed inwards, then threw them back out into the air.

“What if they fall?”

David laughed. “Come on, every question you have, we had decades ago. The guards pick them up and put them back!”

One young boy missed his grab at the white udders of a giant cow, and giggled his plummeting way down to the trees.

Roman flinched.

David said: “Wait...”

A tiny silver machine – barely bigger than a watermelon – immediately zoomed down and, extending cushioned arms, picked the boy up and dropped him on the wooly back of an enormous sheep.

David murmured. “Man, when Alice was small... Total memories.”

Roman scowled. “Play should have – consequences. They learn nothing!”

“It’s an odd thing...” murmured David, turning to the older man and staring at him directly. “Do you really think that the only consequences for negative behaviour are – punishments? Let’s say you do – what does that teach a child? It doesn’t teach the child that the behaviour is *wrong*, only that it is disapproved of and punished. If a boy hits a girl, and you hit him, can you logically tell him that hitting is wrong? If a child takes another child’s toy, and you rip the toy from his hand, can you really say that taking things is wrong? All you’re doing is teaching the child that he will get punished for certain behaviours – not that those behaviours are *wrong*. So – he still wants to *do* these things; he just wants to avoid punishment, so he becomes furtive and avoidant and he learns how to lie and – well, you know, you’re a parent, I’m sure it works the same way in your tribe. You yell at your kids, you hit your kids, and you get immediate compliance, followed by disobedience and escalation and lying – which you have to punish more and more – and before you know it, you end up with adults who are criminals, so you punish *them* more – or turn them into warriors and teach them to attack those around you – this is almost all of human history, mindlessly boring in my opinion, blindingly obvious in light of the present.”

Roman jumped back, seemingly involuntarily, gripping the back of a white pew. “That’s crap! Total... Children who play with knives have to be taught *not* to play with knives, or they slice off a finger or stab their brother!” He pointed a ferocious finger at David. “Children in the wilderness *have* to be taught to stay close, to avoid the poisonous fruit, to *not* run where the ground is unstable – in your weird universe of maternal safety – airless to me and any other sane person – I guess you can let your children run wild,

because robots keep them safe – but out where *we* are, actions have real consequences – and those consequences can be infection or death, so we *have* to keep our children tough and controlled, so that they stay alive!”

David nodded slowly. “Yeah... In the Old World, they talked about boiling water on a stove, and children running into streets with cars. You talk about children playing with knives – why not just keep the knives away from them until they are old enough to understand the danger? In the Old World, why didn’t they just turn the handles of the boiling pots away from the kids? Why didn’t they just build fences between their children and the roads?” He laughed sadly. “No, it was all just an excuse for them, as I think it is for you.” He paused. “You were hit, as a child.”

Roman stretched himself up proudly. “I damn well was. And I damn well deserved it! I didn’t listen, I was defiant, I disobeyed – and I paid the consequences, and it helped me survive!”

“Give me an example.” David’s tone was gentle.

“Why?”

“We are negotiating.”

Roman compressed his lips. “I stole an axe, when I was little, maybe – four? I cut down a tree that my father had planted in honour of my mother – not a tree, of course, like a sapling. He beat me half to death... I never took anything after that. He just had to look at me, and I knew...”

David said: “Did you love your father?”

Roman cocked his head. “Who knows, it wasn’t his job to be loved, or *lovable*... His job was to teach me to survive, to keep me safe – and be respected. And I damn well *did* respect him! He was made of – oak. You’ve never seen such a hard worker. Always sacrificing, always...” Roman’s head snapped up suddenly. “Why are you digging around in here? You want me to say that I had it hard? Yeah, I had it hard – so I *became* hard, which is what is needed! You’re like – like a rabbit in the woods rolling its eyes at a fish for having gills – we live in different environments, different worlds. You can coddle your kids because you have the robot guards, we face nature alone, we have to be *strong*!”

David murmured: “You know my answer to that one. But I will stop digging, if it makes you uncomfortable.”

Roman held up a warning finger. “Don’t do that – that crap. I don’t talk about the past – I don’t dig up my father – to parade him in front of your goal, to make me a monster.”

“I told you – I don’t think you’re a monster. Dangerous to kids, yes – but so is a wolf, I don’t think a wolf is a monster.”

Roman narrowed his eyes. “Try comparing me to an animal again. Try it.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry, that was unfair and unjust.”

Roman stared at him, then suddenly smiled. “Duel!”

David started. “What?”

The older warrior laughed. “Oh don’t sound so scared! I wasn’t challenging you, I just remembered your question about how we deal with crazy people... We have duels. Especially about insults to honour – if we were in the woods, we would’ve already had about twelve duels, you and I, but I’m in your house now, so we go by your softy rules. What do *you* do if one man insults another?”

David shook his head and smiled. “We are all about free speech – free speech is the early warning system of any healthy society. But because we don’t raise children with verbal abuse – verbal harshness – they don’t have that habit. Like you don’t know how to program a computer, because you weren’t raised with computers.” David walked his fingers up Roman’s forearm – the older man jerked his arm away. “But who knows? This whole thing could be one giant virtual reality simulation.”

“Hey!” exclaimed Roman, odd fear in his voice. “You told me that you don’t mess with people’s belief in their senses!”

“I said that about kids – and if I treated you like a kid, you would challenge me to a duel for sure.”

Roman grunted, looking away. “How much longer?”

David imitated a child’s whine. “Are we there yet?”

Roman was silent.

David said: “Everyone in the past thought that they understood human nature, but they didn’t. People said: ‘Oh, humanity is like this, or that’ – but they were like biologists in a zoo, imagining that they know anything about the animals in the wild. Human beings were caged animals until the present, until the Civ. That’s not even an analogy – if you ever look at a map or a globe of the Old World...” David’s flat hands sliced the air. “...the world was divided into countries, which were really tax farms where people were kept as human livestock for the sick profits of their owners. They were indoctrinated by the State, bullied by the media, drugged by the ‘doctors’ – and if they questioned or opposed any of this, they were insulted and slandered and lied about, and banned from society. They were crazed animals back then, and genuinely – many of them – thought of themselves as ‘free.’” David shuddered. “It might be a kind of old memory, or something that trickles down the giant staircase of the generations, but I sometimes have nightmares of waking up in the Old World – as if I could be frozen and sent back in time five hundred years – and I have to see all of the brain-punching daily disasters of the world that was, knowing that the slow-moving tsunami of inevitable horrors was creeping closer every day, while I was chained to the sinking ship of my society – to have knowledge about the unstoppable dominance of evil, and to be able to do absolutely *nothing* about it – well that’s hell, hell on earth, man, and I don’t know how people actually functioned back then. How did they get out of bed? How did they face the day? How could they sleep at night?”

There was a moment’s silence, as the two men fell back in time.

“We know those stories,” murmured Roman. “You and I – the Civ and the Clan – are forks in the road from the Cataclysms, from the very worst time in history. You all went up into the clouds with your machines, making rivers run through the sky and touching through the breath of tiny robots. We went down into the earth, into the old ways. We are all just – existing in the aftershock of every terrible thing that was. And I would rather see my entire tribe perish than go anywhere *near* any paths that led back to that hell...”

The two men stared at the slightly-reddening sun. David had an absurd impulse to take the older man’s hand, as two men staring over the hell-scape of human history, but knew it was an impossible gesture.

Suddenly – out of the blinding sun – a group of men and women *swooshed* down over the white pews, whooping and calling out greetings. They had long sticks on their feet, and gripped slender poles in their hands. Their legs bent from side to side like pendulums; their faces were covered with enormous clear masks.

“Sky-ers,” said David. “Sky-skiers. The breath-bots create the feel of snow under their skis.”

Roman scowled. “Again, they cannot fall.”

David shook his head. “Oh, they can – just not all the way down. The guy at the front – red hat – he’s a client of ours, currently training to cross the Pacific on skis.”

As the whooping men and women *swished* down into the treetops, Roman turned to David. “What do people – do?”

“With their time?”

Roman nodded.

David shrugged. “We are a striving species – we didn’t get to the top of the food chain by lazing around, that job is already taken by the alligators. I have a pretty good view of this, since most activities here have to be insured. People have hobbies, they get together for projects big and small – I know a guy who’s trying to figure out time travel with a bunch of his friends – I think it’s a total waste of time, but I’m no expert. I mean, if you travel back a year, you just end up exploding in space, because the Earth has moved on. There are historians creating entire VR recreations so people can truly understand and learn from history. We are really the first group ever to have a relatively unbiased view of the past, because in the past, the victors always wrote the history, while now, the modern world exists only because *no one* won the Cataclysms. The Civ is what comes into existence when humanity loses completely. We can finally tell the truth, because no one is profiting from lies. There is no ruling class that needs to control the narrative, so we can come the closest to objective history.”

“Are you actually paid by the word?”

David laughed. “I’m paid at *work* to be concise – this verbosity is more of a hobby. People have hobbies and artistic pursuits, they love sports and exploration, and there’s a whole group of people trying to figure out how to have improve the VR experiences on other planets. We’ve been to them, but they’re unbelievably boring. Mars is just a red sandbox – Venus is hopeless, just an acid soup around a big rock. Mercury is basically just a giant asteroid. The asteroid belt is like trying to navigate with giant black ship-crushing rocks all around you. Some of the moons of Jupiter can be quite pretty, but you really have to enhance what you’re looking at, because the sun is so far away. Nobody’s tried to land on the surface of Jupiter, because there isn’t one, really. Out past Jupiter, things get too dark to see without assistance, and you just end up staring at a computer screen, rather than the thing itself. We’ve done this solar system for the most part, and there’s not much there of any interest – at least for tourists, asteroid mining is massive, we get a huge amount from that – it’s a good thing that Bitcoin came along and replaced gold, because the value of gold would’ve dissolved into nothing with the amount we’re finding in asteroids. Some people are working on human gills – don’t even ask me how *they* work – and there are other people who want to graft giant wings onto people’s shoulders so that they can fly without mechanical assistance.”

David sighed.

“I guess I’m old-fashioned enough to find that just a little creepy, but I bet the experience must be amazing. Some people love to climb – there’s an entire sport of climbing under random gravity, which just seems kind of masochistic to me, but I’m probably too old for it anyway. There are people who like to explore the oceans, ‘aquanauts’ they’re called. They are finding some amazing life down there – the real aliens are underwater, not in outer space. There’s an entire club dedicated to raising shipwrecks and restoring them, turning them into restaurants and museums. There’s a huge group that is trying to find, document and bury all of the victims of democide – murder by States – an unholy number of people, counting the Cataclysms. That’s a hell of a project, they are pretty somber. There’s another group of hard-core scientists who are looking to repair and enhance human genetics – particularly IQ, for obvious reasons. I could go on, but when people are freed from the need to earn their daily bread – well we get quite a lot of civilization out of that, a lot of art and history and knowledge and exploration and science.”

After a while, the sky-taxi gently coasted up to a wide set of white stairs that led to a tall peaked pale blue building that looked vaguely like an ancient cathedral.

David jumped out. “Ok, we’re here. The madhouse awaits.”

Chapter 20

David and Roman went with an attendant down a shiny hallway towards a white door at the end. Roman could catch glances of people through square windows in the doors on either side. Some were sitting like broken puppets, sagging against cushioned walls. Others were pacing, gesturing frantically.

Some were sitting with their heads inserted into white globes – virtual reality, he assumed. One elderly man stood with his nose pressed against the glass, only his eyes following them as they walked past – an eerie sight, which gave Roman a slight shiver.

“What keeps them here?” he whispered.

“We should talk about that later,” said David shortly.

The attendant opened the door, and inside was a comfortable living room with a low white table, soft brown carpets, light blue walls and a wall-window view of a Nordic forest in full bloom, with distant circling birds, shuddering butterflies, and a vague pine scent that drifted through the air.

On the couch sat a very thin woman, taller than average, with a cloud of thin bushy hair around her prominent skull. She had high cheekbones, a wide jaw, and grey-blue eyes that alternated between staring dully, and darting around with suspicious aggression.

On a loveseat to her right sat two children of similar age, somewhere in their mid-teens. They looked drained but determined.

“Good afternoon,” said David, sitting in an armchair. “I just wanted to double check, before we start, that it is still all right for an observer to be here.” He gestured towards Roman, who remained standing. “He doesn’t have any recording equipment; he’s actually not part of the Civ, so he couldn’t say anything to anyone about what happens here. I appreciate his presence, but it’s finally up to you.”

The two boys nodded, but the older woman looked up suspiciously.

“Who is that?” she asked sharply. “Who sent him, why is he here?”

“Christine, this is Roman, he is a guest of mine, who is just learning about the Civ.”

She laughed bitterly. “I know you, this is not the Civ, I’m not part of the Civ, I’m on the outside, inside here, staring up the ass of a machine.” She gestured at the view of the sunlit forest. “It’s either a force field, or a mirror, or a window, or screen – it’s real, but I can’t get there.”

Christine turned to the two boys.

“And you, my children, you leave me here...” Her eyes narrowed, and she took a deep breath. “It’s not a prison, I know, but it’s not free either. I’m not free.” She gestured at her hair. “I know something is missing, like when you go on a trip, and you’re sure you forgotten something, but you don’t know what it is, and you have to wait for the trip to happen to find out, but by then it’s too late..!” Her voice rose insistently.

There was a pause.

“Why are you here?” repeated Christine.

“To help you, mom,” said the younger boy, his voice catching.

“Help, help...” As if in echo of his sentiment, her voice thickened with emotion. “That’s *my* job, do you know what it’s like – do you know what it’s like to be a mother and lose your children to philosophy, to UPB...” Her lip curled in disgust at the acronym. “To be replaced by words and metal and sunlight. I was supposed to lead you into adulthood, but I had a growth that killed my growth... I want to be helped, but I don’t know what dress I’m supposed to be helped into. I feel naked, all the time, like I’m missing my skin, like a robot to help doctors, up and walking around, each piece of wind hurts me, I’m an open tooth.” She looked up in self-pitying agony. “What do I need to do?”

David said: “Well, Christine, your children... You have asked to be their mother again – not that you ever stopped, that’s not what I mean – and we would like to facilitate that – we would love to – but your children suffered a lot with you and your late husband – not that I’m blaming you, it was so – unfortunate that he got injured, and you got sick. But the privacy you had, which we all love, meant that your children suffered for a long time as you both deteriorated. You didn’t bring them for Scans, you moved around a lot, you got out of the system, probably by accident... I’m not accusing you of anything. And I know that you are in a fragile state, so I don’t want to go into detail about what your children suffered, but they really *did* suffer, and it’s going to be hard for them to – slide into the society of the Civ, and it is my job as your DRO representative to make sure that their path to adulthood is as easy as possible, because...” David paused, and everyone in the room could see that he was not used to this kind of conversation at all. “Now, trauma is so rare that a lot of people view it as a kind of toxicity, or transmissible ailment.” He spoke more rapidly. “Everyone knows enough to not blame you, or your sons, but – it takes a lot of work to repair some of the – upset, and not everyone is exactly up to the challenge, because they’re looking forward to marriage and children and so on.”

David reached over and patted the older boy’s knee. He looked away.

“I am fully confident – and I put the resources of my entire organization behind this statement – that your sons will have wonderful lives, and will bring a depth and richness to the Civ – and everyone in it who interacts with them – but I am concerned that if they have more trauma, that will be interrupted, and possibly – not be achieved, sorry that’s awkward but I’m – not used to this, no one really is, or at least very few people...”

Christine stared blankly at him – *through* him, it seemed.

Her voice was wobbly. “I have only ever wanted what was best for my boys.”

“We know, mom,” said the older boy softly.

She put her cloudy head in her hands. “I was pouring away... I couldn’t give you up, I couldn’t...” Her voice thickened again. “You both, my boys, you stood between me and... What was coming, what was going. And I kept waiting for the help to come – you boys couldn’t help, I know that, out so far...” Her hands closed into white knuckles, and wrapped her skull. “And I’m not young, not old... I come from a long-lived line of women. I might have ninety more years, without you, with a view of nothing but

someone's dead dream of an old forest. I can't bear it without you... I was greedy, I know it – I grabbed at you and held you close, because you were the only barrel, and I was drowning.”

Christine raised her pained eyes to David.

“I will do anything. Tell me what I need to do.”

David lips quivered. “I have never doubted the sincerity of your desire to be these boys' mother. You suffered a lot of damage from the tumour. It's gone, it won't be back, but we can't – regrow anything, without turning you into someone else, which would be terrible for you and them. And I hate to say it, but you would be – alarming to the future spouses of these boys, your boys. Listen – I will *fully* commit to finding you something productive to do with your time – and no one is saying that you can't see your boys, or that they can't see you – but my job is to protect their minds and their hearts, and we are faced with a terrible tragedy here, a tragedy that is no one's fault, and for which there is no clear and easy solution. I am a parent myself; the idea of not seeing my child – of not being a parent – is unbearable; I *fully* understand that. I have for the last – I've been thinking about how much I would sacrifice to keep my daughter healthy – if I became a problem for my daughter in some way, would I withdraw from the relationship in order to keep her well? It's an unbearable question... I'm so sorry for what you are facing – I'm sorry for the entire family,” he said, turning to the two boys. “And I wish I could turn the decision over to you, but you guys are still like ten years away from brain maturity – and you want to please your mom, of course – we all do, for our own mothers – and so you will do what she wants – and her loneliness and isolation here, which she feels so strongly – and I can't argue with that – is something that you desperately want to save her from, I can see that clearly... Your mom became very ill, and lost significant – portions of who she is. Was. We can't get them back, any more than we can suddenly make you both shorter...” David stopped suddenly, plugging up his own torrent of words.

He took a deep breath. “This is not to say that your – perspectives are irrelevant.” He gestured at their mother. “We know what your mother wants, and I am desperate to facilitate that if possible, to make that happen – but what do *you* boys want? What would be best for you?”

The younger boy burst into tears. The older boy looked stoic, but patted his brother's thigh absently.

David turned to the crying boy. “Josh, what are you feeling?”

Josh took a shuddering breath. “I feel – I feel cursed, to be honest. I love my mom, she was – great, when we were younger. And nothing goes wrong, all at once – it's so slow you don't even notice it, until what's happening now smashes into what you remember – from before. And we were – in the middle of nowhere, maximum privacy settings. And dad went weird, and mom went weird – sorry mom, I'm sorry. And I feel – outside of everything. Like we go past these buildings, and the – apartments look so pretty, but there is no one in them, and that's what it's like for me, I think... I look inside, and there's no one there, just – *survival*.”

The last word hit his brother hard.

“Saul?” said David gently. “How are *you* doing?”

"I love her too," said Saul, his voice cracking from more than puberty. He stopped.

"What do you want to say to your mother?"

Saul turned to her. She sat like a prisoner facing a firing squad.

"I do love you, I do. But..." He gestured at his brother. "I know what ate away at you, but I don't know what ate where, in you... But help was a button away, and for years, you and dad – you *must've* talked about what was happening – with dad it was all at once, but with you it was slower, and you must've noticed something... You *hung on to us*, rather than – face what was happening. Dad got, like, decapitated all at once, from the injury, from Featherball, he was gone, mostly – but you, you weren't that sick yet, and you took us away, into..."

Christine said: "Because I loved him, you know."

A tear spilled from Saul's eye. "I know you did mom, and I know that he was there first, but..."

There was a pause, as what needed to be said – the next inevitable words – stopped in the throat of the older child.

David said: "You loved your broken husband at the expense of your children." He immediately half-regretted his words, because he knew that the shattered family needed to find their way themselves. He apologized, and told them to carry on. He had forgotten all about Roman, and glanced at him. The older man stood stiffly, his lips compressed, his face set like stone.

There was a long silence - strangely not awkward.

"I thought it was just – grief," said Christine finally. "I was foggy, and desolate, and lost. It was grief, for the greatest man, but it was also the tumour..." Her eyes suddenly flashed with anger. "It was not *fair*, none of it – why should I suffer, why should I give him up, I didn't know the end of the road, I didn't even know there *was* a road." She turned to her eldest son. "And you're right, you're right – it *was* gradual, it was bit by bit, bite by bite, who could have known from the first forgotten – name, that we would end up here? It's easy to see now, looking back, but looking forward is a fog, let's never forget *that!*"

The youngest boy said: "Mom!" There was such supplication, such a plea for an even temper, that it tore through the room like a firestorm. Josh could feel the possibility of family unity slipping away, and everyone in the room could feel his desperate desire to stuff himself into the widening holes of his mother's instability, and make her whole.

There was another pause. Christine stared resentfully at nothing.

Saul suddenly said: "Oh for the love of... She's not here, she's not coming, why are we continuing?"

David took a long, slow breath. "I don't know," he said, almost in a whisper. "I think I so much wanted it to be something..."

Josh said: "Something else, something else, you always want it to be something else – just like she did, just like dad did, and it's at our expense, always..." He stopped, miserably.

David got up and talked in low rapid tones to the attendant, who stood by the door.

He returned and sat down.

"Part of me wants to blame you, Christine, I'm sorry, but it's there. You are close, but I don't see any way to close this gap... It's not your fault, you're right, something is missing, something we can't put back." He took a deep breath. "Boys, am I right in understanding that this is a kind of – torture for you? If she was – worse, it would be easier, in a way, am I right?"

The two boys nodded, in obvious agony.

"I guess if it was easier, I wouldn't be here." David stood suddenly. "Christine, we will be back, but I will need to talk to these boys..."

The thin woman leapt forward with a guttural shriek. The attendant gestured – and she froze in midair, mid-sowl, her hands like claws reaching for her children. It was a terrible, terrifying sight, a mad gargoyle suspended over the soft carpet, and David hurried the boys out. Roman followed closely, breathing deeply.

David quickly led the two boys to a bare room about halfway down the corridor. He thought of the number of children who got fidgety without stimulation, but these boys seemed to visibly relax, almost as if they were being gently hugged by the bare white walls.

"Josh, Saul – this is the last review of your mother before you reach adulthood in a couple of years. We've done five of these so far – three without you – and from what I have seen, there is no possibility of improvement for her."

As is so often the case, the younger boy started sniffing, while the older boy hardened his face.

"Come on Josh. We talked about this, it wasn't likely to change."

Josh's cheeks were red. "I'm not allowed to be sad now?"

David let the two brothers talk to each other.

Saul said: "You can be sad, just don't pretend to be surprised."

Josh's hands closed into white fists. "You're such an – empty rock! She's not coming out, we have to live..." He turned to David. "Where are we going to live again?"

Saul answered: "You don't remember anything. You can live with me, I can get support, or you can go off to some other family if you want."

Everyone in the room – even Roman – heard the sentence in Saul’s mind that was not uttered: *I don’t care either way.*

Josh stared miserably at the tiled grey floor. If Saul felt any remorse, he hid it well.

Josh whispered: “What you want me to do?”

Saul immediately shot back: “I’m not dad. Make your own choices.”

Stony ground, thought David.

Josh stared at him. “I don’t know...”

David said: “You don’t have to know, right now at least.” He turned to the older boy.

“Do you know what a short-circuit is?”

Saul nodded, looking away.

“You have kind of a short-circuit at the moment, because you had to grow up too fast. We know what happened with your mother – the mania, the depression, the hysteria, the – cold rage, where you couldn’t have a – different opinion. You were squeezed from all sides. And alone. And your father was – violent, we know that too. Violence is a kind of panic, you know, like someone falling off a cliff will grab at anything to stay up. The hole in his brain was a black spot, one of the largest I’ve ever seen on a scan. He was barely there, just a spine and arms with almost nothing up top. And all of this was put on your shoulders – and you’re a strong boy, I know that, but it’s too much weight for anyone, particularly a child. So – what do you do with that weight? What do you do with that helplessness?” David’s voice grew softer. “What do you do with that hopelessness?”

He moved his chair slightly closer to Saul. Everyone started from the squeaking sound.

“You were in a primitive situation, so you reverted to the mammal. Helplessness is another kind of panic, and when animals feel helpless, they lash out to reassert dominance, because helplessness is a kind of death. Fight back at all costs... Now of course you couldn’t establish any dominance over your father, who was violent – or your mother, who was chaotic and aggressive. This is how the madness gets passed down, or at least tries to. Madness is a kind of virus that replicates by creating the conditions for madness in others, children usually, since they can’t get away. The brain damage of your parents tried to re-create brain damage in you, in your brother.”

David’s voice was barely above a murmur. “And you wanted to run away, didn’t you?”

There was a long pause, then Saul nodded, almost imperceptibly.

“But you couldn’t, could you? You couldn’t get away, because...”

The word unspoken hung in the air: *Josh.*

“You stayed to protect him. Or at least give him some comfort. But you couldn’t keep that up, because – he was kind of your prison.”

Saul took a deep breath and wiped his tears angrily. “She wouldn’t let him go. She thinks he’s like her dad, who she worshipped – she thinks I’m like her husband, who she feared, by then. She called me his name sometimes. She thought I was – attacking her, some nights.”

David could see Josh’s hand moved slightly towards his brother, but knew it was a make-or-break moment, and was glad he did not touch him.

There was a long pause. David did not want to interrupt any of Saul’s churning thoughts, but it became clear that the older boy would not speak next.

“You know it’s not your brother’s fault,” said David softly. “Your brother was also trying to survive...”

Saul’s lip curled. “But he’s weak – I’m sorry, but it’s true.”

David nodded slowly, holding his hand up to Josh. “What would you have done, in his position?”

Saul’s jaw tightened. “Something – different, something stronger. Something not so – pitiful. He just curled into a ball and let things happen.”

David nodded again. “But you had – longer...”

A deep sense of truth shook the boy’s body. He held up both his hands, as if to shield himself from what was coming.

David said: “You are two-and-a-half years older. You had a lot longer time of – normal stuff. Your brother doesn’t really remember things being very normal, is that right Josh?”

Josh shook his head. Everyone understood the ambiguous response.

David said: “You don’t take any pride in being older, Saul, do you? Or taller?”

Saul shot David a sharp look, as if to say: *don’t ask such stupid questions!*

David said: “You were accidentally born earlier, you are *accidentally* older, you *accidentally* had more responsibilities, you *accidentally* got promoted to helpless pretend father, you *accidentally* had someone to protect who trapped you there – and you both *accidentally* fell through the cracks – for which the entire Civ is responsible, and we will help you out. You are both what is called an ‘outlier,’ which means your situation is so unusual that I’ve never seen or heard of it before. We left you out in the cold, where you should never have been – and we *so much* want you to come back into the embrace of society. The entire basis of what we do here in the Civ rests on – I don’t even have the words – nothing like this *ever* happening to children. Nothing we can do here in the Civ can make up for what you boys suffered, but we will do everything we can to bring you back in, with us, to a happy life. If you want to take whatever little consolation you can from this, I can tell you very frankly that we have put in place a number of new procedures to make sure that *nothing* like this ever happens again – so your

suffering will at least have saved children in the future. We don't want you to ever think that what you went through was in vain – it should never have happened, and I think we can now say with pretty good certainty that it will *never* happen again.

“The great danger now is this: because you think society failed you – and you're right of course – you will have no loyalty to society, to the Civ. I'm not saying that you're going to become criminals, of course – but that is where criminals come from. Thieves steal because they were stolen from – their childhoods, their security, their protection. You are – wary of society, because we did not keep you safe. We are sorry, I am personally very sorry, because your safety was my responsibility, because your parents are our customers, they paid us in part to keep you safe, and we failed. That is on us, that is not on you – *we* were wrong, not you. And you wouldn't want to judge everyone in the Civ by your parents, right, because that was an incredibly unusual situation – although it was normal life for you, I get that. The combination of isolation, high security, brain damage and a brain tumour, was not something that we had planned for – but we will now, because we never *ever* want anything like this to ever happen again!”

David leaned forward further. “I don't think you're going to become criminals, you both had people to care for you when you were younger – Saul, you had your parents, and Josh, you had Saul, though you may not feel that at the moment. All this can be fixed, and you can be wonderful additions to the Civ – famous in a way, if you want to be. But – the great danger is not your relationship to the Civ, but your relationship with each other. I have a brother, and I can tell you what an amazing thing it is to go through life with someone who was there every step of the way. I'm afraid to say that you have lost your parents – though your mother's body remains alive – and that happens to all of us eventually. Aunts, uncles, grandparents, parents – they almost always die before us. And our children, well I have a daughter, she doesn't know anything, really, about me before she was born – or a couple of years after at least. Siblings are the only people who can go through the whole life journey with you. You have each other as companions in the journey of life in a way that no other relationship can – come close to. If you let the tragedies of your parents tear you apart, you will lose something immensely precious in this life... If you let brain trauma and disease rip you in two, you are giving up something *precious* for the sake of something *accidental*. You lose at the most important game you might not even know you are playing. Don't blame each other for what happened to you both. Saul, don't blame Josh for being younger and more helpless, that's just an accident. Josh – and this is very important, because it's harder to see – but Josh, don't blame Saul for being older and taking more of the horrors your parents were dishing out. Don't blame him for feeling more responsible, don't blame him for resenting you because he had to shield you. You know what it's like to feel helpless – but you don't know what it's like to feel helpless, and have to protect someone else at the same time. You don't know what it's like to try and be a human shield against adult violence. You don't know what it's like to be trapped by loyalty. Your brother has ended up resenting you, but he is still a child himself, and one of the things that unjust authority always does is set its prisoners against each other.”

The boys glanced at each other.

David continued: “You’ve learned, I’m sure, of the ‘racism’ hysteria of the Old World – everyone was trained to hate each other, so that they could not band together against their rulers. It’s an instinctive thing – whether it comes from brain damage or a brain tumour or just the mad power lust of the Old World. Unjust power always seeks to control through division. Your relationship – or what’s left of it – is just a shadow cast by the ancient rulebook called ‘divide and conquer.’ Your relationship is like one of those insects trapped in amber from the time of the dinosaurs – it’s a relic of ancient times, before civilization. And the challenge now is that we are opening our arms to invite you *back* into civilization. We are sorry, we are desperate to make amends, we promise that this will not happen again... We have learned, we have improved, we have been humbled by what happened to you. But you will never be able to love the Civ more than you love each other. Everything that happens in civilization starts in the family – that is the great lesson the horrors of the Cataclysms taught us. You cannot fix *anything* without first fixing the family – you cannot have a peaceful world while children are aggressed against. You cannot find love in life if you cannot find it at the beginning. I want you both to be great friends, great fathers, great husbands, great – participants in a world you don’t know very well, the world where people are raised peacefully and reasonably. You need to speak the language we all speak, but you were taught the opposite.”

David took a deep breath.

“I will provide to you any and all resources you need to live happy lives – I know that you know me as the head of a DRO, some kind of impersonal business guy – and I’m also responsible to a large degree for what happened to you, which I take very, very personally. I think of my daughter going through what you boys have gone through, and it truly breaks my heart.” David leaned forward and took the hands of the two boys.

“This is personal for me, deeply personal. It is not business. I don’t have to do what I do, but I do it because I know that the peace and plenty of the modern world is entirely dependent upon our willingness and ability to protect children from exactly what you went through. Your suffering is a personal dishonor to me, and I *will make it right!* You have a servant in me – a slave if you want...”

There were slight giggles.

“...and you will never ever have to go through this life without support ever again. The virtue of a society is defined by how it treats its children – and the future of the Civ is in the cribs of our offspring.” David smiled. “You literally won’t believe how many people are waiting for the outcome of this meeting – it’s not just me who feels ashamed; we as a society feel absolutely *wretched* about what happened to you! It is a brutal and humbling reminder of how close we are to everything that led to the Cataclysms. In the Old World, what happened to you, all the suffering you went through, would be just – ignored by everyone around – family, friends, neighbours, teachers, priests, you name it. There are endless reports in the archives of children being assaulted, beaten, tortured – screaming at the top of their lungs, while everyone in the building went about their business, and no one even bothered to call the authorities – which they could have done anonymously if they were afraid of blowback – but no one lifted a finger. Everyone stepped over... This is an analogy of course, but in my mind’s eye, everyone stepped over the

broken bodies of broken children, because they were late for the bus, or had a movie to see, or were excited to go on a date. Everyone lived in this selfish bubble, while the blood of children rained down on them – and then they wondered why the world kept getting worse, and they yelled at each other and spent their imaginary money and tried meditation and yoga and travel and drugs – and even voted for different leaders – to try to feel happy and rid themselves of their growing anxiety, their terror at all they had *not* done...

“But you can’t brutalize children – and ignore the brutalization of children – and be happy, or secure, or have a future – either as a person or a society. They would watch movies about the days of slavery, and they would understand that the slaveowner could never be happy – and then they would go back to brutalizing and indoctrinating their own children, feeling weirdly secure that they were vastly superior to everyone who had come before! They would genitally mutilate their babies; the mothers would happily run off to work at some dumb job, and have strangers pretend to raise their *own* children! The children were taught to hate themselves – and their own society – in the government schools – and if they got bored or resisted, they were drugged into near-oblivion. They were exposed to adult topics and images very early in life, unsupervised, uncontrolled... They had no say in their society, no one profited from protecting them – indeed, the profit was *always* in the abuse!”

David took a deep breath and wiped his eyes. “Children were treated worse than livestock – because at least a farmer lost money if his livestock got sick, or did not have offspring. The children of the Old World were broken into tiny pieces, and reassembled into empty self-hating cogs in the machinery of power. People – governments – even borrowed against the future earnings of the children, casting them into a pit of economic slavery before they were even *born*. Imagine stealing from a sperm and an egg – that is pickpocketing of a truly hellish dimension!”

David sighed. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to give you a history lesson of things you probably already know, but that’s what I mean when I say that you are a shadow cast by the Old World, and we are here to bring you to the light. To the present. You *must not* hate each other for what was done to you – or the injuries and the tumour win. The Old World wins...”

David’s voice wobbled. “And here’s the basic truth, the last thing I need to say.”

He stood up and gestured at the white door.

“Your mother, she will not leave. She cannot. She has no place out in the world, she will just frighten people and make – messes. And she will be around children – that can’t be helped – and we have to protect them at all costs, as you know – at least by my words, not by my historical deeds. She can’t get out – but *you can!*”

David’s voice sharpened in intensity.

“The real danger is that there is a part of you both that will never leave this building, that will stay with your mother, out of a sense of responsibility, of guilt – of anger at me, at the Civ. You will be very tempted to stay here, with her, in your mind. Asking children to abandon their mother is one heck of a

thing...” David smiled. “You have imprinted on her, like little ducks in a way, and you are trained to follow her wherever she goes – even into the whirlpool of what happened to her. But the point of the Civ is to raise ourselves from mammals to – *angels!* To reject the material instincts of the mammal, and rise to the angels of philosophy. We are more angels than mammals, that’s what defines us as a species, our capacity for rational thought and universal values. We are not asking you to become less human, but more human – which means to reject the suffering that provokes the mammal within you – you, Josh, to scorn and reject your brother, so you can feel more powerful. You, Josh, to play out this pretend helplessness which you know provokes your brother, because you are angry at him for putting you down. Those are the mechanics of your relationship, but they don’t have to be. There’s an old story called ‘Hamlet,’ where the main guy apologizes to his friend with the analogy that he has shot an arrow over a house, and hit him by accident. What happened to your family was a terrible accident. Do *not* let accidents destroy you – that is what animals do, but we are not animals, we are human beings, we are angels, and we can rise above almost anything and everything! Love each other for what you have survived, forgive brute circumstances for what happened to you, and join us in the Civ!”

David suddenly felt an intense and hostile skepticism radiating from Roman, who stood stiffly by the door. He stepped between the older warrior and the two boys, as if he could be a human shield against the radioactive cynicism.

He felt a strong urge to keep talking, but knew that the boys had to rise to meet his words – and that their futures hung in the balance.

But then, an amazing thing happened – David was desperately hoping that Josh would apologize to his younger brother, but it was Josh who put his hand on Saul’s shoulder and said:

“I’m sorry, Saul.”

What exactly he was apologizing for was both opaque and blindingly clear. He was apologizing for pretending to be helpless, for trapping his brother, for not doing his part to maintain and repair their relationship, for rolling over and letting events flatten him. For not taking any shred of leadership in the suffering they both were going through – for putting all responsibility on his brother, and breaking him with the weight of his own inaction.

And it was the breaking of that cycle that broke the distance between them.

Josh returned the apology, and they suddenly hugged each other, looking very, very small.

David and Roman went for dinner in the cafeteria. The serving bot was genuinely confused as to why Roman had no order history. David tried to explain that Roman had enabled maximum privacy, but the bot complained that it had no record of that setting, or of Roman at all.

Finally, Roman snapped: “Maximum privacy, you tangled piece of machinery, which means I live in the woods, and have no presence here!”

David soothed the machine with an override, and it bustled off placidly to get their food.

Roman turned to David. “That was total crap, in there.”

David shrugged. “Tell me more.”

“Yeah, those kids had it rough, I guess, but all of this handholding and crying and hugging and...” The older man shuddered. “It’s like everything is being run by – women, or something.”

“What do you mean?”

“All that sensitivity stuff. Bad things happen, you shut your mouth, you move on. You spent – what, close to an hour talking to those kids? That’s not the world, that’s not realistic.”

“You keep thinking that ‘the world’ is your world. In this world, we process feelings, because we understand that all psychological problems arise from the denial of legitimate suffering.”

“Hey – I wouldn’t deny that they have suffered. That never would’ve happened in my tribe.”

“Almost nothing *else* happens in your tribe,” said David evenly, obviously probing for resistance,

Roman laughed harshly. “You see? Even that weird little jab is so – feminine. If you have something to say, just say it! Don’t sigh and pretend it’s a conversation.”

David said: “You and I speak different languages. I’m looking for common ground. Let’s start with this. You think it was a waste of my time to spend an hour talking to those boys?”

Roman shrugged and gestured vaguely. “You all seem to have so little to do that – who the hell am I to tell you that your time is being wasted – but coddling those boys won’t do them any good.”

“Do you know the price of pain?”

Roman started. “What?”

“Those boys are in pain. If we don’t find a way to ease that pain – through empathy, concern – then that pain will cost us. Even in the Old World, they knew that children who suffered a lot ended up costing society about twenty times more. The average person produces at least a bitcoin worth of value over the course of his or her life – tens of millions of dollars in old currency. Criminals cost 10 to 15 bitcoins. So that’s what – a hundred million dollars plus that swings on *one hour* of conversation – and follow-up, of course. I don’t see how that’s a bad investment at all.”

The conversation paused as their food was delivered.

Roman grimaced, poking at his plate. “I feel like there’s going to be engine oil in my pasta.”

“Once criminality goes below a certain threshold – and we had 38 murders across the entire Civ last year, out of a population of seven hundred and fifty million – then people don’t need to protect themselves from it. It’s not just the cost of the stolen goods or the prosecution or the expulsion or

whatever – it’s the cost of having to protect all of your stuff – alarms and thumbprints and voice recognition and insurance – it’s a staggering amount of money. Here, people can leave their doors unlocked, they make enough – and have enough – that they don’t even think of stealing, why would you? Children can roam freely, women can walk all night if they want to. There are still occasional crimes, but we have found the cure for criminality: peaceful parenting. Even in your world, rare random accidents happen, but you don’t plan your life around them. Someone gets hit by lightning, a tree branch falls on you out of nowhere – it happens, but it’s not a central part of life. That’s like crime here. Those two boys were in grave danger of having no respect for their society, because their society had failed them. There *is* a social contract here – though not like in the Old World. The real social contract, the contract of the Civ – the contract I have spent my life defining and enforcing – is this: *protect children.*”

Roman blinked. “I was kind of expecting more.”

David smiled and shook his head. “Nope, that’s it.”

Roman scowled. “Come on!”

David said: “Do you know how we domesticated dogs?”

“We don’t use animals.”

“This isn’t about you, but okay. We domesticated dogs by feeding them, and not beating them. Same with cats. Why not with children? Treat them well, don’t hit them, reason with them, don’t punish them – and they grow up to love you and your society. If society has treated them well, then society gains credibility – and credibility is the very essence of the Civ. So when their society tells them to obey a certain rule – if the children have grown up respecting the rules of the society, which protected them, then they are much more willing to listen to the rules of society, and obey them. Why are you the leader?”

The question obviously took Roman by surprise. “Why am I the leader?” He mused for a moment, then shrugged. “Because I get things done. I win.”

“And you have proven that, over time.”

“Oh yeah. Yes.”

“And does anyone doubt your ability to get things done – to win?”

Roman scoffed. “Oh, there are always the young bucks nipping at your heels, waiting for me to go soft in my old age, but no, not really.”

“So, you have – credibility.”

“Yeah. Yes I do.”

“Outside of your children, when was the last time you had to use violence to be in charge?”

Roman's face softened slightly, as his focus shifted to history. "Don't know... I get things done with a glance by now, but when I was younger, I had to fight all the time – but remember, violence was used on *me* as well!"

"I don't forget that for a second," said David slowly.

"When I was – oh, twelve, around puberty of course, we did this thing – it happened for everyone, my boys... You had to stay up all night, standing, not even leaning on anything, and then you had to dodge arrows, three times your age, thirty-six arrows for me. My father and uncles shot at me – you'd think that because they were family they might go easy, but I think they went harder, they knew where I would dodge..." Roman laughed. "All you had to do was not curl up in a ball, just keep twisting and turning. The arrows couldn't kill you – they had cloth on the end, but they left a helluva bruise – and you had to watch your eyeballs, to speak of two of four... That was a long while, probably only a couple minutes, but it felt like a lifetime." His aging voice shone with pride. "They only hit me six times – some of the best archers in the tribe. I kept that record until..." He turned and locked eyes on David. "My son had just finished his trial, the day before he met your daughter. It's a point of pride I guess, you're really exhausted, but you stay up that night anyway..."

Roman's voice trailed off, as his mind got lost in subterranean warrens. His lined face looked slashed by the knives of time.

"That's the difference," said David softly. He had an urge to place his palm on the back of the older man's hand, but knew that would be violently rejected. "You have credibility because of your ability to *withstand* suffering, I have credibility because of my ability to *prevent* suffering."

Roman murmured: "Not with those two boys though."

David shook his head. "No, also with them. I can't do anything about their past suffering, but I can do a lot about the future."

Roman shook his head slowly. "And that's the vanity that will end you. And the Civ."

Chapter 21

When they left the asylum, Roman shuddered in the steepening light of the setting sun.

They climbed onto the waiting sky-taxi. David settled into his white pew.

Roman paced back and forth. "I've got to get out of this – city," he said, almost snarling.

"Yeah, I'm not gonna argue with you there," said David.

"You know you're going to have to come and live with my tribe for a while, after this, right?" said Roman.

"The thought had crossed my mind," said David. "If you're not convinced after your tour, then yes, I will come with you, although at the moment I think it's a little bit more likely that you will join at least the outskirts of the Civ than I will paint myself blue and run half-naked through the woods."

Roman grinned. "Whoever said 'half'?"

David laughed. "It's been a while since I went dive-walking, let's do that."

"Do you like being confusing?"

David clasped his fingers together, turned his palms upwards and stretched his shoulders. "The nano bots create a bubble that surrounds you; they provide air and motion, and you can travel underwater wherever you step and look at."

Roman shuddered slightly. "I'm not a huge fan of deep water – how deep can you go?"

David shrugged. "As deep as you want, you don't have to worry about pressure or the bends, the air stays constant. And it will be earlier in the day there, we're chasing the sun."

Roman swallowed. "And how – how often does this – diving go wrong?"

"It hasn't happened, to my knowledge – and I would be the person who would know, since I insure all this stuff."

The older man shuddered. "And what about – the beasts and creatures and – squids and sharks and those creepy things with the little skylights over their demon eyes..?"

"No complaints, it's too weird for them to do much but run away – or swim away, sorry." David leaned slightly towards the older man. "But I thought that living in the woods made you tough, with skin like tree bark and hands like granite. Surely a few bubbles and some little fishies aren't enough to make you faint, right?"

Roman waved him away. "You're such a woman."

David laughed, brushing his hair back. “More of a mermaid, in this case. Are you coming, old man?”

They took the sky-taxi to the coast, over the barely-visible submerged houses in the swamps, where David explained that some people were fascinated by Cyprus roots and alligators, and loved the view from just below the surface.

“It has kind of turned out, in our state of freedom – or statelessness – that people are, in fact, quite mad in their obsessions. My daughter is fanatically into lizards – or, worse, now she’s all about the ducks. That stuff tends to wane as they grow older, but some people just – keep their obsessions, sometimes for their whole lives.”

Roman did not respond to this snippet of information, and David intuitively understood that the older man was on a mission, and chit chat just blew past him like leaves in the wind.

When they got to the seaside, Roman stared at the squat houses on tall stilts.

“I guess you get quite a tide here,” he said, gesturing at the spider-like structures.

“I think so, but that’s not why...”

He trailed off as one of the houses stretched its legs, and smoothly lumbered off down the coast.

David smiled at an inside joke. “Mobile homes,” he said.

“Those are the laziest nomads I have ever seen in my life,” murmured Roman in wonder.

At a seaside shack, quaint in its ancient wood and red-and-white striped overhanging canopy, they rented the *scubbles* – scuba bubbles – from a slow-moving – and even slower-talking – bearded man in dreadlocks.

As they walked towards the surf holding the bright yellow rings of their *scubbles*, Roman scowled.

“Druggie,” he muttered. “Total degenerate. Every now and then, we have one of those in the tribe, they get addicted to mushrooms or peyote, like your VR-addicts I guess. It’s pitiful, wanting to run away from reality – they become loud, useless, self-important fools who think they are wise, when they are just delirious and distracted and dumb.”

David pursed his lips and nodded. “Addiction is very rare here, because – I’m not talking about your tribe – but in history, in the Old World, addiction was just self-medication for the trauma of child abuse – and the adult abuse called ‘politics.’ Maybe that happens where you are, you can let me know, although we probably have different standards for what constitutes...”

David was distracted by a flock of slow-moving pelicans winging their way above the waves. He watched them pass, then shook his head slightly.

“Anyway, we solved the problem of addiction by improving childhoods. In the past, the addict wasn’t trying to feel happy – he was just trying to feel *normal*. Me, I’m a happy guy in general – today has been a bit unusual, but overall I’m a very positive person.” He held a flat hand up in the air as they stepped into the slowly-rolling seawater. “I have a happiness level of about a hundred – people traumatized as children have happiness levels of maybe twenty. When they take a drug, it raises them to maybe a happiness level of a hundred and ten – a ninety-point difference. Then, when the drug wears off, they crash down to a happiness of maybe *minus* twenty, which is a kind of agony for them. But what they have done – what they have tasted – is what it’s like to be normally happy. It’s like someone with chronic pain – he doesn’t take a painkiller to get high, but just to feel normal, *not* in pain. So – the addict starts off miserable, but he doesn’t really *know* that he is miserable, he just thinks that misery is just the human condition, or something like that – and then he takes a drug, and he feels normal – or slightly better than normal – and then he crashes down to a *real* misery, which reveals to him that he’s been miserable his whole adult life, maybe his whole *entire* life. So he tries the drug again, because the horror of his own misery has been revealed to him, because he had a couple of hours of feeling normal. But the drug doesn’t get him to a hundred and ten anymore, maybe it only gets him to ninety-five, and then he crashes down to minus fifty, and that’s where the cycle comes from. They are just trying to feel normal, and they end up half-killing themselves...”

“God!” exclaimed Roman, leaning into the salty waves. “Do you have an explanation for *anything* that doesn’t come back to ‘Oh, I had such a bad childhood!’? Talk about obsessive, you’re like someone who wants to live underwater and look up the ass of an alligator all day! Trauma?” He spat. “Hell, it’s just a matter of *weakness*, a lack of self-control, a lack of acceptance of the responsibility of being a damn adult! People aren’t delicate little broken flowers from bad childhoods – they make *actual* decisions in the here and now – and sometimes those decisions are *terrible*, and *stay* terrible, and just get worse! People fall into self-indulgence, they terrorize everyone around them, they demand happiness without having to earn it, and everyone else has to hold them up and keep them going and feed them and wipe their asses! Sometimes people are just pieces of crap, waste material in life, useless eaters, an insult to bipeds, sentimental garbage trying to drag everyone down with them! Everyone and everything here seems like some kind of pitiful handwringing bad mother, useless in her emotions and demanding forgiveness for every bad imaginary thing she ever did!”

The sky-taxi had taken them far enough west that the sun had climbed back up from the horizon, like a strange blinding orb that *rose* in the West. Roman’s face was a mask of contempt and hatred – against the white-capped churning waves, he looked like an aging God of the deep, enraged at being summoned to the unfriendly air.

David took a deep breath. He was not alarmed by the older man’s rage and strange eloquence. He knew it was a bomb that had to be defused indelicately – because any delicate handling was more likely to make it go off even more violently.

He nodded, strapping the *scubble* to his waist. “It does seem quite mad, I agree. In the Old World, people thought that dysfunction was caused by radio waves, bad food, fluoride, chemicals, sin, racism, sexism, you name it. In the ancient world, Aristotle thought there were four layers of elements.” David swung his hand in levels up from his chest. “Earth, water, air, fire. Fire leapt up because it wanted to rejoin the fire element – water flowed downhill because it wanted to rejoin the water element, you get the idea. It all got very complicated, as you can imagine, because there are so many exceptions to those rules. It was even worse with the motion of Mars – or the retrograde motion of Mars. The ancient astronomer Ptolemy thought that God made everything go in a circle, because a circle was a perfect Form, in the style of Plato. So – the orbits of the planets had to be circles, with the Earth at the center, of course, because that’s what it feels like. But the Earth is the third planet out, and sometimes Mars seems to swing back in the sky, as the Earth accelerates faster around the sun. So they created this crazy set of calculations – pages and pages – in order to figure out where Mars was going to be. But sometimes, you know, when things get too complex, it’s because you’re missing the one central variable. Put the sun at the center of the solar system, you only need one calculation to know where Mars is. Make the gravity of mass constant, and you don’t need four elements and atoms that yearn to recombine with some fantasy layer cake of Platonic perfection. Make the speed of light constant, and you unlock the power of the atom. All this is, I daresay, elementary – and I apologize for that dad joke.” David pointed at Roman. “And you have this – belief, which you think explains something, called ‘free will,’ but what does it really explain? It’s circular. ‘Why did this person do something bad?’ ‘Because they chose badly.’ No additional information is added to the equation. Obviously they chose to do something bad, but putting a kind of random ghost into the center of the meat-packet we call a body doesn’t explain *anything*, any more than saying that God created the universe explains where the universe came from – or saying that God gave us moral commandments explains morality!”

Roman scowled again, working his yellow straps. “But any time...” He took a deep breath. “Anytime you say that a man’s decisions are caused by something before, you are just setting up a series of slabs that fall over because of the one behind it. There is a magic mystery at the center of the soul; you can’t explain *why* people make decisions any more than I can, because that is the whole point of free will. We hang in the balance, we look down the path – or paths – of every outcome we can think of, and we strike out in some direction, based upon – what? You say a bad childhood, I say that strips us of free will. We are not slabs, we are free souls!”

David cocked his head slightly and spread his hands. His sandy hair suddenly blew back from his broad forehead, as if startled. “Hey, I’m a free will guy – one of the main points of the Civ is to *restore* free will to the center of the mind. We have spent about a century clearing away all the rubble that gets in the *way* of free will. If a kid grows up hungry, he ends up stunted. Maybe he doesn’t get to play basketball, because he is shorter. So – because of the deficiencies in his childhood, his free will is limited, because he can’t choose a sport that requires good height. Or maybe his bones are more brittle than they could have been, in which case he has to take supplements and exercise more – which also reduces his choices, to *not* do those things. Children raised well and reasonably can make choices without being coerced by the unconscious avoidance of trauma – or be susceptible to addiction or promiscuity or ill health or brutal relationships. We are trying to clear away all of the *impediments* to free will, so children

grow up with a *full* view of their opportunities – rather than a train track or a couple of narrow passageways left over from the collapse of – their lives, sorry, that analogy kind of got away from me.”

Roman scowled, fidgeting with his straps. “Yeah, it’s just that kind of looseness that turns my stomach! You keep your explanations, I will retain my firm belief in the narrowness of the path of virtue. You can spin off into infinity with all the choices you want, I will stay to the straight and narrow path of goodness.”

David took another deep breath, then said: “Just squeeze the ring.”

The tension suddenly left the argument as Roman tightened his grip, and the water scudding past his calves parted suddenly, blown expertly back by a bubble of expanding nano bots.

David smiled. “Go on – take a step!”

Roman swallowed, and David could see the ripple of muscle as his jaw tightened. He took a tentative step forward, and the water parted ahead of him, and drew in slightly behind him.

Roman said: “What about the sand?”

“The bots only blow back against water. They will make the sand a bit more firm, but it won’t disappear under your feet.”

“And – light? I don’t know how deep we’re gonna go...” He shivered, staring at the churning darkening ocean. “God help me, but it gets pretty dark... down there.”

“The bots know where you are looking, they’ll shine light in that direction if it gets dark – when.”

“And we’ll be able to – talk?” asked the older man uneasily.

“Sure, sound travels hundreds of times further underwater than in air – don’t worry, I know that it would be tragic if you couldn’t hear the sound of my voice for even a minute or two...”

Roman responded only with a guttural growl. Taking a deep breath, he strode into the water. It parted before him as if he were the central protagonist in a tiny prophecy.

Chapter 22

Roman visibly shuddered as the foamy water churned over his head. He doggedly continued on, walking along the sand, until the bottom gave way to rocks and coral.

He started when he heard David’s voice in his ear.

“So – pretend you are walking level, or climbing slight stairs, and the bots will adjust the floor for you.”

“What, they can read my mind?” Roman was panting with stress.

“No – they read body movements, and know when you want to walk level or climb, or go down.”

Roman tried walking as if there were an invisible path under his feet. Sure enough, he felt a foamy surface appear under the soles of his soft shoes. He took a deep breath, feeling dizzy and slightly nauseous.

“I am where no man should be, doing things that no man should do...” he muttered.

David grinned and gave him a thumbs-up. “And you could live to over hundred and thirty, that’s the whole point of technology!”

Roman grunted, then noticed a distant long needle-like object spearing through the water to his right.

“What the hell is that?”

David glanced over. “Oh, that’s a sharp-ship, some aquanauts heading down to Atlantis, I suppose. They are quite mad about not disturbing the ocean, so they make their ships like needles, so they displace less water. And in answer to your next question, aquanauts are people who mostly live underwater. Sometimes it’s people who’ve lost the use of their legs, sometimes it’s people with brittle bones, and sometimes it’s people who just – prefer to live like fishes. You’re kind of old school, you should appreciate that – evolutionarily speaking, we were in the water long before we were on land, so they’re just – old, old school I guess. I’m sure they would give you long lectures about your adoption of the radical new technology called ‘land.’”

Roman scowled. “‘Atlantis’ seems a bit obvious. Don’t look so startled, we have some books.”

David shrugged. “They’re not the most subtle group – their anthem is an ancient song called ‘Under Pressure.’”

Roman groaned.

David continued: “They’re doing some amazing stuff though. Harvesting the heat of underwater volcanoes – did you know that the center of the earth is hotter than the surface of the sun? They are also resurrecting species that went extinct from the eighteenth century onwards, mapping the ocean floor, finding a truly amazing number of new sea creatures – one has an enzyme in its cartilage that really helped us eliminate cancer.”

“Did they grow gills?”

David laughed. “Some of them would like to, but no DRO will sanction radical genetic body manipulation.”

“Why not?” Roman grunted, staring at the blue-shaded beauty around him.

“Well, the way it works – are you sure you want to talk about this now?”

Roman stared around him, at the rays of the setting sun spearing in soft shafts through the dark water.

“Hell no, it’s all so – distracting...”

David nodded, and they walked on, down and down.

As the surrounding ocean shaded from blue to black, the two men saw a faint glowing line appearing before them, stringing down into the depths.

David gestured. "They use the bots to feed glowing plankton in a line, so no one gets lost..."

Roman said nothing. His shoulders were hunched, his jaw tight.

"Would you like me to go ahead?"

The older man shook his head, marching on. "We go together."

Various strange sea creatures – attracted by the glowing lines – came and nibbled at the plankton. Tiny clear octopi, seahorses, slender eel-like fish with fins on their heads, iridescent goggle-eyed creatures with horns – and in the shadows beyond the glow, dim shapes of larger creatures swirled, lit up in tight spotlights by the lit gazes of the two men.

A large swimming beast cut across the glowing lines, scattering them.

"What the hell was that?" cried Roman, emotionally naked in his sudden alarm.

"Porpoise, I think."

"Not a shark?"

"Don't think so."

Roman threw him a scornful look in the dark, as if to say: *seems like something you should be more sure about.*

David said: "You need to remember to breathe, everyone forgets that the first time."

After a while, they walked down to a wide swathe of low buildings, shaped like enormous bubbles. Some of the curved roofs were covered in barnacles, and various sizes of fish swirled above them, hunting, fighting and fleeing. Others – as well as most of the passageways between them – had clear rooves, and people could be seen strolling through water in their *scubbles*.

David pointed down. "Follow me, the entrance is just down here. Get ready for the drying."

"The – what?" grunted Roman – just as warm blown air began whipping around his hair, face and body.

They walked through a glowing portal into a large room with a sign on the wall reading “Arrivals.”

A very pale young man greeted them – Roman’s eyes widened, because the young man seemed to have scales for skin.

David whispered out of the side of his mouth: “Sorry – I forgot to mention – some of them take underwater life very seriously.” He turned to the young man. “Hello Aqualung – I’m sorry I didn’t call ahead, but do you have any tables available for a late dinner at Beachside?”

The young man gestured, then nodded.

“Sure thing, David – great to see you again – and you, friend of David...”

Roman said nothing.

David said: “They have the best seafood...”

Silence.

The young man lifted a finger. “Follow me.”

They were led down flat wide corridors with clear lit views of the ocean above. The bellies of sharks and rays drifted by overhead; some *scubble*-strollers wandered past.

They came to a restaurant with tangy sea-salt hanging in the air. Roman and David were seated at a table laid on the bottom of an enormous clam shell. Overhead, luminescent letters traced through the dark water – birthday wishes, ecological reminders, anniversary greetings...

Seeing Roman’s wide eyes, David smiled. “Bots drop food for the glowing plankton to feed on, it spells out letters for the restaurant guests.”

Roman scowled. “Will we be served by a mermaid?”

“Do you want to be?”

“Only if she’s topless.”

“So – you are OK with robots if they show a little skin?”

“Ech,” growled the older man.

His face suddenly grew serious. “What if I died when we met, on the mountain. What if we fought, and I was vaporized, and all this...”

David nodded. “The ancient Norse warriors thought that their afterlife was Valhalla, where they drank mead, ate meat and fought for eternity. This – here – can’t be yours.”

Roman stared at him – it was a strangely intimate moment...

A floating jellyfish brought the menus. Roman stared at his, turning it over and over.

“What the hell – you said this place had great seafood.”

David blinked, then laughed. “Oh, sorry, that’s just what we say – food served under the sea. You won’t find any fish or shrimp here. Everyone comes to live in Atlantis because they love the sea – you might as well ask for meat at a vegetarian restaurant.”

Roman tossed the menu on the white tablecloth and scowled.

“Fine, just order for me.”

The jellyfish returned, picking up the menus in a few tendrils, while pouring water from others.

After David ordered for them, Roman picked up a knife and gestured at him.

“What the hell was that on the pale guy’s skin – scales?”

“Oh no. Some people here have talked about growing gills, but as I said, no DRO would ensure that kind of genetic manipulation – and without insurance, you can’t really do anything.”

Roman just stared at him.

David pursed his lips. “Okay, so DROs usually bundle health insurance along with contract enforcement and protection from violence. You can also buy divorce insurance, but we should talk about that another time, that’s quite a complicated one... Anyway, if you get sick, the DRO pays for all your current treatment and future costs. So – DROs only make money when the population stays healthy. In ancient China, you paid your doctor every month *until* you got sick – it’s similar to that. So we are pretty obsessed with keeping people healthy – if you eat well, exercise, get sunlight and regular blood work, checkups, all the basics – you pay almost nothing for health insurance. If you gain weight, or your bloodwork shows that you are eating badly, or your muscle and bone mass decline, if you lose vitamin D, your health insurance costs go up.”

Roman scowled. “So you have to give over all of your private health information to some – corporation.”

David looked genuinely shocked. “I don’t know where you are getting your information from – some of your education seems a bit random to me – but there’s no need to insult me by calling my DRO a ‘corporation’!”

“It’s not?”

David leaned forward on the table. Behind his head, outlined in phosphorescent trails in the black water beyond the glass, were the words: “Happy Birthday Debbie!” A cheer and a song went up from a nearby table.

David’s voice was deadly serious. “Listen to me, Roman. Corporations were legal fictions invented by governments to protect the rich.” Seeing the older warrior’s tension, David took a soft step back. “It’s like – if you had a choice of two banks to hold your money – imagine you *had* money – and the first bank had a contract with you that if they lost your money, you would get all the *private* assets of the bank managers – while the second bank said that if they lost your money, they could just declare bankruptcy, and you couldn’t get a penny from anyone, the bank managers would get to keep everything! Where would you put your money?”

Roman thought for a moment. “Yeah, well, the first one, of course,” he said grudgingly.

David nodded. “Sure, right. The corporations in the Old World were these weird half-person legal fictions that allowed corporate managers to take *all* the profits out of the business – while all the *losses* had to be eaten by the shareholders and employees. It was a one-way street for money, and did more than just about anything to promote the rampant pillaging of the general population by the corporate managers. If you make money, you can become rich – if you lose money, you just declare bankruptcy or quit the corporation, and no one can touch your personal assets. It was quite mad, and had nothing to do with the free market – the free market should be driven by *customers*, not by legal activism on the part of the rich, the powerful and the political.”

“Why the hell did they do it then?”

David laughed bitterly. “Ach – the wealthy who make their money in the free-market are always a challenge to governments. Governments always need scapegoats for their own inevitable failures, and they love to point at the wealthy, to strip-mine the resentments of the less-successful. They want to *take* the money of the rich and give it to the poor – but the problem then is that the rich don’t want to make much money, or want to leave for another country. So – they give rich people the legal protection of the ‘corporation’ so they will still want to make money, and stick around. And the media – one of the greatest benefactors of this ‘corporatism’ – constantly repeated that corporations were a feature of the ‘free-market’ – when they were *never* chosen by customers, but rather imposed by governments. In fact, corporations would be specifically *rejected* by customers, if they had any choice – just as you wouldn’t put your money in a bank where the managers could keep their assets if they blew all your cash!”

David’s face was set, hard. “So no, Roman, we are *not* a corporation. We are what is called an ‘entity,’ which means that we are legally tied to each other as a body of business, but if the DRO loses money, and for some reason we can’t fulfil our contracts, I lose everything. Personally. My wallet, my house, my savings, you name it. People can sue me into oblivion until the end of time. My contract rating would be destroyed, no one would *ever* hire me as a manager again – so I have every incentive to be responsible with my customer’s Satoshis. It’s the same everywhere – I would *never* enforce a contract where the managers had no liability for losses. No one would. Anyway, back to health...”

The floating jellyfish returned with their food. The plates were giant oyster shells; meat and vegetables swirled in a dark green soup.

David picked up his spoon and fork. “Health is fascinating... We are invested in the health of our customers – literally, because we can’t make a Satoshi if they get sick. So we are very proactive about making sure they stay healthy – free assessments, personal trainers, Scans whenever they want – or whenever we think they need them, personalized blood-dependent meal plans, you name it. It’s one of the main reasons why we can get people to 130 now. If someone gets sick, we view that as *our* responsibility, for failing to prevent it, so we pay. In the past, it was quite mad – when governments ran health care, they made money when people got and stayed sick – not when they were healthy. It’s the exact *opposite* incentive you would want for a true healthcare system. Back then, almost three quarters of illnesses were the result of people’s bad choices. Obesity was massive, if you’ll excuse the bad joke. Five percent of the population consumed half the healthcare resources. People got sicker and fatter and sicker and fatter, until – well, I’m sure you know what happened.”

Roman finally took a bite – the expression on his face was a clear advertisement for the wonder of the food.

“Mmmmm... Well... What if someone is born with some – defect?”

David nodded. “Life is risky, even for us. DROs are about managing that risk. People take out insurance for birth defects – the price varies on the genetic testing of course. If a baby is born with such a defect, the price of the care is paid for by the DRO.”

“Can they abort?”

“Abortion is a violation of the nonaggression principle. The only time you can use violence is in immediate self-defense. At the same time, parents are not required to take care of their offspring – they can give them up for adoption very easily, if they want.”

“So – what do you do, put a gun to the head of the woman who wants an abortion?”

David shook his head. “You are talking about the problem of criminal violence. Usually, we peacefully torture people who use violence.”

Roman laughed grimly, his lined face lit from above by the electric blue lights of the glittering letters beyond the glass. “Peacefully torture? What the hell are you talking about?”

“We exploit – or hack – the wiring in the human mind that equates social ostracism with torture. You know this better than me – we are herd animals, pack animals; we couldn’t survive in solitude for most of our evolution. To be rejected by the tribe is a death sentence – you can’t protect yourself at night, you can’t hunt well, you can be easily circled by a pack of predators – and even if you survive all *that*, ostracism means genetic death – boom, end of your bloodline.” David tapped his temple in the dark. “That’s how we are wired – social ostracism triggers the same parts of our pain centers that are activated by physical torture. It’s like that horrible bargain in the Old World, when men were told to go

to war for the government – the rulers were smart, they knew how to make men do it – they simply told women to reject men who didn't serve in the military. If enough women did that – and they usually did – then the lizard-brains of the men performed a simple calculation: *if the chance of being seriously wounded or killed in combat is less than the chance of failing to reproduce if I don't go to war, then go to war I will!*

“Access to society is a privilege, not a right. Technology reproduces the intimate knowledge that you have in your tribe about people's habits and virtues. You know everything about everyone; you grew up together and see each other in every kind of situation – DROs reproduce that with contract ratings. If you keep your word, keep the peace, pay your bills, your debts – then everyone knows, and you gain all the rewards of living an honourable life. We are your tribe with better knowledge.”

Roman grunted, taking a sip of water. “So – no privacy – sounds like hell.”

David shrugged. “What privacy do *you* have? In your tribe, everyone knows everyone's business. With us, in the Civ, you can have all the privacy you want – but it will cost you. You can shield your contract rating from everyone; that just means that people don't know how honest you are, so they have to charge extra for doing business with you.”

“So – what do you do with murderers?”

“Prevent them. Good childhoods, Scans...”

“Murders must happen.”

“Yes. Yes, they do happen,” said David softly. “Even with great childhoods, and no obvious health problems, some bad wiring – or bad choices – does produce killers. It's incredibly rare though.”

“So – what do you do with them?” repeated Roman.

“How about you? What do *you* do?”

Roman's lips tightened. “We have a Tribunal, and if the killer is found guilty, he is put to death.”

“We don't do that here. That would be a violation of the NAP, because it's not a situation of immediate self-defense. A murderer has no – economic standing.” David gestured at the distant invisible surface of the ocean. “Everything is privately owned in the Civ – except the wilderness, which was the origin of this conversation between us. Roads, sidewalks, sky buses, homes – land – it's all privately owned, and when people sign contracts with DROs – which is the only real way to function in a complex society – they agree to *never* let convicted criminals use their property. If they do, they also get cut off economically – which means they can't survive either.”

David's darkening eyes grew dreamy.

“When you think of how much power a complex economy has over each individual – everyone needs to have a place to live – to buy food, water, energy, have access to the blockchain – it's endless. Imagine

you have a sore tooth – you have to leave the apartment which someone sold to you – or rented to you – you have to be allowed on a bus, the dentist has to be willing to take your payment – it goes on and on, the amount of contracts that have to be fulfilled just for you to fix your sore tooth. In the Civ, no one will honour the contract of a convicted criminal – any contract at all. That includes his existing property rights, his house and jet pack or whatever – DROs will not enforce property rights contracts for convicted criminals, which he agrees to when he first signs up with the DRO. All of his property reverts to ‘unowned,’ which means anyone can have it – except him.”

David shrugged.

“He has no place to go, no place to stay. He can’t buy anything, use anything – everything he has is deactivated, and he cannot survive in the Civ...”

David took a deep breath, and turned to Roman.

“He has no choice – well, to be fair, he has *one* choice, other than to leave the Civ.”

A thought struck Roman – David could see it rise in his mind, and could see the older man viciously suppress it.

Roman put down his spoon and said, softly: “What is his one choice?”

“He can make restitution. What that restitution is can vary; it’s determined by the DRO with the victim’s family – or the victim, if he or she survived the attack. Conditional rights to participate in the Civ can be maintained if the criminal maintains the peace and pays restitution.”

Roman said: “How many – criminals – take that option?”

“Most do. Criminals always want something for nothing – the root of evil is the desire for the unearned. They don’t want to go and carve out a life in the middle of nowhere, they tend to be greedy and lazy.”

Roman said: “There are exceptions...”

David nodded. The jellyfish returned, but he waved it away.

He turned to Roman and spoke the truth.

“Yes. Your great grandfather was one.”

Chapter 23

There were deaths other than Jane – I seemed to belong to an unlucky caste. I occasionally wondered over the years why I was launched into life amongst a buckshot of tiny gravestones – it probably had something to do with the stress of wealth.

In college, when I took a class on statistics, I learned about the bell curve – outliers, and regressions to the mean, you know. Our parents were remarkable – literally one in a million at times – and we were, as their children, likely to be above average, but nowhere near their level. A friend of mine’s father was a great singer, and my friend was also good at carrying a tune, but couldn’t silence a room like his dad.

We were the second generation, shadowed by the vain ignorance of our elders. When you succeed in life, it’s so easy to swell yourself by saying that you are responsible for *all* of your success.

Yeah, there is *some* willpower involved, *some* personal responsibility – but a very large chunk of it has to do with accidental factors; where you are born, who you are born to, what language you learn as a child, how much money is around, how attractive you are, what your health is like, your height, your hair – and your raw intelligence, which is mostly genetic, thanks mom!

Every kid I knew of a famous sportsman played that sport – and way above average, but not as well as their dad. Every kid I knew from a famous writer had seriously good language skills, but...

But the sports dads genuinely believed that it was simply grit and willpower and a commitment to training that got them to the top. They loved their lives, they wanted their kids to be happy, so obviously the kids had to live their fathers’ lives.

“Work harder” works *if* you have a massive amount of raw ability, programmed into your mind and body by the ineffable universe. A friend of mine was an underwear model – he went to the gym three hours a day, and refused to drink any liquids for two days before a photo shoot, so his skin would be paper-thin over his rippled abs.

“Sure,” I said, “that makes sense, because you’re getting paid tens of thousands of dollars for that photo shoot – and because your genetics gifted you with a lean physique to begin with.”

A lot of my friends got sucked into that “willpower” stuff, and it was pretty tragic.

One friend of mine wanted to play football like his dad, and began using steroids at the age of fourteen, because he just didn’t have his dad’s natural bulk.

We were both dirt-bike fanatics – not motorized, just pedal. As he grew in size, he shrank in stability. We liked doing cool tricks on our bikes, but his tricks got more and more deranged, until I really began to fear for his safety. I remember biking out back of a factory once with him, and he just pedaled his bike right off a wall about 6 feet above the ground. He made it, giving a crazy-eyed *whoop*, having no idea how lucky he was it seems.

The steroids drove him crazy. One night, we were biking back to our neighbourhood, and I had to swerve to avoid a rock on the sidewalk.

“You cut me off!” he snarled at me.

I’ll be honest – I was kind of intimidated by his size and temper, so I had been deferring to him for a couple of months – but I’d had enough.

“You were tailgating!” I shot back.

His eyes widened in the dark, and I realized how black they looked. His veined biceps looked like giant lined sausages.

He escalated, but I refused to back down.

He demanded that we return to the rock and reenact the entire scenario in slow motion. That was too crazy for me; like another friend of mine, the daughter of a famous lawyer, who had a dispute with her friends about Springsteen concert tickets, and wanted to conduct an entire mock trial in her living room...

I sighed. “I’m not going back to reenact this stupid swerve, bro – you were too close behind me, so when I swerved, you almost crashed! That’s it, *let it gooo...*”

I insultingly put a little trill at the end of my voice, reminding him of a famous song for kids.

What can I say? I was pissed.

He demanded that I *admit* that I had cut him off.

I refused, insisting that the problem was that *he* was tailgating, and on and on it went, round and round.

It was my fault, really. He escalated because he was used to me deferring to him. My bad – I never did *that* again in my life...

He doubled down to the point of neck-veined screaming, so then – I just got on my bike and rode away.

It was a strange and terrifying moment when I heard him get on his bike, skid around, and crank his meaty legs to pedal after me.

He was screaming with rage like a demon under a priest; my heart began to thump painfully in my chest.

He was a stronger biker than me – because of the steroids mostly – and so he began trying to drive his bike into mine sideways, demanding to know if he was still “TAILGATING!?!?”

It was a crazy desperate battle, really. About half a block from my house, I had to slow down, to feel for the keys in my front left pocket – and he almost rammed me into a tree at high speed.

I dropped my bike as soon as I got to our front lawn, and sprinted – dodging left and right like trying to evade a sniper – up to our side door. He came screaming and roaring up the driveway, aiming directly at me. I still remember – and my heart still pounds – at the memory of fumbling with my keys, trying jam the right one into the lock.

I yanked the door open, turned and slammed it shut, sweat pouring from my forehead, despite the coolness of the evening.

He pounded on the door maniacally, his puberty-broken voice hoarse from screaming.

Thank *God* no one else was home! And we had a big property.

I crept to the upstairs balcony, and watched through the plump stone pillars as he picked up his heavy dirt bike and threw it back and forth, sparks flying from the tarmac as the steel of his wheels hit the black of the driveway.

Eventually, he pedaled off, his wheels wobbling, bent from his raging impacts.

He tried to give my bike a kick as he passed, then squiggled off into the night...

About a year later, he called demanding that I return some football of his he claimed I had – other than that, I had no more contact with him.

I almost never saw him at school again – now, when I think back, I guess he kept seeing me first and avoiding me.

And then, about a year after high school, I read that he had died on a motorcycle – decapitated by running into a truck, because he didn't stop in time.

Tailgating...

And people try to tell me that there are coincidences in life.

We can *move on* – that's really the essence of power, leaving people behind without a second glance.

We all did that to Jane's parents, because there is no conformity without enforcement. And it was amazing to see, it was the first real *flex* I had seen from my parents' generation. No one was in charge – to my knowledge – no memo went out, no smoke signals drifted across the evening sky, but everyone silently agreed to exclude them.

Ostracism is the most powerful weapon in the known universe.

I think they knew it was coming; I think they knew the price of continued acceptance, and just weren't willing to pay it.

It's like my dad always said: *if you want to be successful, just figure out the price of success – and pay it.*

It's the same with – integrity, I guess. If you want to have integrity, just figure out the price of integrity, and pay it!

I never quite understood their position, frankly. Talk about locking the barn door *after* the horse has left!

I mean, what is the point of blowing up your social relationships *after* your daughter has died – especially if you believe that some – toxicity in those social relationships was responsible for her death?

If your social relationships are okay, don't blow them up.

If your social relationships have cost you your daughter, then don't blow them up – for the simple reason that blowing them up only makes things *worse!*

If you find out that you can live without these 'toxic' social relationships, then you will just kick yourself forever for not separating from us *before* your daughter killed herself.

Once we take your daughter, we own you, like it or not.

I can respect anyone who bails out *before* disaster. I don't have a shred of respect for people who bail out *after* disaster – it's just a silly cartoon comedy, like a parachute opening after some idiot has fallen to his death.

No, they had to go – they made that decision, we simply respected it.

And where could they go?

Nowhere.

You find your tribe, you keep your tribe, or you end up all alone – with less than nothing, just the memory of something...

Because they were new money, Jane's parents couldn't go back to whatever trailer park they crawled out from under; they would just face endless resentments and spoken – or unspoken – accusations that 'Oh, you think you're *better* than us!'

God, what a pathetic and mealy-mouthed statement!

*Of course we think we are better than you! And guess what, Cletus - people **agree**, that's why **we** are wealthy!*

Everyone talks about wealth like it just falls out of the sky and lands on some people by chance.

That's not wealth – that's meteors, and the lottery.

Wealth is hard to make, harder to keep.

Everyone believes that wealth buys freedom, but becoming wealthy generally requires really good social skills – the real money is always in networking, in negotiation – which means that you have to have a fairly desperate need for people to like you – because if people *don't* like you, they won't give you their money!

You get the money by being a people-pleaser – and then you get a brand-new social circle who knows *exactly* how desperate you are for their continued approval, because they're the same way!

You can't go back to where you came from, and you have to please everyone you end up with.

We get power over you, because you *need* our approval – because we are all you’ve got now.

So yes, when you land on our doorstep, we own you.

Does that sound like freedom?

I suppose you could retreat to some ivory tower of naval-gazing contemplation – you could buy a remote island and live off fish and sunlight – but those people are inconsequential to the world, who cares what they do?

You conform, or you are *banished*.

Chapter 24

I wake up suddenly, and feel wretched nausea churning through my innards.

God, I haven't thought of my headless friend in decades, why is he haunting the carved channels of my memory now..?

The figure to my left has moved closer. I can't tell in the gloom whether Jane has moved her chair, or is just leaning forward, her dark hair hanging over her eyes like a black awning.

What kind of insanity is this?

The chill, the nausea – it's because I have just experienced a complete reversal of everything that is human.

The waking world is supposed to be sane; dreams are the toxicity-release of nightly madness...

But I fell asleep, here – it feels that way, at least, I really have no idea what is going on anymore – and I walked through perfectly lucid memories, resurrected in my mind with electric clarity. Nothing went awry, no physics were violated, everything – and everyone – came back to life as if they were a movie briefly paused for a snack break. Gerhart stayed ostracized, my friend stayed dead, Jane stayed dead...

My waking life is madness; dreams are my only sanity...

Jane has been waiting for me in this room for decades. Everything I took from her, she will now take from me – and not for a week or a month, but for eternity...

You run from the lessons of your youth, then spend forever in regret for what you failed to learn...

But – would Jane want to punish me?

When I think of those who wronged me, in the past, I don't feel much anger – some frustration, that I lost at the game of life, in part, but not real anger, because – because...

Because Jane was pure...

Pure – what the hell does that mean? I interrogate the alien voice – and get another deep spinal chill, remembering that the voice exists in both my waking and my dream life – it can pass between the barriers of madness and sanity...

Unless my waking world is now the hell of walking through my history, helpless to change it – and when I fall asleep, I end up in this little room with the dead girl of my doing...

I try to move my arms – it is a violent attempt, but they barely seem to twitch.

Jane slowly raises her head.

I stare straight up, then close my eyes, hoping that she imagines I have drifted off back to sleep – the sleep where she is alive again, in her youth, before her step, her fall...

Jane clears her throat – and it sounds too deep, too guttural, almost like a hint of a man’s voice – and then a tear escapes my left eye as I remember that she hung herself, and is trying to speak through a broken neck...

“Welcome back,” she says – again, in a gravelly masculine voice.

The light in the room – I can’t find the source – brightens slightly.

Can a man cry in his sleep?

A deep anger grips me, at the idea of running from the dead.

If she has power in the afterlife, then so do I!

I open my eyes, turn my head – and see – and see...

Jane lifts her head, pulls her hair back – and – and, it is not Jane at all, but a man with a black beard.

Something faint is deep-screaming in my ears as the man – *did Jane have a brother?* – puts his hand on my left arm, over the covers – and I am wildly relieved to feel the pressure of his palm.

“You made it,” the man says gently. “We welcome you.”

“Where – where am I?” I whisper – and feel another flood of relief that my voice seems to work.

The man says: “I have no idea how to answer that. You are not dead. You are where you paid to be.”

“What?”

The man nods slowly.

“Your name is Louis Staytin. You have recovered from a serious illness, and you have been out for some time. I am not a doctor – just someone – watching over you.”

I have memories of cheesy movies where men wake from comas and always ask the same question.

I will not conform...

But then I do.

“How long have I been out?”

The man stares at me for a moment. “It’s been a while, let’s take this one step at a time – literally. What do you remember last, before...” The man gestures at the room.

I swallow painfully. The man lifts a cup and gives me a sip of ice water.

“I – I can mostly remember my childhood, my – youth... And the word – was I – the President?”

The man seems oddly relieved, and nods vigorously. “You were – you were the President.”

I feel anger again. “Then I still am – you are never a *former* President!”

“That is true, my apologies,” said the man – and I find the phrasing annoying... *He didn’t say that he apologizes, only that his apologies exist somewhere...*

“I want – I want to see my wife, my children – why are they not here?”

The bearded man purses his lips. “Even with so long to consider your questions – which are perfectly sensible, and totally predictable... We need to establish your physical health before anything else. You are clear of the heart disease, I know that for sure...”

Heart disease...

A vague memory swims at the edge of my mind, like a shy shark.

A bald doctor – his wrinkles end where his hair used to be – telling me that there is *nothing more to be done* – that I can be *made comfortable* – but that there are still options – which confused me, and confuses me now...

“I feel – I feel disoriented, but all right. Why can’t I move my toes?”

“Oh, sorry.” The man made a gesture, and feeling came flooding back to my extremities.

“Wha...” I cry out with the sudden sensation.

“I’m doing this very badly, I’m so sorry,” says the man, half-standing. “Let me get your family.”

My heart pounds in my chest – reminding me of that raging night with my friend on the dirt bike – and I remember being afraid of my heartbeat, in the past, near the – end.

The full-body sensation overwhelms me, and I

dark

My eyes open at the same time as my door, the white door that leads to wherever...

My God!

My wife strides into the room, her handkerchief covering her mouth...

Chapter 25

Alice's mentor was so ancient that it came to no one's surprise whatsoever that his name was Adam.

Shortly after her confinement at the top of Smudge Mountain – and the resulting media firestorm that accompanied such a radically unusual occurrence – Alice decided what to do with her life.

She made an appointment with Adam, who lived in a cave – a cave with many modern amenities, but still a cave.

Adam loved the law – like many philosophers, because it's the practical engineering of abstract reason, words made flesh and fist – and hated Plato so much that he actually went to live in a cave. It had high ceilings and endless bookshelves and could be sealed from the outside and cooled in the summer – and Adam had installed a fire which cast the shadows of hung shapes against the dark recesses of the cave, which he stared at while writing, to thumb his nose at the ancient Athenian totalitarian.

Adam had written the Basic Law, which was the template for most DRO contracts. He had completed it at the age of 55 – which seemed young for such a feat – but he argued that things seem endlessly complicated when you're young – and also when you're old – but there is a time of luminous clarity at the peak of middle age, when the world is written in universal laws, not petty specific details.

He only took in-person visits, so Alice went out early one morning.

He boiled some mint tea and welcomed her.

"Adam, I think I have found my Bliss," she said, without preamble.

He nodded slowly. "As a wizened old elder, I feel obligated – although it is kind of a cliché – to tell you that you never just *think* you have found your Bliss – you know."

"You knew?"

"Mentoring? Oh yes. Although when I was a kid, it was called 'teaching.' But that word got into such disrepute, we couldn't use it ever again."

"How old are you?"

"140."

Alice whistled – not just because she felt she had to, but because she wanted to show off a recently-acquired skill.

“So – you remember the Cataclysms.”

His face seemed to go slack, losing all animation. “I do. I’m one of the few.”

“Why are kids not supposed to ask about those – that – whatever they are?”

Adam shrugged. “You are smart enough to know that is an unfair question.”

Alice nodded. “You know that just makes kids more curious, right?”

“We know.”

There was a pause. Something skittered outside the cave opening, and Alice deeply inhaled the relaxing scent of the mint tea.

Adam said: “Your Bliss.”

Alice jumped up, as if electrified. She paced back and forth, her hands gesticulating.

“You know, I kind of got – touched by the Old World, in a way. I never felt it vividly – of course I can’t, I’m too young – but now I feel like – like an archaeologist, studying some ancient civilization, and the people who were dust come back to life, or something like that, I’m not putting it very well, but...”

Alice took a deep breath. She knew that it was considered extraordinarily rude to interrupt a child, so she felt in no rush to collect her thoughts.

“I had this all worked out in my head, but now that I’m talking about it, my thoughts are like a bunch of startled birds. I want to know about the law. I know we don’t have that anymore – my dad has explained some of it to me – but I want to know about the old law. The history of how things used to be. Tell me – Adam, do you think that we will ever forget how bad things were, and go back?”

The old man paused. “I’m not sure if that’s a rhetorical question.”

“Wasn’t that always the way, though, in the past, that disaster would follow disaster, and no one would ever learn anything for more than a generation or so?”

Adam nodded.

“Why didn’t they learn anything? Why did it have to get so bad? They had books and flat-movies, and the hyper-net...”

“Internet,” Adam murmured.

“Yes, sorry, Internet. They had access to every slice and dice of information at their fingertips, but they learned nothing! I know that when I was taken, on the mountain, with Emily, that it was a piece of the

past, cutting into the present – but I can't shake the feeling that it could also be our future, and I've been researching some of these – cycles of history, and I guess I'm kind of worried that we're just at the top of another cycle, and everything that was bad and old could become new and alive again."

Adam nodded slowly. "You are not alone in that fear. The philosophers who founded how we live now spent a lot of time thinking about how to avoid that kind of – repetition. There was a big movement, towards the end of the Cataclysms, to go back to the land and give up on civilization completely, because people were so exhausted from civilization leading inevitably to – brutality and barbarism. Why build a tower just to have history knock it down? What's the point of carving a whole civilization out of the brutal prehistory of the species, just to have that prehistory become the future, and swallow every city up whole? And the Christians in particular had a mission, to civilize the world as a whole, to bring their universal values to every corner of the planet, but this 'caring about everyone' was used against them. They wanted to help the helpless, so everyone pretended to be helpless to get resources, and the Christians tore their own arms off trying to lift the world, so to speak. They didn't know enough – they knew just enough to make things worse – a constant problem in the past."

Alice stared into her green cup. Old tendrils of historical air seemed to be leeching the heat from her fingers.

"Tell me about the law."

"You know about the few historical nations that remain... Well, the whole world was like that, long ago. The land was divided into sections, and a tiny minority of people controlled the legal use of violence in those sections."

Alice blinked. "The legal use of violence? But everyone has that, that's self-defense..."

Adam shook his head, his hooded eyes dark. "Oh no, precious child. This tiny group of people could *initiate* the use of force against their disarmed subjects."

"Initiate?" echoed Alice, deep shock in her voice.

"Yes, that was the cycle... Rulers took money from people by force – more and more every year. People were oppressed by their rulers, until the rulers took so much money that they destroyed the economy, or the people rose up and attacked them – or both. And then the people would claw back some of the power of the rulers, keeping more of their own money. And then the economy would start growing again, the wealth of the region would increase, and the rulers would start taking more and more money – but the people had so much wealth that they could afford to pay off the rulers to be left in peace – until the rulers ended up taking too much money again, having too much power, controlling too many people, and then the collapse would begin all over again."

"And how did the law – how did the law do this?"

"I don't know if you've ever heard about fairytales..."

“Old stories about magic? I’ve heard of them, but I’ve never heard one.”

Adam grunted. “Good thing too. Magic always means madness, and we have finally found how to live in a sane world. Magic was the idea that certain words – magic spells – could change reality – like summon fire, move items, create illusions, disguise people, all sorts of mad stuff. Experts in this magic were called wizards or sorcerers or – or *lawyers*, as they were known later. Once upon a time, a ‘wizard’ could put a curse on you, and you would have to give him money to remove that curse, or keep it at bay. Later, people were threatened with hell, and had to give priests money to stay out of it. When the scientific revolution happened, and people stopped believing in magic, the people who were wizards invented a new curse called the ‘Law,’ and you had to give *them* money, otherwise they would use the ‘Law’ – a kind of magic curse – to put you in prison, where unbelievably terrible things would happen to you. In other words, when people stopped believing in hell, the wizards had to become lawyers – or politicians – and create ‘hell on earth’ so that their magic words could still get resources and obedience out of people.”

Alice shuddered. “Sounds like a madhouse.”

“Hey!” cried Adam loudly, startling Alice. He pointed a wizened finger at her. “Don’t ever do that, please – don’t insult asylums. It’s not madness, it wasn’t a madhouse – that’s like calling a zoo a madhouse for animals. No – it’s just a place where the animals are caged so that the owners of the zoo can profit from them.”

“Sorry about that,” said Alice. “You’re right. It wasn’t madness. But it’s all very abstract to me – can you give me a real example?”

“Sure, let’s start with...” Adam frowned, and Alice could almost directly see the old man’s brain sifting through the horrors of the past, to provide something composed of lesser horrors to her waiting mind.

“Okay – do you know what ‘counterfeiting’ is?”

Alice shook her head.

Adam got up to refill his tea. “Okay, well – in the past, there was no bitcoin, no blockchain. Way back, gold was money, because gold is limited and valuable, and can be used for more than one thing – money, of course, but also jewelry – and later, industrial production, just like now. You can divide gold into smaller pieces and it doesn’t lose value. You can also melt it and join it back together, you get the idea. Well, the rulers demanded to be paid in gold for most economic transactions. It was called a tax...”

Alice started. “Wait, what, *every* transaction?”

“Sure.”

Alice gestured helplessly. “What does that mean?”

“So – if you earned a thousand dollars, you had to give five hundred to the rulers, or be thrown into one of their torture prisons.”

“Five hundred... Why? What value did they add?”

“Well, they claimed to protect people’s property rights...”

Alice snorted. “How can they claim to protect property rights, while forcing people to give them money? That’s like a thief promising to keep your wallet safe by stealing it! Isn’t that – the wildest contradiction?”

Adam held up his hands. “Listen – I’m happy to tell you these things, but you’re going to have to check your outrage. You’re looking for reason, morality and consistency, but we are in the realm of sorcery here. The blackest magic. Have you ever tried to figure out the physics of your nightly dreams? You can’t – it’s the wrong standard completely. I will get to *why* people accepted this – but first we have to understand what they were accepting. Okay? Good.”

A rather hypnotic *clanking* drifted through the air, as Adam stirred his tea.

“Ten years ago, I wouldn’t have forgotten what I was talking about,” he murmured.

“The rulers stole gold from every transaction...”

Adam snapped his fingers. “Right, thank you. So – the rulers took gold, kept a lot of it for themselves, and then handed out some to their friends and relatives – and the enforcers, of course. The enforcers were the citizens willing to initiate the use of force against their fellow citizens for money. Yes, I know, I know. Outrageous. But that’s most of human history – almost all of it, up until the last century or so.”

Alice frowned. “I think I get it – I think I do, it’s very strange, but – I don’t quite understand why it was so unstable...”

Adam interlaced his fingers and pressed the heels of his hands outward. “Violence is never stable, Alice. Because the rulers didn’t add any value, but rather were taking value *away*, they had to create the *illusion* of value – otherwise the citizens would be – would get wise to the predation. So – what did they do? How do you pretend to *add* value, when you are just taking it away?”

Alice stared blankly, shaking her head slowly. “I don’t – I have no idea. Create – art? Build things?”

Adam smiled, a little sadly. “It is actually testament to the beauty of the modern world that you have no *idea* how any of this worked! Sorry, I forgot to put mental quotes around that – ‘worked.’ All right – the rulers could *add* gold to the economy in many different ways – they could borrow gold from bankers, or other rulers. Or, they could use *less* gold per coin, so that they might get a thousand coins, instead of five hundred, from the same amount of gold.”

“But – that’s not adding any real value, right?”

Adam laughed. “Oh of course not – in fact, it’s just another kind of stealing. It’s hard for you to understand, because the number of Satoshis and Bitcoins cannot be increased, and no one controls the

entire financial system – but back then...” He whistled. “...things were very different *indeed*. If you could somehow magically double the number of Bitcoins, what would happen to the price of everything?”

“It would double,” said Alice instantly.

Adam snapped his fingers, pointing at her. “Exactly, perfect, that’s the kind of economic instinct that everyone has – unless it’s bullied and trained out of them. Yes, they inflate prices. However, it’s *perfect* for the rulers – when they double the number of coins, they and their friends get to spend those coins at *full value*, while people who get those coins later pay sometimes more than double for everything that used to be cheaper.”

Alice smiled with illumination. “Oh, and – and everyone would just blame the shopkeepers, rather than the rulers.”

Adam nodded. “Oh yes, obviously – the *rulers* would also blame shopkeepers, and threaten them for ‘price gouging,’ which was another curse invented to cover up the rising prices that resulted from the inflation of the money supply – of the gold.”

Alice shook her head. “But surely – but surely people would figure this out quickly, and know what was going on...”

“You would think so – you would think so *now*, for sure, because – well for about a billion reasons. But this is what no one understood, really, until much more recently – the rulers didn’t really rule over the people, the *citizens*, the working population. The rulers ruled over the *children* – everything else, every other disaster, was just a long shadow cast by that initial violent control over the young.”

Alice blinked. “I don’t know what you mean, Adam. The rulers – raised the children?”

Adam shrugged sadly. “It’s hard to strangle a thousand individuals – but if you can give them one neck between them all, you only have to strangle one. Sorry, that was a little inappropriate, and badly worded.” He took a breath deep into his creaking lungs. “The real enforcers were the *teachers*, which is why we don’t use that word anymore. There was a word called *curriculum*, which was the plan of instruction that every teacher in the region had to follow – or lose his job, or *her* job, later on. Once the rulers could define everything that the children had to ‘learn,’ millions and millions of children were all told the same lies.”

Alice jumped up, frustrated. “But – but kids are great at figuring out lies – you just told me that yourself, when I knew what happened to the prices.”

“Children *are* great at figuring out lies – they are original humans, blank slates, un-gouged by the swords of the rulers. But even deeper than their capacity to detect falsehood is their need to bond with their parents – and it was that bond that was used to kill their capacity for honesty.”

“Can you – draw this out?”

Adam laughed. “No, you will get it in a moment. Look – for most of human evolution, food was very scarce – and there was no easy way to control fertility, so women had a lot of children. Children who displeased their parents would inevitably get less food, and were thus less likely to survive. Pleasing parents is *absolutely necessary* for survival – at least until puberty, when you get the ability to hunt for your own food. In other words: we imprint very strongly. The rulers know all about this, and use it to control the population. They take money from parents – by force of course – and use it to pay the teachers who lie to their children. The children get a sense of the lies – but if they push back against these lies, their parents get angry at them – partly because the parents were told the same lies, and partly because knowing the truth about an evil society can make you mad – but mostly because we evolved to please our parents, so we swallow the lies rather than stay honest. It’s hard for children to imagine that their parents willingly and voluntarily hand them over to liars working for the rulers. The children grow up defending the lies – which means defending the liars – which means defending the parents. Anyone who questions the lies is actually questioning the loyalty the children have to their parents – which means undermining their very capacity to survive. Cornered animals fight to the death; indoctrinated delusions do the same. When you raise children in unreality – through violence – they become reactionary and hostile to the truth. The lies form a kind of immune system for their insanity, making it impervious to reason and evidence. You, my dear, have been raised to honour and respect the truth, because we do things so differently in the here and now – but you are asking about the past, the lid of which I have opened.”

Alice’s face was pale. “It’s like a horror movie that never ends.”

“But it did,” said Adam softly. “It finally did.”

He shook off the imaginary spiderwebs of ancient history.

“But – back to counterfeiting. The rulers pretended to add value to the economy by creating money out of thin air. This was called ‘currency,’ and it was of course perfectly legal. To put it another way, the ‘law’ removed the curse called ‘jail’ from the counterfeiting of the rulers. Ah, but if you were a *citizen* caught watering down the money, you were punished with jail or maiming. To be more clear: the ‘law’ put a curse on one man for counterfeiting, but lifted that curse for another man who counterfeited, depending if he was a ruler, or the ruled. In fact – and you might not believe me, but I swear that it’s true – it could even be the same man, depending on whether he was a ruler, or – if he left the ruling class – a citizen. You could wake up one day with the ‘law’ keeping you safe, and the next day the ‘law’ would kill you.”

“How would – how would people know the law?”

“Oh, well, that was the black beauty of it all! *Ignorance of the law was no excuse, but no one knew the law!*”

Alice looked up, shocked. “What do you mean? The law must’ve been – written down, somewhere.”

Adam smiled grimly. “Oh, it was – in fact, it was written down everywhere! The ‘law’ was so lengthy, complicated and convoluted that not one single person – not even the greatest expert in the ‘law’ – knew the entirety of the ‘law.’” He ticked off his fingers. “There were laws for criminals, laws for businesses, laws for families, laws for taxation – another magic word to cover up the word ‘theft’ – thousands and thousands of laws, some of which contradicted each other – and each of these laws had language that could be interpreted any number of ways – by design of course – so that people were fully responsible for knowing the unknowable, and understanding that which could never be objectively explained. The ‘law’ was simply a permission slip for the rulers to use violence. The ‘law’ was an opinion with a gun.”

Alice swallowed. “This must – this must have been known, at the time.”

“Except for a very few, it really wasn’t.”

Adam spread his fingers and slowly spiraled his hands together.

“Everything which is centralized becomes corrupt. If you put power in the hands of a few people, those people will become corrupt – or, if they are somehow immune from corruption, they will be replaced by corrupt people, who will cheat them out of the power the *most* corrupt always want. Competition in the free-market is the only antidote to the entropy – the inevitability – of human corruption. This is why we can never *ever* have only one DRO, or only *one* curriculum, or a central control of currency. Everything and everyone that is forcibly imposed on others degrades into rank corruption and evil. I mean – imagine if your father ran the only DRO – no, forget your father, at least in this example. Imagine that your worst enemy – one of the boys from Smudge Mountain perhaps – had violent control over the only DRO allowed to exist. Imagine that he controlled *all* the currency, and *all* the education of *all* the children, and could create any rule he wanted – and interpret those rules any way he wanted – and paid millions of enforcers to point weapons at anyone who disagreed with him. Imagine what a terrible and delusional man-God he would turn into. Imagine how coldhearted and cruel and – *inhuman* he would become. Empathy is like a copper wire – put too much power through it, it just breaks. The power to initiate violence destroys the soul – which means only the soulless want to use it. The Old World was a giant invitation for evil to rule the good.”

Adam’s eyes had grown feverish, intense.

“If everyone is good, you don’t need rulers. If everyone is evil, you can’t have rulers, because that guarantees the rule of evil. If the majority of people are evil, you can’t have rulers, for the same reason. If the majority of people are good, you *still* can’t have rulers, because only the evil will want to have power over the good – which eliminates people’s capacity to be good, because you cannot be virtuous if you are ruled over by evildoers. There was no possibility that human rule could lead to anything *other* than rank and bottomless evil. These rulers were contained by disaster and revolution – for a time – but they always grew back, grew back their power over others, crushing freedom and productivity and virtue in their damn bloody fists. The only solution – the solution that was finally found – was the *nonaggression principle*, the ethics of universally preferable behaviour, and the peaceful and rational

raising of children. Tell me this, Alice: have you ever wanted to violently rule over another human being?"

Alice shuddered. "Of course not!"

"And the boys, on the Mountain?"

She paused. "They did, yes."

Adam nodded. "Right. When society stopped ruling over children, we stopped raising children thirsty to rule over others."

He snapped his bony fingers once more.

"We broke the cycle by accepting that no man or woman alive can handle power. We broke the cycle by convincing parents to *stop* ruling over their children, and so feeding the power of the rulers who repeatedly destroyed humanity for the past – tens of thousands of years. The solution was so simple that it took forever to realize!"

Alice considered his speech for a long while.

"I don't see how parenting creates tyranny,"

"Not current parenting," said Adam. "Why have you never had the desire to violently rule over another human being?"

Alice paused. "It would be – horrible."

"Why? If you rule over others, you can get a lot of resources. Money, food, the thrill of obedience..."

"I can get my own resources, thank you very much. And I don't think – I don't think that seeing fear and subjugation in someone else's eyes would be thrilling at all. It would be horrible, I would just imagine myself in their shoes, on their bended knees."

"Right."

Adam nodded in satisfaction.

"You know about painkillers, right?"

"Yes, my grandfather had a back problem, he took opioids."

"Did he become addicted?"

"Not to my knowledge. I don't think so."

“Right, because he was raised well.” Adam stood up and paced slowly around the fire, like a strolling planet in a tiny solar system.

“I want you to imagine something. Imagine that mothers took a powerful and addictive drug during pregnancy – and fed that drug to their babies – not just through breastmilk, but directly. Then, imagine that the children were locked up in schools that continued to feed them this addictive drug, and it was everywhere in their life, as teenagers, as adults – it could not be escaped.”

Adam paused.

“In these circumstances, would you say that it was human nature to be addicted?”

Alice shook her head. “No. No, of course not. If it was natural, it wouldn’t need to be inflicted from the outside.”

Adam nodded. “If you took nomadic animals, and put them in a small field surrounded by an electrified fence – and within a few generations, the offspring of those animals no longer roamed – would you then say that it was the *nature* of that animal to remain in one place?”

“No.”

“Right. Humanity was confined, controlled, brutalized, for almost all of our evolution. And the purpose of all that trauma was to take away our humanity, to push us from the path of our natural evolution...”

“No,” said Alice firmly.

Adam smiled. “Go on?”

She pursed her lips. “If this trauma was common to all human evolution, then it *was* natural to us.”

“But didn’t you – just say that if it *was* natural, it would not need to be externally applied?”

Alice cocked her head. “It is – natural for us to use violence on each other, I think – that’s what the evidence you are telling me clearly shows.”

“Very good. Now we get to the essence of humanity, which is a very powerful thing. We will come back to the addicted babies, but let us talk now about *justifications*. Tell me – does the lion lecture the zebra before eating it?”

Alice smiled. “I’m going to go with a big ‘no’ on that.”

Adam narrowed his eyes. “Are you sure? Doesn’t the lion say to the zebra: ‘It is moral for you to submit yourself to my appetite, and it would be very selfish for you to refuse to give your flesh to feed my little lion cubs! Only the most selfish and evil zebras would run away, and force my lovely family to starve to death. Have a thought for creatures other than your own selves, my zebras, and surrender yourself to us!’”

“I must have missed that documentary.”

Adam smiled and spread his hands. “Between the lion and the zebra, it is an open game. The lion chases, the zebra tries to escape, and whoever wins – wins. There is no need to justify either the chasing or the running.”

Adam poured another half cup of tea. As his passion grew, he started waving it around – hence the need to only fill it halfway.

“However, human rulers feel a bottomless need to *justify* their power. Indeed, without that justification, ruling people is impossible. Everyone *used* to think that morality was invented because people were interested in being good – and, like most things in history, the exact opposite was the case. What was called ‘morality’ *was invented to control and subjugate human beings*. ‘Morality’ was defined as subjugation to virtue – and virtue was always defined as subjugation to the magic ‘laws’ of the rulers. Being a ‘good citizen’ always meant ‘obeying the law.’”

Adam paused, and Alice could see that it was taking him a moment to organize his thoughts, because there was so much to convey...

“As we are talking,” said Adam, “do you think you are getting any closer to seeing the modern version of the laws as your bliss?”

Alice nodded without hesitation.

Adam closed his eyes, deep satisfaction radiating from his wizened face. “Very well, now I will initiate you into the mysteries of history. In the past, there was a massive contradiction in all human societies, which had to be skirted around and evaded in order for those societies to pretend to function, at least for a while. The contradiction was *the rules inflicted on children versus the rules the rulers obeyed*. What was *expressly forbidden* to the children was *expressly encouraged* for the rulers! Children were told *not* to hit, *not* to steal, and *never* to use violence to get what they want – but the rulers threatened citizens with endless violence for failure to comply with their magic ‘laws.’ Children were told that it was deeply immoral to use violence – but the *entire* foundation of the *entire* society they lived in was *based on violence* – taxation, regulation, laws of every kind!

“Now, as you so wisely told me earlier, children have an amazing ability to detect lies – and in particular, when they become teenagers, to detect *hypocrisy*. A mother – and it was usually mothers, sadly – would hit her son for hitting another child, yelling at her son that it was *immoral to hit*.” Adam smiled grimly. “It was quite a brain-twister, I can tell you – well, you can imagine! Parents would tell their children that it was immoral to use force to take money – and then would send them to schools which only existed because the rulers used force to take the money from the parents to pay for those schools! Teachers would tell children not to bully – the very same teachers who were happy to have their fellow citizens *sent to jail* if they tried to avoid paying the teacher’s salary!”

“They were almost like a – different species...” murmured Alice, her eyes wide.

“I know what you mean, but try to avoid that kind of thinking – remember the animal in the tiny enclosure, losing its natural self to electric fences. It’s not a different species – it’s just a punished and controlled animal.”

“Okay.”

“So – children in the past were given strict, objective and universal moral values – the nonaggression principle and a respect for property rights – and then they grew into – and tried to live in – a society that only existed due to its *complete violation of the nonaggression principle and the respect for property rights!*”

Some tea slopped over the side of Adam’s cup. He didn’t seem to notice.

“How is this achieved? How is this possible? Well, an unholy bargain...” Adam shook his head slightly, then rose and started walking around the fire again. “Sorry, that means a very evil bargain – was struck, between the rulers and the parents. The parents acted as agents for the rulers by training their children to be useful citizens – more obedient tax livestock – while the rulers encouraged the punishment of any adult children who awoke to the rank hypocrisy of their parents.” Adam took a deep breath. “I don’t want you to think that this was conscious, or willed, or subject to a modern moral analysis – any more than we would blame a peasant ten thousand years ago for believing that the world was flat.”

Colour rose in Alice’s cheeks. “I don’t agree! In fact, I couldn’t disagree more strongly!”

“Yes?”

Alice rose in agitation. “Well, it’s one thing to talk about an ancient peasant, who walked on the world he felt was flat – and saw as flat – and had no scientific knowledge to think otherwise – but it’s *totally* another thing – another thing *entirely* – to inflict universal morals on your children, and then punish them for following – for acting as if those universal morals *were in fact universal*. That would be like teaching your children that the world was round, and then punishing them as adults for trying to navigate the world as if it were round! It’s a self-contained hypocrisy – not a lack of knowledge or a narrowness of perspective. You don’t need access to any outside information to know that you are contradicting yourself – when you rankly contradict yourself between being a parent and being a – what was it, citizen?”

Adam nodded.

“Oh no, they don’t get off the hook, they don’t get off that easy!”

Alice shuddered, struggling to find the words.

“You’re literally standing over a child with your – fist – raised, punching – so horrible – *punching* your child while telling your child *not to hit anyone*, that hitting is totally *immoral* and *wrong*. That’s a bubble, that’s an island – I don’t know how to put this – but you don’t need any outside information to know that you are contradicting yourself – violently, *literally*, in this case! I don’t agree with this – lack of

judgement about the past. You're suggesting that we do for the parents what the rulers back *then* did for the parents – create excuses, create bubbles and reversals and – eddies in the river of morality, where time goes backward and up is down and black is white and – no, I won't accept it, I won't accept it at all!"

Adam nodded slowly. "That time on the mountain changed you."

"For the better I think!" said Alice fiercely.

"I don't disagree." Adam inhaled deeply through his nose. "I'm not ignoring your argument, but I would like to continue with mine, we can circle back later." He tapped a forefinger to his temple. "It's bookmarked."

Alice did not sit down, and a smaller planet joined the small solar system as she strode with Adam around the fire.

"Go on," she gesticulated.

"In many religions, the clerics had a similar bargain with parents. The parents had to deliver the children to the clerics to be educated in the religion – why would they do that? Well, one main reason was because the clerics – in most religions – indoctrinated the children in the belief that disobeying parents was a *great sin*."

Alice held up her hand, frowning. "So – disobedience to authority was a great evil..."

Adam smiled. "Go on."

Alice's brow furrowed, and her hands traced the air. "Disobedience... The parents use violence against the children, while telling the children that violence is immoral – which means that the parents have carved out – or created – an exception to the rule that violence is immoral. In other words – those in power – those in power – the rulers are exempt from the moral standards they inflict – no, it's even worse – it's even more – the rulers are in charge because they *must* do – or can do – the opposite of the moral rules they inflict. It is immoral for the child to hit, but it is not just – permitted – for the parent to hit, but it is *moral* for the parent to hit. The child must *not* hit, but the parent *must* hit – morally. It is forbidden for the child to hit – but it is equally forbidden for the parent *not* to hit!"

"The child must not take property without permission, but the parent *can* take the child's property without permission – just as the rulers can take the parent's property without permission."

"The child must not bully... But historically, parenting *was* bullying..."

Despite the grimness of the topics, Adam laughed. "Now it is *my* turn to disagree, because you are insulting bullies!"

"Insulting bullies?"

"When you were on Smudge Mountain, with those boys – were they bullies?"

“Yes, yes I think so.”

“Did they give you moral instruction?”

Alice thought long and hard. “No.”

“How did they exercise power?”

“They were just – bigger, and willing to use violence – *ah!*”

“Hence the illumination!”

Alice smacked a fist into her open palm. “Bullies do not lecture, they just inflict. Bullies don’t – don’t...”

“*Justify.*”

Alice pointed at him. “Yes, yes, that’s it! They are just bigger, and willing to use violence – ah, like the parents of old. The parents of old were bigger, and willing to use violence, but justified what they did on – the basis of – *morality.*” Alice scowled, drumming her fingers on her temple. “And this – led the children into the enclosure of the rulers, because size and strength and violence and hypocrisy were *morality* for them, as they had been – instructed.”

“Fantastic!” Adam clapped his hands, which seemed so old that they should have ejected dust from their palms. “Do you want to take a break?”

“Hell no,” said Alice in a rare moment of harshness. “I feel like I’m just waking up!”

“That’s the mark of the Bliss,” said Adam seriously. “Okay, imagine that you want to become the greatest thief in the world. One problem you face is that if being a thief is very profitable, more people will want to become thieves – but the more people who become thieves, the more society takes countermeasures against stealing, and the more hazardous and unprofitable the occupation becomes. If you break into someone’s house, you might get killed. People create locks and put bars on the windows and use biometric scans to activate their property and get dogs and put tracers on things – the list is endless. It’s a real cat-and-mouse game between property owners and thieves. Plus it can get kind of exhausting – in the past, you only got about one tenth of the value of whatever you stole when you tried to sell it. If you needed a hundred dollars a day to live, you had to steal a thousand dollars worth of stuff – old currency of course – and that got tiring and risky. No, to become the greatest thief in the world, you had to convince everyone else that stealing is wrong *for them* – but that stealing is right *for you!*”

Alice said: “I feel the urge to say that a scam like that would be far too obvious for everyone – but when I think about being hit as a child, that could really fry your brain, and it would be hard to make sense of anything after that...”

Adam said: “Well, childhood trauma creates physical damage to the brain. Your brain is undamaged, which is why you have such trouble taking modern morality – Universally Preferable Behaviour – and applying it to the past. Malnutrition makes people shorter – you can’t blame them for that. The brain

damage of child abuse – and most things in the past were child abuse – makes people crazy; that is the entire *purpose* of child abuse. How much can you blame them for that? Hit a robot with a wrench, it goes haywire, can you blame the programmer?” Adam raised his hands. “I know, I know – people are not machines, free will, determinism – I understand. But the reality is that people without self-knowledge kind of *are* machines! If someone genuinely believes that a question is immoral to even consider – if it is forbidden to their entire mental framework – are they free to entertain that question? In some existential, abstract way, we all say ‘yes!’ – resoundingly – but are they *in practice* free to entertain that question? If a man grows up a foot shorter because he was malnourished as a child, is he free to become a professional basketball player? In the abstract, yes – in the practical: not really. ‘Morality’ uses trauma to destroy empathy – and without empathy, there is no true morality. Parents hit their children because those parents are too traumatized by being hit themselves to question the virtue of hitting. And you can tell – there is always a tell – when people are traumatized, because they have to invent new words. ‘Hitting’ becomes ‘spanking.’ ‘Violence’ becomes ‘punishment.’ ‘Stealing’ becomes ‘confiscation.’”

“‘Indoctrination’ becomes ‘education.’”

“Yes,” said Adam softly. “And ‘indoctrinators’ become ‘teachers.’”

Alice shuddered. “And ‘rulers’ become ‘protectors.’”

“Yes. And every time the rulers became too overbearing, too powerful, and crushed the life out of their societies, people responded with *fight or flight* – they waged war against their rulers, in the form of a revolution – or they fled the region. Both were very primitive responses, which only reinforced the power of violence. Everyone understood that fighting fire with fire only burns the whole world to the ground – the idea that you fight the power of the *rulers* by rejecting violence against your *children* was inconceivable to most people! If you raise your children with benevolent and valuable authority – with authority as a resource based on virtue and experience, which can help them navigate life better – then you sow the seeds of the modern world, of peaceful and voluntary Dispute Resolution Organizations. They begin to see the world in terms of *voluntary contracts*, not *pretend-virtuous brute power*. Your father’s organization provides value to its customers, who are free to leave at any time – that is the source and sustenance of the value he provides. If you can’t leave, nothing can be any good.”

“But children can’t really leave the family – not back then, at least, before the Scans and DROs.”

Adam nodded. “But humans are a raise-and-release species. How would – how did people’s parenting change when they began to realize that society would no longer force their adult children to interact with them? If you worked for some coercive organization, some violent monopoly – but you knew that in a few short years, it would be turned over to the free market, what effect would that have on your work ethic, your desire to invest in your human capital, your desire to add *real value* to your customers?”

“*Privatizing the family...*”

Adam looked up sharply. “Where did you hear that phrase?”

“I don’t know...” murmured Alice. “It just – popped into my head. Although – my father once told me that DROs were privatizing the Law.”

Adam nodded. “It’s an old phrase, an old duality – ‘public’ meant a centralized, coercive monopoly. ‘Private’ meant a decentralized, voluntary interaction. It’s like the difference between a ‘stabbing’ and ‘surgery.’ Or ‘stealing’ and ‘charity.’ It’s the difference between violence and virtue, vile and voluntary.”

“I didn’t know you had a habit for alliteration,” smiled Alice.

Adam laughed. “‘Quality’ and ‘voluntary’ are two sides of the same coin. In the past, everyone knew that no one who worked for the rulers cared about customer service, efficiency, or – any kind of satisfaction other than their own greed and power. People who worked for the rulers *hated* the idea of the free market, because – well, who would choose them? In a society where there were forced marriages, moving to voluntary dating was a huge negative to the ugly, the abusive and the generally unappealing. The worst among us *always* worship violence and monopoly – again, two sides of the same coin – because violence and monopoly *always produce the worst among us!* Violent parenting produced two kinds of people. People cowed and broken into obeying any hypocrite in power – and criminals, who would rather rule in hell than serve in heaven, so to speak. The rulers were happy with both kinds – the obedient were obviously good livestock, while the criminals scared the citizens into believing that the rulers were necessary. This system served everyone except the future, and escalated into the Cataclysms, which finally taught humanity the eternal price of breaking children with lies.”

Alice digested this for a moment. “And this is where UPB comes in.”

Adam nodded. “Morality gains its power in the human mind through its universality, because if we are anything at all, we are *conceptual beings*. We are naturally drawn to abstract universalizations, from science to mathematics – to morality. UPB simply accepts the *premise* of morality – that morality defines Universally Preferable Behaviour – and applies it consistently. In the same way, hundreds of years ago, Sir Isaac Newton simply accepted gravity as a constant, and thus understood the universe. Albert Einstein simply accepted the speed of light as a constant, and so understood both the universe and time. The abolitionists ended slavery by *universalizing* the principle of self-ownership – you could not own yourself, and be owned by someone else at the same time.”

Adam rapidly clicked his teeth with his fingernails, creating a tap-dancing sound.

“In the old days, there used to be something called an ‘asterisk,’ which told readers to look at the bottom of the page for additional information, often an exception to a general statement. UPB simply takes the simple rules of the nonaggression principle and the respect for property rights – removes the asterisk, the exceptions – and simply – *universalizes them!*”

Alice laughed out loud. “Oh, come on, Adam, it can’t be that simple!”

Adam rubbed his face violently with his hands. “You may not believe me, but it is! Don’t steal, don’t hit – things that a two-year-old was told, and punished for disobeying – these rules – which everyone claimed were universal – were simply *accepted as universal*. Then, the most radical transformation of society in the history of the world occurred – *almost literally overnight!* We replaced violence against children with peaceful parenting, we replaced rulers with DROs, we replaced coercive ‘laws’ with voluntary contracts – and we broke the entire wheel of history, the cycle of violence that has consumed every shred of human success for the past – forever.”

Adam’s voice dropped to a near-whisper.

“And the amount of human suffering it took to truly universalize morality was so great that we will never, *ever* give up this advance!”

Alice digested this. “We never got back to the addicted babies.”

Adam nodded. “We will, in particular because you met two of them on the mountain that night, with your friend. And because you will be partly responsible for breaking their addictions.”

Alice took a deep breath. “So – addicted babies?”

Adam whistled tunelessly and took another sip of tea. “Nature has endowed all creatures with a thirst for power, for control – and, in the great apes – of which we are the greatest – for dominance over *other* apes, other members of the tribe. For an ape, dominance means the greatest access to food and shelter – and the greatest access to the highest quality females. I’m sure you are aware that there is a brain component called ‘serotonin’ which is a reward chemical – when apes climb higher on the social hierarchy, they are rewarded with serotonin. Conversely, when they tumble down, serotonin is withdrawn, and they get anxious and depressed.”

“Punishments and rewards...” murmured Alice.

“Excuse me?”

Alice cleared her throat. “Well, you told me that parents in the Old World would punish and reward their children for compliance to the parents’ wishes – delusions. And here you have Nature as a parent, offering sticks and carrots to whip the apes up the social ladder, to achieve dominance.”

“Right – but Nature is not a parent, because Nature does not use *moral* justifications for inflicting punishment – Nature hits us with a straight up drug deal. More tea?”

Alice shook her head.

“Animals need dominance over two things – nature itself, and their fellow animals. They need to dominate *nature* to gain resources – food, shelter, water – and they need to dominate their fellow *animals* to gain access to the highest-quality females. Without reproduction, there is no point to the life of animals, and no future for their genetics – so the dominance over nature is merely a means to an end for the dominance over their fellow animals. Even frogs fight each other for access to females – and

many birds show their dominance over nature by creating elaborate nesting rituals to attract females. It doesn't matter if you can eat if you can't reproduce."

Adam sipped more tea, and Alice couldn't help but wonder where he put it all.

"It's impossible to take the desire to climb the social hierarchy from apes – the reinforcement mechanism of serotonin is so strong that it dominates even the desire for food and water. When you train them to use currency, the first thing the male apes buy is sexual access to the females.

"This desire for dominance over other apes is so strong that we consider it a foundational driver of all biology. However, this dominance has its limits – think of a male ape called 'Bob.' Bob could theoretically impregnate all the female apes by threatening all of the male apes in the vicinity, but he generally doesn't do that, do you know why?"

Alice paused, wrinkling her nose, with the usual teen disgust about talk of reproduction. "Well, he is outnumbered..."

Adam nodded. "Bob has to sleep sometime. If he tries to shut out *all* the other males from reproducing, it provokes great rage in them – or rather, great rage is provoked by their genetics, which view a dead end as the worst thing of all – so they band together and kill Bob. Also, as he ages, Bob loses his strength and capacity to dominate – if he has angered the other males too greatly, they will also kill him or drive him out, and therefore he doesn't have the capacity to care for his grandchildren, so to speak.

"No, our good hairy friend Bob is limited in his capacity to dominate the other males, because it is ape-on-ape aggression, without any third-party technology or weaponry. To take an extreme hypothetical, imagine that our friend Bob gets ahold of a solar-powered laser gun, and can fry any other ape who displeases him – and that he will train his sons to do the same."

Alice blinked. "Then there is no limit to what he can do – he can eliminate all the other males, and impregnate all the females."

"And this has been tried by countless animals, over the course of evolution – but it really doesn't work out very well, do you know why?"

Alice pondered for a long moment, then snapped her fingers. "Inbreeding."

Adam nodded in satisfaction. "Quite right. Too many ape babies are born with birth defects, which makes the females depressed and anxious about mating – and also drains resources, because they will still feed their unviable offspring, which cannot grow to protect the tribe, and hunt – or reproduce, for that matter. Therefore, any other tribe with more genetic diversity can take them over, or drive them away from the good food sources. Dominant apes with too much power over reproduction destroy their societies. Power, in other words, corrupts."

Alice scowled. "I really appreciate the lesson, but I'm not sure if you're aware of how smug you sound when you do that 'the knowledge has come full circle' Zen routine."

Adam grinned. “When the mentor is good enough, the student can survive a little smugness.”

“Even when defending your smugness, you are smug! My dad does the same thing – we called it ‘smugging.’”

The old man laughed. “It is my way of making light of some truly terrible aspects of human history – the most terrible, many think, myself included.”

His face grew serious. “An excess of power destroys the tribe – a deficiency of power stagnates the tribe. A central question about apes is: *why did they never develop as much intelligence as humans?* The answer, of course, is that greater intelligence is not rewarded among the apes. Another way of putting it is: the female apes prefer violence and size over intelligence and wisdom, which means that the apes remain violent, and stay dumb.”

Alice frowned. “Is that because – greater intelligence doesn’t provide any specific evolutionary value?”

Adam shook his head. “That’s far too general a statement to be of value. *Why* doesn’t intelligence provide evolutionary value for the apes?”

“Because – because growing the brain means – well, there are only a certain number of calories available, and if the brain becomes bigger, the body usually becomes smaller.”

Adam smiled. “Thus, we have the stereotype of the nerdy geek who is bad at sports. His body has poured its energy into growing his brain, at the expense of his size, muscles and coordination. Conversely, the stereotype of the giant dumb jock also has its basis in reality – for the opposite reason, but the same principle.”

Alice said: “So, the ape who develops a larger brain – or at least, a *smarter* brain, I know the correlation isn’t perfect – is smaller and weaker in his body, which means that he is rejected by the females.”

Adam nodded. “Right – the females are looking for markers of the ability to provide resources, and being smarter *might* make a male better at getting resources, but that remains only theoretical – physical size and strength are valuable now. To turn to humans – in colder climates, intelligence is *essential* to gather, store and slowly measure out food during the hungry winter months, so strong but dumb men are rejected by females, because it’s a higher likelihood that everyone will starve to death over the winter with those men as heads of the family.”

Alice said: “But – that’s only in a time of peace.”

Adam’s eyes sharpened. “Go on?”

“Well, women want men big, dumb and violent during times of war...”

“Right – which tends to perpetuate war. All personality traits are subject to genetics. Violent societies tend to stay violent because the genes for violence help with survival. Starting one war changes the genetics forever.”

“War never ends...” murmured Alice.

“All wars are gene wars,” said Adam grimly. “The genes for violence wage war against the genes for intelligence.”

He put down his cup.

“When women choose smarter man, society becomes more intelligent. There is no shortcut, no other way to do it, because men will do *anything* to gain the approval of women – the alternative is genetic death.

“Now, when you have a coercive social structure – a collective moral delusion really – called the *State*, that’s the equivalent of giving Bob the ape a laser gun. Many animals don’t know when things are ‘too much.’ Some birds prefer larger eggs, but if you give them an egg larger their whole body – an ostrich egg, say – they will sit on *that*, because their brains don’t have a cutoff for ‘too much.’ Human beings are the same with power – particularly, power over other human beings. You can think of all the major empires throughout human history – dozens and dozens of them – and they all crashed because the rulers kept wanting more and more power. Human beings don’t have a ‘cutoff’ for ‘too much power’ – or, at least, human beings who *do* have that cutoff don’t seek or keep power as rulers.

“The natural limit to human dominance is blowback from the subjugated – just as the excluded male apes will kill the dominant male. Trying to dominate other humans creates the certain risk of blowback. However, with the apparatus of the State, a ruler faces no immediate or individual limit to his thirst for dominance. A Roman ruler can conquer the known world; a British monarch can rule over a third of the entire planet. Of course, you could never do that *individually*, but if you have – if you *pay* your enforcers a portion of the money they extract from others through violence – then you can dominate as much as your heart desires – and, when it comes to dominance, the human heart has infinite desires. This is even a founding principle of economics – that human desires are infinite, but resources are always finite.

“How much power do rulers want when there is no blowback? Infinite, no limits – or, at least, the limits accrue inter-generationally.

“This is the classic pattern of the addict. We all want power – over nature, over each other – and here in the modern world, we have turned that power-lust into technological control over the natural world – and sports, and debates, and other forms of dominance-combat that don’t result in death, either of individuals, or of our entire society.

“Towards the end, before the Cataclysms – especially in the democracies – this addiction reached its inevitable peak. The mental constructs designed to limit the growth of sociopathic control by the rulers – various laws and bills and constitutions – proved as useful as the promise of an addict, who always says: ‘*Only one more, only one more!*’”

Adam’s face was as hard as stone. “Power grows in part out of hatred – hatred is necessary, because you never want to rule over someone you truly love, because that would destroy the free will that you love them for. When you gain power, you gain sycophants, adherents – and enforcers. When people sense a

growing power in society, their first instinct is to submit, because the purpose of power is to destroy those who *don't* submit.

“You *have* to hate those you rule over. You *have* to view them as sub-human – and yourself as super-human – so that you can destroy them without disturbing your conscience. It’s an instinct – you mentally divide human beings into ‘the good’ – those who *support* your rule – and ‘the evil’ – those who *oppose* your rule. You subvert the remnants of the ‘law,’ you create arbitrary punishments – which fill your subjects with existential dread – and then you harvest all that anxiety and dread, and blame the disobedient. Then, of course, because human beings seek power, and hate helplessness, the helplessness and powerlessness generated by the rulers is then aimed at the disobedient, and the frightened attack the noncompliant, and no one and nothing is then left to resist the expansion of the power of the rulers – except the inevitable collapse, the destruction of society – the *Cataclysms*.”

Adam’s eyes were hooded, and he almost panted with the exertion of his speech.

“And,” he whispered, so softly that Alice had to lean forward to hear him, “when the rulers have power over all the words poured into the ears of the children, they create a fairy-tale, a horror story, wherein all the disasters created by the *rulers* are blamed on the *disobedient* – and that *all* manner of disasters await the society if even a *tiny minority* *disobeys*. This programs the children to gain serotonin not from *dominance*, but *obedience* – and programs them to be hit with the twin horrors of anxiety and depression – not from *subjugation*, but from *disobedience*.

“And when human beings are programmed this way, they become addicted to slavery – literally addicted – and will fight to the death to remain enslaved. Freedom, liberty, conscience – these all become predators to be kept at bay with all their might.

“People mistake totalitarianism as a top-down system. Oh no, it is not the *rulers* attacking the *citizens* – it is *the rulers programming the citizens to attack each other if they disobey the rulers!*

“Enslavement is not top-down – enslavement is *horizontal*. Horizontal slavery is the only slavery that can ever exist, because the slaves so vastly outnumber the rulers. Social slavery exists when slaves experience terror *only when another slave resists enslavement*.

“When the rulers use the State to program their slaves to attack any freedom-lovers, there is no escape from slavery except total collapse – which for most slaves results in death.

“And this was the cycle of human history – inevitable, inexorable, inescapable. Human beings cannot handle power, any more than a drug addict can handle the drug. We are programmed to be infinitely addicted to more and more power – it is never enough, it never satisfies, it always expands until it collapses.

“The history of our species is the history of the mad delusion that an infinite addiction can be restrained with pieces of paper and mere *concepts*. It is the history of people who turn the education of their children over to their rulers – and then wonder why their freedoms continually disappear.

“It is the history of a species – of our species – who continually repeat the mantra that ‘power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely’ – and yet keep handing more and more power to their rulers, and wonder why they wander from disaster to catastrophe to horror to – the Cataclysms.”

Alice’s eyes were filled with tears. “But – are they to be blamed? They were addicts, trained from birth to – to – I don’t even know how to put it, you put it well of course. Can babies born to addiction be blamed for being addicts?”

Adam pursed his lips. “That is a very interesting question. It is not at all theoretical.”

“What do you mean?” asked Alice, confused. “Are you talking about the few remaining – rulers?”

Adam shook his head. “Oh no – I’m talking about the rulers to come.”

Alice’s face went pale. “You said – you almost promised – that we have broken – the cycle of history, that the Cataclysms will never come again!”

Adam said: “I *did* make that promise – and I will keep that promise, or rather society will. But the rulers are coming back – because we are going to bring them back to life!”

Chapter 26

My wife came into the room – and I couldn’t help myself, I sobbed loudly in relief – I was fairly convinced I was not in hell, but if I was – at least *she* was here with me.

I also tried to crane my head a little, to see where she was coming from – my first glance outside this room, but all I could see was a glimpse of a white hallway – with a hint of some kind of uneven barrier to either side of the doorway outside.

The long-haired man got up, nodded at me, and left the room.

My wife strode in and leaned over me, brushing my hair back with a tender gesture. My eyes widened slightly, and she sat back in the chair beside my bed.

She looked a little older – but we had met in our twenties, and every time I saw her after an absence, she looked older, because first impressions stick in the brain, and reject time.

“Good morning!” she said, with her usual slight note of brisk sarcasm.

“Hello,” I replied.

She waved her hand. “So glad you’re better darling. Now go on – start complaining!”

My eyes widened slightly, then I laughed, which came out more as a deflating ‘croak.’

“You know me too well,” I said.

“Is the bed too uncomfortable for his Majesty?” She smiled, leaned forward and fluffed my pillow. “Are you not getting quite enough information, at the rate you want it? Are you hungry, uncomfortable, disoriented, discontented *in any way*?”

My smile broadened. *God I love her!*

“No, my love. I am just happy and relieved to be alive.”

“Well! It looks like they removed more than plaque from your heart!”

“So – what happened?”

She paused, and her voice caught. “Well, you were very sick, and they basically – put you to sleep, or induced some kind of coma, and you’ve been out, and they were able to – fix your ticker.”

“How long have I been – out?”

She snorted. “As you can tell from my still-youthful appearance, not very long in geological terms!”

It was blindingly obvious to me that she had avoided my question, but of course I trusted her infinitely more than the bearded ghost of Jane, so I let it pass.

“Are the kids well?”

“They are unable to be here at the moment – which I know sounds impossible, but I hope you will trust me when I say it is not their fault.”

“You are asking for a lot of trust at the moment,” I said, though not without a smile.

“Well, if I haven’t earned it by now, you’re just unwilling to pay the bill,” she replied.

There was a tiny pause.

“So – I was sick, I was put to sleep, I was – cured? I’m – better?”

“You have nothing to worry about. You are fine.”

I considered this. “Okay, I know you’re not answering, so I won’t ask again – but I have to imagine that I’ve been out for a while, if they – found a – cure, while I was – sleeping?”

She tilted her head slightly. “I’m not a doctor, you’ll have to ask them. They just woke me up and told me that you are better, and to come in.”

“Woke you up? You’ve been here – in the hospital?”

“Almost the whole time,” she murmured, and something in her voice betrayed the suffering she had gone through.

“I’m so sorry,” I said softly. “I guess I just – slept through it all, while you...”

She took a deep breath. “Well, old age is our punishment for all the free and easy times we had when we were young.”

I had a strange memory – a déjà vu of sorts – of her saying this in some public place.

Her eyes grew oddly alert. “Tell me how you are feeling?”

“It’s quite odd – my head feels like some city, Atlantis, rising from the ocean... The confusion is draining away – and my body is – it’s very strange, I feel both helpless and strangely – muscular – at the same time. I mean, I guess someone has been exercising me, otherwise I would have bed rot something fierce.”

“What else?”

I let my mind slide down my spine, towards my extremities. “I feel cold in the bone marrow, but warmer on the skin. I’m not hungry, but I don’t feel full. It’s like I’ve not eaten for a hundred years, but been fed...”

“As hungry as a skinny horse,” she said – an odd twist on the old cliché that I vaguely remember reading somewhere. “What else?”

I paused. “Shouldn’t I be saying this to the – doctors? And where are the kids?”

“Please don’t worry about them right now,” she said firmly. “You really need to focus on telling me how you feel, what is going on in your mind, because – well, to be frank, this is all fairly unprecedented, it’s not any kind of typical cure...”

I held up my hand, and she stopped speaking immediately.

“Look, Phyllis, I can tell the doctors everything that’s going on – later. How are you? What’s new..?” I laughed at the ridiculousness of the question. “You know, fill me in, fill my ears.”

She took a deep breath, and her eyes seemed to shudder slightly. “Did you think you were dead?”

I saw her redirect again – and had less patience this time.

“Well it wasn’t like springing up from a catnap,” I said, slightly grumpily. “I don’t feel the same – you don’t feel the same. What is wrong with answering a few questions?”

Her cheeks flushed. “Look, I’m just following the doctor’s orders – they said not to excite you – and yes, I know you’re going to say that means – *am I cured for real?* Yes, you are, but you can’t just spring up from this kind of – ordeal, or situation. Do you remember, when I was in my forties, and I always wanted to write a comedy about getting old? Well, now we are old – really old – and it’s really not so damn funny at all.”

I swallowed painfully. “You – talked about that, in an interview.”

She shrugged. “Probably.”

I felt a sudden onrush of emotion. The vulnerable words escaped my mouth before... “Where am I?”

She looked at me sympathetically. “The future, of course – where you least expected to be.”

My brief moments of sanity and lucidity seemed to be evaporating.

“What is – going on?”

“Look – you are coming out of a deep sleep, you’re bound to feel disoriented – I’m here to help.”

Phyllis leaned forward and kissed my forehead.

“What are you going to do next, put coins on my eyes?” I snapped.

“There’s my complaining husband again! Glad to know you’re feeling like your old self.”

There was another pause – more awkward. My sense of déjà vu was getting stronger.

A sudden thought struck me: “Have I woken up – before?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Damn, you are – answering my questions with questions, all the time!”

Phyllis paused. “No, you haven’t woken up before – as I said, you were in an induced sleep, it was impossible to wake up without – outside stimulation.”

Another pause, another shred of half-information, more maddening distance...

“Look...” she started, then stopped. “What would make you the happiest?”

“Oh don’t do that – don’t refuse to give me what I want, and then ask what would make me happy.”

“Answers,” she stated simply.

I struggled to rise, but felt a sudden cramping in my lower back.

“What is it?”

“Ow – my back – spasm!”

“Do you want the doctor?”

“Oh – just *do* something!”

She got up briskly, pulled back my tight covers and felt around behind me.

And my blood froze.

Something was missing...

I could sniff her hair spray; I could inhale the vestiges of her usual perfume – but something more elemental, something more basic and mammalian – the accumulated intimate scent of another body, gathered in my mind for over a half-century – something elementally *human* – was missing – and it was such a strange absence that my brain took several seconds to even begin to piece the void together...

I had a sudden urge to push her away, as if she were an imitation mannequin leaning over me in the near-dark. I remembered –

Where the hell am I?

“What’s the matter?” she murmured into my ear.

“Nothing, nothing,” I muttered, submitting to her groping. “It’s passed, thanks, I’m okay...”

“Something about me?” she asked, drawing back.

I shook my head.

“Don’t lie,” she said automatically, distractedly. “Something about – me, being close? I’m very clean, they told me to...”

“It’s nothing,” I muttered, the dread beginning to grow in me again.

Her seemingly-genuine confusion did put me at ease, at least slightly. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to make you – suffer anymore.”

She brushed her hair back from her eyes. “Oh, it’s fine,” she muttered – although I could see that she was still thinking about – something.

She asked suddenly: “Do I smell different?”

I tried to smile. “I don’t know, apparently it’s been a while...”

“No, really – they told me your sense of smell would be affected, but would – come back.”

I felt pain in the face of her obvious agitation. My left hand, freed from its covers, reached for her hand.

She hesitated, then took it.

I froze again. The hand I had held, countless times over fifty-five years – it felt as strange as a bag of marbles.

My words escaped. “What – did...?”

She snatched her hand back, rubbing it with her other hand.

“What’s wrong?” she demanded. “Everything is going wrong!”

I said nothing. I felt I needed a celestial lawyer.

She turned to the door and said: “It’s – I’m on a new medication for my arthritis, maybe my hand feels different.”

“They cured me, my heart, and your arthritis – all while I was sleeping..?” I murmured – and suddenly felt that my lips and mouth had now turned to stone, as silent as a statue.

There was a long pause, and my wife seemed to sag in her seat.

“I’m sorry,” she said, a tear spilling from her eye.

I said nothing. Strangely enough, I did not feel mad, I did not feel dead, I did not feel haunted or tortured or buried in an insane waking world of an afterlife – I was in a sane situation of *waiting*, and she seemed to know that somehow.

She said my name, but it had strangely – *public* – ring to it, as if she were calling out my name at a crowded party, rather than in the intimacy of a hospital room.

Everything she has said, I have heard before...

It struck me strangely, sideways, when I remembered *as hungry as a skinny horse* – that was a phrase from her autobiography, about her eating disorder as a teenager, when she was on the track team...

She had also made the comment about getting old not being funny in a talk show, when she was publicizing her book.

Her tone was – public, crowded... It always used to bother me about actors – you could tell they were acting, and self-consciously impressed with their own acting – and how different it was when you had an actual documentary, with real people – and I would imagine actors trying to play those real people, and realizing that they would fail completely, that they were only *pretending to be human beings*.

The melodramatic phrase: “*Who are you?*” floated through my mind.

I studied her face, as she looked back without blinking.

It was perfect, perfectly her. The age spots were in the old spattered constellations I remembered; the little scar above her left eyebrow from the bicycling accident, right there. The grey roots of her hair were just at the length she would allow before getting a dye job...

A dye job, in your little die...

It was her, of course – and it *wasn't* her. It was her *public face*, public voice, social self – everything was from the outside in, nothing was spontaneous and intimate and generated from the moment. She was like an assembled recording of her public statements...

And then – a memory floated into my mind, from the room before this one, the old room that seemed fantastically new at the time – and a white-haired doctor, who always reminded me of Dr. Welby – or whoever played him – putting a needle into my arm, saying:

“Goodbye, goodbye... I wonder what brave new world you will wake up to...”

I hoped that this one memory – the first one that was recent, not from my early life – would trigger a flood of other memories, but apparently that only happens in novels, because that one drop was the last gasp of a dry well...

My ancient doctor said goodbye to me in a manner only fit for funeral directors – a permanent goodbye, an acknowledgement that we would never meet again, under any circumstances, in any universe...

And I remembered a phrase that Nancy Reagan had used about her husband, and his slow decay into dementia...

The long goodbye...

My doctor was giving me the *long goodbye*...

And then, another gasp – a memory of his somber face... My bald doctor had always been jovial, positive – like Bill Cosby in a sitcom – but like Bill Cosby, he would occasionally become dead-serious, which hit you like a hammer...

Something about the difficulty of the speech, the inevitability of...

Everyone gets this news, sooner or later...

And a feeling of panic, in a long-dead room – *what a strange phrase!* – and a desire to *keep on living*, and *keep on living*, and *keep on...*

“I’m far in the future, aren’t I?” I whispered.

She paused, as if listening.

“How much do you want to know?” she asked.

I paused. “I will go mad if I don’t know everything, right now.”

She nodded. “Where are we starting from? What do you remember?”

“I was sick, and I wanted to live, and my doctor told me I would wake up in a new world – I’m sure he didn’t imagine I would remember it, not that it matters now...”

She nodded, all business now. “It has been a long time.”

“And you – you are not my wife, unless I have gone quite mad.”

“You have not gone mad.”

“Who are you?”

“Do you want to know – everything?”

“I can’t imagine how long it has been, if they can – fake you, so well. Am I on another planet? Did I – die, and is this – no, that’s totally mad. Or are these are all my dying thoughts, that just go and on for ever and ever..?”

I whimpered, and this seemed to rouse some sympathy within her, as far as that was possible.

“Are you sure you want to know – everything?” she asked softly.

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

My wife reached up with both hands, brushed back her hair, then removed her face.

Chapter 27

David addressed the assembled meeting.

Heads of all the major DROs were gathered – most in person, a few virtual.

“So – a problem we had long suspected has returned to – haunt us, if I can use an old colloquialism. I believe that Roman will return to the wilderness, to his tribe, and we must make preparations for that possibility. My solution will shock you – perhaps literally – but please hear me out.

“As you know, we have been ostracizing unrepentant criminals for the past century or so – it is incredibly rare, only a few hundred individuals in that total time – a couple every year. You all know the standards, we have all agreed... You have to be deemed mentally competent, have committed acts of evil, and refuse to make any kind of restitution, and your victims do not grant clemency. By all our understanding of the role of peaceful parenting, and the massive rewards of staying in the Civ, these individuals shouldn’t really exist – but we accept free will, and people can always make absolutely terrible decisions – just as we are free to inflict consequences on them.

“Most of these people left the Civ, went into the wilderness, and were heard of no more – a few of them returned and attacked citizens, who killed them in self-defense. A couple more also tried to worm their way back in, but were unable to hack our decentralized servers, and were quickly caught and expelled again. A few more returned half-starving, and agreed to make restitution, take talk therapy and reform... We haven’t really troubled ourselves with the fates of those exiled from society – they are so rare, and relatively trouble-free.

“Through sheer accident, my daughter Alice came across a tribe in the wilderness – they number about a hundred and twenty, and they can be roughly traced back to one of the first expulsions. A husband and wife from the town of New Eden were expelled for conspiring with a foreign government to try and reestablish a State in the Civ.”

Everyone in the room shuddered at the thought.

David continued. “As you know, we place people in disparate locations, with enough survival gear and food to last them for a month – and of course, they are always welcome back, if they are willing to make restitution for their crimes. We have deliberately placed them in remote locations – both from us, and each other, out of concern that an alternative wilderness society would develop, and present us with just this kind of problem.

“As it turns out, this man and woman used smoke signals to locate other outcasts, and this was the foundation of the Clan we are now dealing with.”

A bald black man raised his arm and said: “How on earth did they find each other?”

David shrugged. “It’s a little hard to tell, but based on an analysis of their mythology, apparently the first man and woman built a giant fire on top of Smudge Mountain, which drew other stragglers to them, and they – paired up in some way, at least I hope so, and had kids, and here we are.”

An old woman said decisively: “I’m not sure how we can leave them alone, and I don’t believe we can integrate them.”

David nodded. “We all know the perils of the old White Man’s Burden. It seems that civilization has to evolve; it cannot be transferred – we can also see *that* from the few remaining nation-states.”

A man with long silver hair said: “Okay, this is how I see it – I assume that the adults are using force against the children – and against each other, at least on occasion as well.”

Again, David nodded.

The man brushed his hair back and continued: “So – the parents are violating the NAP by assaulting their children – and each other. Free-speech obviously doesn’t bar *verbal* aggression between adults, because adults are free to choose who they listen to – but verbal abuse of children *is* a violation of the NAP, because it so obviously damages the developing brain – and the precious children have no escape. So, these parents – or the adults as a whole I suppose – are violating the NAP, but – we can’t ostracize those we have already ostracized, so what are we going to do?”

The old woman said: “Well, any children over the age of four or five can most likely *not* be integrated into the Civ – and we would have to use force to separate them from their parents, which would cause more trauma to them – the kids I mean.”

David said: “Right, we can’t just go and scoop up the children and bring them here – too traumatic, and too much bad brain development for integration. But we *also* can’t leave them where they are, because they are victims of violations of the nonaggression principle.” He sighed. “Universality is universal.”

Everyone nodded, and there was silence for a short while.

The bald man drummed his fingers. “So – we can’t take the kids, we can’t bring the kids here, we can’t bring everyone here, we can’t ostracize them – *but* we can’t allow the parents to continue abusing their children – or each other.” He snapped his fingers rapidly. “Come on people, we get paid the big Satoshis, there *has* to be an answer!”

The faint humming of air circulation drifted through everyone’s ears, as their collective intelligence circled the problem.

David said: “In my experience, the longer you take to come up with a solution, the more upsetting the solution tends to be...”

The bald man scowled. “And in my experience, describing the problem does not solve the problem.”

David smiled. “Very true. So, without any further ado, I will upset you with – my solution, at least.”

Everyone lifted their heads, and stared at him expectantly.

He touched his watch. "Okay, bring it in."

There was a momentary pause, and then a small floating baby drifted through the holographic curtain that led to the hallway. It had pink skin, blue eyes, thin tousled blonde hair, and a broad toothy smile. It carried a small wooden bow in its tiny left hand, and a quiver with blue arrows hung on its back. Its – his? – groin was covered by white cloth.

The bald man whispered: "Holy eye of Sauron, what on *earth* is that?"

The old woman said: "I know what that is – my grandfather told me about these, showed me some pictures when I was little. What was it called – something medieval..."

David said: "A cherub."

The old woman nodded slowly, staring at the floating baby.

The bald man said: "Well, don't keep us in suspense!"

David gestured at the old woman. "Go ahead, Agnes."

Agnes took a long moment to respond, then said: "This was the beginning of the Civ. When we pieced together peaceful parenting, after the – Cataclysms – we had the problem of enforcement. How do you get parents to stop yelling at – or assaulting – their children?"

"The military technology developed during the early part of twenty first century – combined with the horrible advances during the Cataclysms – was taken over by the founders of peaceful parenting, and they invented these devices – called Cherubs – and released them in society, and we had peaceful parenting pretty much everywhere, within a single generation."

Another woman said: "The Enforcers."

The old woman said: "They were called a lot of things. Child-minders, the eyes in the sky, enforcers, shielders, snappers, Civ-builders..."

"Angels," murmured David.

The old woman nodded, lost in memory. "That's my favourite. The most accurate."

Another man said: "It's so strange when your history books come back to life... I'm sure we all read about these, so long ago..."

The bald man said: "How do they work? How does it work I mean?"

David jumped up. "*You son of a bitch!*" he snarled.

The entire room was stunned into silence. The floating baby hovered placidly, regarding the scene with piercing blue eyes.

David smiled. “You see? Free speech, no response – because we are all adults.”

The bald man laughed nervously.

David strode towards him, drawing back his fist.

Immediately the floating baby shot between David and the bald man – so quickly, it almost seemed to be teleporting.

“Imminent violation!” a stern deep masculine voice stated flatly – utterly unnerving coming from a baby’s pink mouth.

David hurled his fist at the bald man’s face – the man flinched, raising his arms – and – almost too fast to see – the baby drew an arrow, fitted it in the bow – there was an electric blue flash, and a bolt of lightning shot into David’s chest. Gasping and trembling, David dropped to his knees, tiny bolts of electricity crawling over his skin like random blue centipedes.

The bald man jumped up. “Damn, David, are you okay?”

David grimaced, pulling himself up by the edge of the obsidian table. “It’s not exactly – painful, but it does mess with your muscles... Hang on – you can’t do much for at least a couple of minutes... It’s basically the – minimum dose to prevent an attack. The Angel attacks physical violence between adults... And physical and verbal violence against children. These were used in the founding of the Civ – basically, they *were* the foundation of the Civ – but within a generation, physical attacks – and verbal abuse of children – had become so rare that they were all decommissioned... Some were sent to museums, most were recycled, some put in storage – and we’ve got a bunch back, and updated them a little bit, and this is our solution. My proposed solution...”

There was silence in the room. This was a lot to process.

The silver-haired man said: “So we just – release these, in this tribe, around them – and they just – zap everyone who abuses kids?”

David nodded.

“Okay, I’m sure this is blindingly obvious, but I don’t know the answer – won’t the abusive parents just – go into a hut or someplace – a cave maybe – and abuse their kids there?”

David grimaced. “I activated this Angel with my earlier phrase – now that it is activated, it will stay with us until it is deactivated. It’s solar powered, so it won’t run out of juice. It defends itself, so you can’t destroy it – at least not in the wilderness. It is authorized to use up to lethal force – it records everything of course. And if you try to go into a closet or a hut or a room or some private place – well, I can show you. This thing is a work of art – and in art, showing is always better than telling! Come with me...”

David and the bald man walked out of the conference room. A real door materialized on the hologram. David raised his voice beyond the door. The tiny pink head of the Angel jerked up – another blur of arrow-shooting, a flash of light – red, this time – and the Angel flickered through a perfectly-cut circle in the door.

David poked his head through the mildly-smoking hole. “It can cut through just about anything – even drill through rock if need be.”

He opened the door and came back in, the bald man close behind – followed by the eternally-smiling Angel.

The bald man said: “I’m not even going to pretend to be sorry to be ‘that guy,’ but what if a truly sadistic parent finds some way to escape this – driller?”

“It was called a sNAPper, because it snapped people with electricity – and because it enforces the NAP. I like the suggestion of Agnes – let’s call it an Angel. It was made in this shape to – be more pleasing to children. So they wouldn’t be as scared.”

“Okay, the Angel – what if the parent evades it somehow?”

David nodded. “Oh, we know how tenacious parents are in continuing abuse – there was a reason it went on for hundred and fifty thousand years – basically the *entire* history of our species – and so the Angel can also analyze cortisol, scan for salt patterns on the cheeks – and breathing rates, you name it. If a parent somehow abuses a child outside the Angel’s watchful eye, the Angel then gently questions the child, looking for stress patterns and the avoidance of eye contact. It also analyses the cortisol levels of the parent – as well as endorphins, which will get released if the parent enjoyed the abuse.”

The old woman’s eyes were sad. “If he or she is a sadist.”

David nodded. “Right. If all evidence points to very recent abuse, it provides a double-does of electricity to the parent – which really *does* hurt, trust me!”

The old woman said: “I can’t remember, does it promote good behaviour at all?”

David shook his head. “No, it’s just enforcement. All stick, no carrot.”

“Do you know why that decision was made?”

David stared at the friendly floating implacable cherub. “Oh yeah, I’ve studied this thing deeply. I mean, you know, one of the central weird delusions in history was the idea that if the *government* doesn’t do something, that thing won’t get done. If the *government* doesn’t provide education, no one will be educated – if the *government* doesn’t build the roads, no roads will be built. It was a mad delusion, you all know – it’s like saying that if you take a giant rock from the middle of a stream, the water will still continue to flow *around* the hole!”

David's eyes moved from person to person. "It turned out that when parents were *prevented* from abusing their children, they – spontaneously, mind you – just – kind of *invented* peaceful parenting on their own... Like when we eliminated the power of the rulers, DROs emerged spontaneously. When violence is banned, spontaneous self-organization emerges naturally, inevitably – and *very* quickly. The end of government education was about ten days' worth of chaos – a few classes held in garages, the quick purchasing of government schools – which were then quite quickly abandoned – and the current system of parent-shadowing experience education emerged within a month or two – and has stayed pretty much the same ever since."

The bald man said: "So we just – release these in this tribe, and then what?"

David smiled. "Come on, we are not savages! We already have a number of peaceful parenting advocates who are perfectly willing to deploy to the Clan – if they are allowed, which I kind of doubt. But no – we will provide information and training and resources, anything they want – at the same time as we let the Angels protect the children."

The old woman said: "It's so – tech-y! Why not just – use people?"

"Go on."

"Well, I can see why in the *past* they needed robots, because billions of children were being abused, all around the world, so it was impossible to – there weren't enough people, and most of the people wanted to abuse the kids, it was a sadistic age, as they all were..."

David said: "Well, it wasn't billions of people at all by the end of the Cataclysms. Remember, we started out with only a few million, best guess. Those who had seen the disasters coming, they were the ones who worked their hardest to break the cycle of history, and give us the Civ."

"Right, right – but why not use people – experts – with this tribe? It seems a little freaky to have these babies hovering around, zapping people who raise their hands against their children. I'm concerned about – psychotic breaks, or..." She furrowed her brow, taking a deep breath. "Well, sadism is next door to masochism, and cruel parents might learn to love being zapped – or they might be willing to escalate the Angels even to lethal force, in order to... I mean – we are talking about some *seriously* primitive personalities here!"

David nodded slowly. "That is certainly a... Not a risk exactly, but a – possible consequence. It is *incredibly* destabilizing for abusers to stop abusing – it brings back their own childhoods, their conscience – if they still have one – and it can cause a total collapse in the personality – and yes, some people might choose to really harm themselves by provoking the Angels – which would certainly be very traumatic for the children, but universality is universality... That's why we've never released these in the Statist societies. They would just respond with – terrorism, escalation. Plus they could find ways to disable them..."

David's voice grew grim.

“Look – we all know, around this table, across the Civ, that we *cannot* base morality on *consequences*. ‘Consequences’ are a form of mysticism, because you can invent *any* outcome *for* any proposed action – all ‘pragmatism’ does is paralyze morality. I could say: ‘Well, the parents won’t stop abusing, so the Angels will end up seriously harming or killing them – which is even *more* traumatic for the children, so we should just let things be...”

David spread his hands in a gesture of benevolent helplessness. “Consequences be *damned* – *we enforce the nonaggression principle, regardless of consequences!*”

He paused for a moment.

“We won’t use people because – abusers are incredibly sensitive to loss of status, and it’s hard to feel *as* humiliated by a mere machine. Being attacked by a human being would cause immediate escalation; the genius of the Angels is that it’s harder to take being punished personally. If we had people there, the *children* would be in far more danger – as would the parents.”

The bald man said: “Okay, I get the – physical abuse thing, that’s just reading body language and sniffing for cortisol... But the verbal abuse thing, that seems – that’s impossible to understand, for me. Parents still *lecture* their children – which some kids seem to hate more than spanking – and *correct* their children, and *guide* their children – how on earth is a robot supposed to figure out the line between verbal correction and verbal abuse?”

David nodded. “I hear what you’re saying, but – would *you* have any trouble distinguishing between the two?”

The bald man paused. “I guess it’s like most things – there’s some stuff in the fuzzy middle that’s hard to unpack, but most of the more extreme positions are pretty obvious.”

“The Angel is designed to provide a warning if it detects vocal stress, cortisol, rising volume and muscle rigidity – all signs of hostility. It comes preprogrammed with many phrases of verbal abuse – the usual: calling names, implying incompetence, universalizing the stakes, moral hypocrisy, insulting personality, all that stuff. If it really can’t decide, it simply sends the recording to us and provides a warning – and we can decide after a manual review. It’s not perfect, of course – but it’s a massive improvement. Look – we all know that I can’t impose this solution unilaterally, so – I’m open to any and all other suggestions. But this is the basic fact: we can’t leave them there, and we can’t bring them here...”

The debate ranged back and forth for most of the afternoon. Some voices were even raised, causing the floating Angel to turn rapidly – but free speech ruled, and the deployment of the Angels won the day.

Chapter 28

David knocked on the door of Roman’s hotel room.

He had not seen the older man for several days. The hotel room was consciously spectacular – a whole wall of real windows with a dual view of the ocean above, and a teeming coral reef below. Zero-gravity tickle-showers, in-room barbecues, isolation massage chambers, the whole works...

But after returning from Atlantis, Roman had closed the curtains, used nothing, eaten nothing, said – nothing.

David wanted to give him his space – but had to talk to him now, and finally got a robot maid to open the door.

The room was dark, silent – and smelled vaguely of a rotting fall forest.

David let his eyes adjust to the gloom rather than turn on a light.

Roman sat hunched over the edge of a voluminous couch.

“Are you sure you don’t need anything?” it asked gently. “Do you feel unwell?”

The old warrior said nothing, his head in his hands.

“Roman?” asked David. He made a gesture to silence the couch.

Nothing.

“I’m going to assume that – our tour is done?”

David walked closer to Roman. In the dark, he noticed that the couch had been slashed and stabbed – there was still a steak knife sticking out from a torn cushion.

Of course he didn’t know how to turn it off... So – violence!

“You went silent the last time we talked. Don’t you want to know any more – about your history?”

Roman looked up, his face like a smudge of charcoal in the dark.

David said: “As my mother used to say, let’s shed a little light on the subject!” He gestured again, and the curtains opened slightly.

He sat in an armchair opposite Roman – gesturing to ensure that it did not ask him if he wanted a snack.

David said: “We have traced your history – your ancestors were ejected from the Civ for just about the gravest crime – they were starting a DRO with the intent of reestablishing a State.”

Roman nodded slowly. His eyes were hooded, sad, defensive.

“Was their case fairly proved?” he asked with dull belligerence.

David nodded. “Well – of course I’m going to say ‘yes,’ but I don’t expect you to believe me. I will tell you the mechanism by which they were found out, and you can tell me if it makes sense to you.

“They started a DRO – this man and woman, early on, shortly after the end of the Cataclysms. There were a number of groups struggling to reinstate the State, so to speak, but society was too chaotic and fragmented for any group to gain ascendancy.” David shrugged. “Ireland, millennia ago, lasted eight

hundred years without any government, it's happened before – but people still need collective security, charity, dispute resolution, roads – at least then – and the longer the re-creation of the State was kept at bay, the more voluntary organizations stepped in to fill the void. There was a general horror of the violence that had massively traumatized the entire population, because nobody escaped the Cataclysms, as I'm sure you know... We found some Old World writings about Peaceful Parenting, which we were able to spread, and the right ideas began to take root..."

David's voice was gentle. Roman stared through him.

"No taxation, no indoctrination of the young, a horror of violence, the nonaggression principle finally applied to children – voluntary and peaceful solutions to collective social problems – *and* the rise of a generation that had no interest in crime, no susceptibility to addiction, no obesity, no hyper-sexuality, good and reasonable health habits – raised by parents who were held *personally* liable for the misdeeds of their children – this all meant that the usual bogeymen held up by the State to justify its existence just – weren't there – at the same time that vastly superior replacements for traditional State functions were *everywhere*..."

David spread his hands. "When you think about the general span of human history, it was almost – overnight. But the same thing was true of slavery – it went on for almost all of human history, and was ended pretty quickly – and once it was over, no one argued for its return. Peaceful parenting, a stateless society – they all turned out to be the greatest advancement in human history..."

David let his calm voice work to soothe Roman's obvious mental and emotional collapse.

David smiled.

"Your name keeps reminding me... Did you know that the ancient Romans knew all about the steam engine and other – necessities of the nineteenth century industrial revolution?"

Roman shrugged.

"But they didn't have any – interest in replacing human labour with machinery, because they owned slaves – their entire economy was built on their backs. Labour-saving devices reduce the value of physical labour – so why would you want to invest in machinery that destroyed the value of your slaves?"

David sighed.

"No, the Old World could not come about while there was still slavery – and you can go back and read all of these hysterical idiots, when the end of slavery was proposed – they were all saying the same thing, like a mantra of morons: 'Oh, but slaves pick the *cotton* and the *food* – if we don't have *slaves*, we will end up *naked* and *starving!*'"

David chuckled softly. An enormous manta ray swam the bright narrow pillar of ocean between the curtains.

“They had the strangest fantasy – they believed that because an unjust situation produced something, there was *no way* a *just* situation could produce something better! Madness! Come on – if a society ran on arranged marriages, enforced by the State – and someone proposed a system of voluntary courtship, these exact same morons would scream that *no one would get married unless they were forced, and there would be no families or relationships or children, and we would all die out within a generation!*”

David laughed sadly, brushing back his sandy hair.

“To the truly indoctrinated, the truth is always stranger than their wildest fantasies. This whole journey is like time travel for you... Hah – imagine if I were sent back in time to the slavery debate, and I were to say to the pro-slavery advocates: ‘You don’t have to worry about cotton and fruits and vegetables being picked in the future, because within a few short decades, giant robots – half the width of a field – will use huge metal arms to pick the wheat and barley – a giant field in just an hour! And these giant robots will be powered by crushed dinosaur juice from hundreds of millions of years ago – and then, not too long after that, smaller robots with metal fingers as delicate as the legs of a spider will pick the fruits and vegetables – and work all day and all night, powered by the light of the sun!’”

David shook his head.

“They would call me insane, because people truly believe that they can accurately predict the liberated future of a free mankind. But the future cannot be known, because of free will – which means that we can only use principles to navigate where we are going – universal principles – because those in charge – those with power – will *always* frighten us with dire consequences in order to bypass our rational faculties. Two things kill thinking in a man: arousal, and fear. Filling the minds of the masses with horror stories about the sins of disobedience – using hell in the past; pandemics, racism, war and starvation before the Cataclysms – requires that you studiously *avoid* principles, and focus on imaginary consequences. It’s all about as sophisticated as a voodoo curse, if you’ve heard of them.”

Light was coming into the room. Lionfish and lazy seahorses gathered outside the invisible glass.

“And if you try to run an advanced society on the basis of primitive superstitions – the greatest being that you can predict the future of freedom – then you end up where the world always *did* end up. Destroying freedoms by predicting a dire future *creates* it – the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy. And it is truly horrible how many people had to suffer and die for us to learn that lesson, but we are a strange species – we will usually rather *die* than be proven wrong – and sadly, nature grants our wish on a regular basis – or at least, she used to.”

David’s voice had grown distant.

Roman stood up, his knees creaking.

“My ancestors,” he said grimly.

David blinked. “Yes, sorry, it’s a story I tell myself – or others – too often, and it’s a tangent at the moment. Your ancestors – they started a DRO – a defense DRO, specific to researching and creating – or

buying – weaponry to protect the region from invasion – a bunch of them started up, but they weren't very necessary, because no external State was really interested in invading our region.”

Roman grunted. “I don't believe you.”

“Why not?”

The older man glowered. “Since this is to be our last – conversation... No State would ever want a free region nearby – especially if that free region was successful – because its best and brightest would flee to freedom – and the success of the free region would undermine the arguments for the State.”

David blinked in surprise.

“That is true – the flood of people fleeing Statism was almost beyond belief – and we were *hated* by the politicians and rulers, but – let me explain it this way: let's say that there are two regions, one we call 'Farm,' and one we call 'Wilderness.' The Farm is fully functional, it has crops and livestock and fences and machinery, and makes a lot of money – while the Wilderness is just that: an untamed area with no domestication at all. If you want to make money – and you have no ethics – which region do you take over?”

Roman's dull eyes narrowed, sensing a trap. “The Farm.”

“Why?”

“Who cares? It's already finished, you can start making money right away...”

“Right – and when governments take over another country, what are they really taking over? They are taking over the *tax-collection system*. A country is a Farm – a free region is a Wilderness. If you take over the free region, what do you get? There is no government, no State courts, no treasury, no bullion, no tax-collection, no government schools you can take over and use to indoctrinate the population... There is no central registry of the population, no accounting for location, income, assets, ownership of weapons – no census, nothing. What are you taking over? A well-armed 'wilderness' with no way to profit from the population... No way to seize assets – because crypto currency cannot be seized. A country presents a single throat for you to squeeze – a free region is scattered, unmanaged, unknowable – and the population has not been trained into obedience!”

Roman sat heavily, shaking his head. “Yeah, but power is – for power... It's not just about making money. If you have this – free wilderness – States will destroy it because it threatens their power.”

David laughed, delighted that Roman seemed to be coming back to life.

“Quite right, I can see why your ancestors were so good at... We were shielded from invasion for immediate material gain – but our threat to the power of neighbouring States was significant, you are right! Because of peaceful parenting, we didn't need much policing at all internally – but there were existential threats from neighbouring States, so Defense DROs were created.”

Roman scowled. "I can see about a thousand problems with those."

"Go on..."

"Do we have to?"

"No," said David. "But I have asked for nothing, and I know you are never coming back. I would like your answer."

Roman sat in silence for a long moment. The ripples of light behind him, reflected from the water, gave the large room the appearance of an underwater cave.

"Well," he said finally. "I would imagine that if you wanted power, you would just promise to protect the citizens of the free region, take their – what, bitcoin? – and just use it to fund your own Army, and take over the region. People desperate for protection always give up their liberties."

"True. Central lesson of the past. It's why history was just a series of jump scares into a volcano, run by the rulers. So – what is the solution?"

Roman shrugged. "There is no solution. It's a power vacuum – get rid of the State, another rises to take its place. I die, my son rises..."

David *tsked* between his teeth. "I know it's a lot to ask from a wild man from the wilderness, but you have to think like an entrepreneur if you want to solve these problems."

"I'm not a damn entrepreneur!"

"You can take me hunting."

"What?"

David grinned. "You're in my area of expertise – I'll come to yours, you can take me hunting, teach me what you know – and watch me get everything wrong!"

"You're saying – I'm getting everything wrong?"

David laughed. "No, of course not, you're doing incredibly well. But instead of being a sceptic, you need to be a *salesman*."

"I really don't."

David sighed. "Yes, now you are all about the precision – it's true, you don't, but you won't understand the world that rejected you if you refuse. Try this – instead of being someone lobbing problems at a proposed solution, be someone who is trying to sell your solution to *me!*"

"What the hell do you mean?"

“Well, when people first came up with Defense DROs, everyone was skeptical, and fearful, and wanted to just defend themselves – so the leaders of these Defense DROs – when they were just a proposal – had to sell their ideas to the general population, who were scared of *exactly* what you are talking about, that the Defense DROs would take their money and buy some robot army – then take over.

“But *someone* needs to look around the world to figure out what dangers are brewing – and negotiate with or threaten hostile foreign actors. Most people can defend their own homes – it takes a real expert to defend an entire region – preemptively if possible. So we – this region, when it was smaller – needed people to scan and act against hostile actors – but they were terrified of those people taking their money, then taking them over. So – imagine you are your ancestor, and you’re trying to sell people on the idea of a Defense DRO – one of many, because it is a violation of the nonaggression principle to establish a coercive monopoly – how would you sell them? How would you deal with their fears that you will just take their money, and create a new State to rule over them?”

Roman scowled again. “Is this necessary?”

David shrugged. “Depends how you define the word. It is your history, the history of your tribe, the decisions of your ancestors that define how you live now.”

Roman’s eyes darkened. “So I am supposed to – sell you on my ability to defend you, without threatening you?”

David nodded.

Roman took a deep breath. “Well, I would have to give you an account of everything I was doing, all my weapons and – research, or whatever – and that would have to be – verified by someone else, someone independent – maybe a competitor, or all my competitors. And – and I would have to put some money – a lot of money – someplace safe, and I would have to give it up if I was proven to be dishonest about the weapons I had, or what I was developing...”

David raised his hands, as if to clap them together. “Fantastic. Fantastic! ‘Not an entrepreneur...’ Yes – all that happened. And each Defense DRO was competing on price – the price of defending the region. So any DRO that bought *more* weapons – and you would need a *lot* to take over a freely armed region – would have to find some way to fund – to pay for that additional weaponry. They would have to borrow, or raise their prices – which means their customers would have to pay more, either way. Also, a bank would have to agree to secretly *loan* money to a Defense DRO – *knowing* that this Defense DRO would likely try to create a new State, which would then have coercive power over the bank! Never happened!”

David laced his fingers together.

“Everything in the free market is intertwined. Every loan to a Defense DRO would need to be scrutinized – and we use Bitcoin, of course, so the ledger is public, the loan can’t be hidden. And each Defense DRO is watching the others like a *hawk* – scanning for *any* accumulation of hidden weaponry – and if they find any, they advertise it broadly, which would scare the hell out of that rogue DRO’s customers – who

would *immediately* stop their payments, causing the dangerous DRO to collapse. And any institution that *supported* the rogue DRO would *also* lose customers – and other DROs – the ones dealing with civil disputes like contracts – would stop enforcing any contracts for *any* rogue institution. Also, the heads of the rogue DRO would be sued into oblivion, for what is called *fiduciary misconduct* – threatening the value of the entity through immoral actions – and those leaders would lose *everything*, their houses, their savings, you name it! Remember: there is no corporate shield for institutional leaders. The old question – *who watches the watchers?* – the only real answer: *everyone, through market choice!*”

David shook his head.

“No, there’s no incentive to try to re-create the State – and every incentive to provide regional defense as cheaply and effectively as humanly possible.”

Roman stood up. Something in the abstract conversation was exhausting him. “But – this is what happened. You say.”

David nodded. “This is what happened. Your ancestors created a Defense DRO, and ended up with excessive weaponry – they were funded by foreign governments, to institute a State in the free region and crush our liberties.”

There was a pause.

Roman asked: “How were they caught?”

“Their contract with their customers enforced a monthly audit. Everything was accounted for, all the weapons and research – but there was a mismatch between the energy consumption and the resources produced. A competitor Defense DRO was running a heat scan from orbit, and compared the results to previous months.”

David smiled sadly.

“Those were *my* ancestors... They publicized the significantly-increased heatsink and warned the customers of your ancestor’s DRO of the danger. They demanded a more detailed audit – which revealed an underground bunker half-full of robot drones. There was a *massive* uproar, as you can imagine – everyone’s worst fears coming true – and their customers cancelled their contracts, and sanctuary and money was offered to any foreign leader or dignitary willing to expose the plot – and a few came forward, with documents confirming it. Your ancestors were tried, but the evidence was beyond overwhelming.”

There was another long pause.

Roman finally said: “Were – was there an offer for them to stay at all?”

“That was a big debate, at the time – the Civ didn’t have a mechanism for ostracism or expulsion without the possibility of restitution, because there had never been crimes of this magnitude before. It’s actually fascinating reading, going over the historical archives. The general consensus was that

restitution was *impossible*, given the magnitude of the treachery – treason, really. But some people argued that it was essential that your ancestors be given the choice to stay or to leave – otherwise, it would be easier for them to play the victim. The restitution proposed was pretty significant – lose all property, all contracts, and work as manual labourers for a competitor’s DRO for twenty years.”

Roman pursed his lips. “I thought your lot didn’t *do* manual labour...”

“Yeah, that’s true – they would have worked alongside robots. But they could have stayed, and their new contracts would have been enforced – and they would have participated in the economy.”

The sun was setting over the ocean outside the curtains. Waving red light danced over David’s face.

“But they chose to rule in hell rather than serve in heaven,” murmured Roman.

David nodded slowly. “They did.”

There was a long silence.

David said: “But in their way, they did an enormous service to the Civ. Sometimes the best thing some people can do is serve as a warning to others. No one ever tried that again.”

“What happened to the – foreign rulers?”

“Oh, they got sick and died,” David said grimly.

Roman nodded.

David stood up and gestured for the curtains to open wide.

Sunlight flooded into the room, making both men flinch.

David rubbed his eyes, then turned to Roman.

“And then, your ancestors passed from the knowledge of the Civ, and went into the wilderness.”

“They were not – sterilized?”

“No, that would be a violation of the nonaggression principle.”

“So, they – bred. That wasn’t considered?”

“It was. But again, we don’t make moral decisions based on consequences, because that is an imagined fantasy. They chose to do wrong, they chose to reject restitution, they chose to leave. What happened after that...”

Roman took a step forward. “But now, it matters. To you.”

David sighed. "It's not personal, Roman. It's not what matters to me – it's what matters to morality, to universality, because that is the foundation of everything that we have achieved, and if we break that – if we even crack that – then everything might fall apart."

Roman snorted bitterly. "That's an appeal to consequences if I ever heard one!"

David considered this with surprise. "No, you're right, you're right... Let me ask you this – if you saw a man about to sleepwalk off a cliff, and fall to his death, would you stop him?"

"Yeah – unless he was an enemy."

"You are not our enemy," said David with great seriousness.

"You think I am – sleepwalking?"

David paused. "It's not important what I think about your motives, or what goes on in your mind, because that's not objective, it can't be proven. I *do* know that you are abusing your children – I know, you call it 'instruction' and 'culture' and 'tradition,' but none of that matters. You strike your children."

"We do," said Roman unapologetically.

"You are verbally harsh with your children. You call them names and punish them."

"They punish themselves, just as you said."

"What?"

Roman took another step forward.

"You said, about my ancestors, that they *chose* to do wrong, and avoid restitution – and so they chose to leave. You were enforcing morality, not just punishing individuals, right?"

"Yes."

"It is the same with us. We have rules for our children – and those rules are not arbitrary, and they are not to be enforced in anger, and they are essential to our survival – and just as my ancestors *chose* to leave, our children *choose* punishment, by disobeying the rules."

David thought for a moment. "But they are – children. Your ancestors made their choices when they were adults."

"But you say – and you have *endlessly* repeated – that adult choices are conditioned by childhood experiences – abuse, as you call it. A boy who was abused – even by my standards – who then becomes a criminal is less – responsible – for his criminality, *because* he was abused, right?"

"That is true," said David softly. "And that is why we focus so hard on the Scans, and figuring out which children are being abused – and stopping it at the source."

“And – were there Scans, when my ancestors did what they did?”

“There were, but not nearly as accurate...”

“So – if criminality as an adult is based on abuse as a child – what happened to my ancestors, when they were children, that turned them into such criminals?”

David considered this for a long moment.

Roman continued. “I saw you – with great empathy and – tenderness – talking to – Christina, the mother of those two boys, who was violent, but had brain damage from her – tumour – and you did *not* condemn her, you did *not* reject her, you did *not* evict her from your society. She was physically damaged, in her mind – can you tell me with absolute certainty that my ancestors were *not* also physically damaged, in their minds?”

David whispered: “I cannot.”

“And this is why you cannot consider me an enemy,” said Roman softly, stepping forward again. “Because *your* ancestors acted with tribal fear and hatred against *my* ancestors, banishing them *against* all of this ‘new knowledge’ about child abuse and criminality. You just waved your magic wand called ‘free will’ and kicked them out. You were terrified that your new society might not work – that it might be taken over by another State – so you needed someone on the Cross, someone on Calvary, a scapegoat, an example to scare everyone else. And it worked – you just told me, no one ever tried that again!”

“They were *interviewed* about their past!” cried David, his cheeks red.

“And I *saw* you interview Christina about her past. She was not accurate, because her brain was damaged. Memory is a physical thing, right? If my ancestors were damaged, they might not remember what happened! What do you think I have been doing, sitting in this damn room, since you told me?” He tapped his own swarthy forehead violently. “THINKING!”

David opened his mouth, then closed it again.

More softly, Roman asked: “Have you ever interviewed an evil person?”

“Define.”

Roman shrugged. “Well, someone with good Scans as a child, no brain damage, no trauma, no diseases – who just did evil, violated your nonaggression principle.”

“Tough question,” murmured David.

“Tell me,” said Roman, in a slightly mocking tone, imitating David.

David took a step backwards. “Well, if I have *never* interviewed an evil person, then evil is always brain damage – and therefore not evil, but just a shadow cast by sickness... But if I *have* interviewed an evil

person, then you will say that my use of ‘free will’ is just a kind of superstition, a phrase that I paint on behaviours that I cannot understand...”

Roman smiled with grim satisfaction. “That’s right.”

David looked back and forth, as if scanning his memory externally.

“There was always an – explanation,” he said finally.

Roman nodded. “And – was this explanation always *provable*, through some kind of scan or procedure?”

David paused for a long time.

“I think I felt a – pressure – to come up with an explanation. But at the same time, I guess I felt that if everything could be explained, if we were all just dominoes falling – slabs – from what came before, then there really wasn’t any such thing as ‘morality’...”

Roman grunted and said: “Civilization is over-complication.”

David shivered. “What do you mean? I feel it, but I don’t – get it.”

Roman shrugged again. “We say to our children: ‘Do what I tell you, or I’ll punish you – and my punishment will be much less than *nature’s* punishment, so it comes from a place of *protection*, of *love*.’ The *purpose* is survival, the *morality* is integrity to that survival – but you people are so far from questions of survival that you have just invented ‘morality’ as a justification for your decisions to punish!”

“No, that’s not it at all – it works, it really does work, you can see it all around you! We don’t have any crime, we are safe and secure, we are content, we are happy – utopia has been *achieved* – and it is not the nightmare of boredom and restlessness that everyone believed it would be, in the past, when they wrote fantastic stories about the future, because those writers were just serving power by telling people that happiness was actually misery, so they should stay enslaved.”

“But...”

“But what?” snapped David.

Roman paused, glancing at the sky, the sea, the coral and bright creatures swaying in the current, the tide.

“But – yeah, it is impressive, what you have achieved, I’m not gonna argue that – but you’ve just *trained* people to be good, like dogs... By making everyone’s childhood a paradise, you’ve taken away the biological, material fight between the past and the present – maybe that’s for the best, what do I know, I’m just some old warrior from the woods...”

Roman was very close to David’s face. He gestured towards all they had seen – all the wonders and distractions of the Civ, over sky, land and sea...

“But I can tell you this: no one here is ‘good’ anymore – they might be perfect, they might be happy, they might be *wonderful*, but they are not *good*, because they have no temptation to be *evil*, because they are raised sooo peacefully – and maybe that is heaven, maybe that is paradise, but *I* prefer the tension, *I* prefer the temptation, *I* prefer the risk of evil, and if we have to discipline our children in order to maintain that essential humanity...” He shrugged eloquently. “Well...”

“Give your opponents their best arguments...” murmured David.

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing...”

David shook his head, as if clearing water from his ears. He took a deep breath.

“Ok, but tell me – would a more skilled hunter hunt by hand, without bows or spears or any traps or weapons?”

Roman snorted. “Be a crappy hunter...”

“But it would take more skill to catch a deer with your bare hands.”

“Idiot skill.”

“Can *you* catch a deer with your bare hands?”

Roman scowled and shook his head. “So what?”

“So,” said David steadily, “you are willing to hunt with less skill, in order to hunt better – or more efficiently. It would take *more* skill to catch a deer with your bare hands – but you’re hungry, so you shoot the deer with an arrow!”

“So?” demanded Roman.

David paused, collecting his thoughts. “So, you reduce your free will – your *choices* – in order to be more efficient, in order to be *better*! You could *still* choose to throw your bow and arrow aside, and try and tackle the deer – but you never *would*, because it wouldn’t *work*! And if you proposed that to your hunting party, they would laugh at you, even though you might be able to achieve it with everyone working together. So – you have shrunk your choices, in order to improve the outcome. In other words, ‘skill’ doesn’t mean ‘maximum ability,’ but rather ‘best outcome.’ A skilled hunter brings home the most meat – he doesn’t have the very best possible ability, because the ability only matters in getting the meat!”

“Your point?”

“So – we have removed – or reduced – *some* choices, in order to have the best possible outcome, just like you remove some choices – tackling deer – in order to get the best possible outcome, which is

getting meat! A one-armed bowman would need more skill than a two-armed bowman, but you don't cut off one arm because *more* skill is always *better* skill, right?"

Roman refused to answer. More deepening sunlight filled the room. The shadows of fish swam against the far wall.

David continued: "So by raising children peacefully, they end up reasonable, peaceful, productive, happy – the skill is in the *happiness*, not in the 'overcoming of temptation' – just as for you, the skill is in getting the meat, not overcoming artificial obstacles like cutting off an arm or trying to catch deer by hand. You use your technology to focus your skills on the goals – and so do we! Our technology is called 'peaceful parenting,' and the goal is happiness – the methodology is virtue."

"But it's not virtue if you don't *choose it!*" shouted Roman.

"Virtue is not the *choice*, but the *method* – just as a hunter's 'skill' is not his *goal*, but actually *getting* the meat! The ability serves the purpose, the purpose is the point! We are just removing the obstacles to consistent virtue – reason leads to virtue leads to happiness, and child abuse undermines our capacity for reason, which makes virtue incredibly challenging, and happiness endlessly elusive. We don't cripple our children in the pursuit of happiness, just as you don't cripple your hunters in the pursuit of meat. Nobody wakes up and really wants to be 'virtuous' – virtue is the means to the end, which is happiness!"

Roman leaned forward and snarled: "That's just the pathetic love of *pleasure*, wanting to be 'happy' all the time – a lazy drug-addicted bunch of crap! We are *men*, goddamn it! We are born to *strive*, to *struggle*, to *overcome obstacles*..." He lifted up his arm and flexed his bicep. "Our souls – ourselves – are like muscles, they only strengthen with resistance – and you have taken away all resistance, and become flaccid and loose and lazy!"

David exhaled. "You get angry when I strike a nerve."

Roman paced back and forth. "Don't try to control my anger by categorizing it, that's – girlish..."

David said: "You go back tomorrow."

Roman glared at David. "And if I want to stay?"

David shook his head. "You can't."

"Like my ancestors. Yet I have committed no crime."

"You have," said David flatly. "You have abused your children."

"They are *my* children!" snarled Roman.

"No, they are not. They belong to the world, to morality – and to themselves, which you cannot violate."

Roman almost smirked. "Yet you are sending me out into exile. You will not gather my Clan in nets and put us in a zoo here – our children will remain ours!"

David put his hands squarely on his hips.

“No – saying that your children are exempt from morality is like saying that your children are exempt from gravity. Morality is objective, universal – it is the laws of interaction between objects – like the laws of physics, but with people.”

“And how do you intend to enforce these laws, if you turn me out? The laws of physics don’t require your intervention.”

David stared at Roman, then murmured: “Strike me.”

Roman paused. “It’s not – it’s not a violation of your nonaggression principle if you ask me, right?”

David shook his head.

Roman curled his fist, raised it – and then a floating pink blonde baby carved a smoking hole through the white wall and shot an bright blue arrow into his spine.

Chapter 29

Roman refused to be delivered back to his tribe on a sky bus – “Like a package!” – so he and David disembarked a short distance away, and covered the remaining distance on foot. A *footless* – a giant crate that transported itself, though not on feet – followed them at a medium distance.

As they strode under the sliding shadow-branches of the trees, David cast occasional glances at Roman’s set face. The older warrior was busy concocting some kind of story to explain the new developments – David could understand that, see that clearly, but he gave Roman his space, not wanting to interfere in whatever face-saving narrative the older man was creating.

“You wouldn’t let me scan for them,” said David eventually. “How do you know where the tribe is?”

Roman grunted. “Our movements are not random.”

He was not disposed to say anything more, so the pair walked in silence – David behind Roman, who had a surer sense of where the firm footfalls were.

“I’m sorry you wouldn’t take any of our – parenting consultants,” said David.

“We’ll figure it out.”

After a while, they climbed a small mossy hill, and stared down into a wide shallow depression, full of cherry trees, tangled undergrowth and darting birds.

Roman said: “It’s an old crater.”

“From the Cataclysms,” murmured David.

“We have a – story, in our Clan, that we were first kicked out of hell, and then we were kicked out of heaven...”

Again, he refused to elaborate. After a minute or two, Roman moved suddenly, stepping down the mossy rocks into the depression below.

The members of the Clan were lying in the shade of the cherry trees, escaping the stealthy rise of the noonday heat. Children played a game of catching petals as they fell. David was reminded how little work people did in the distant past – and in the present, too. In most of Ancient Europe, serfs worked only twenty hours or so a week, and over the winter months, families mostly huddled under blankets, telling stories and conserving heat. Ancient Spain had five months of holidays a year. The truly manic – and frankly unsustainable – workaholic really took root from the nineteenth to the twenty first centuries. Early on, it was because the Industrial Revolution was building capital from nothing – later on, it was because taxes were so high that everyone had to work insane hours just to keep up.

A few young males jumped to their feet a short distance apart as Roman approached, and thumped their right hands against their chests.

They greeted Roman using a word that David did not understand – he returned their greeting, thumping his own chest.

Word quickly spread, and Roman’s two sons came and knelt before him. He touched their foreheads in a strangely tender gesture; they stood and hugged him, joined in a moment by his wife.

David stood awkwardly as the tribe hugged and chatted. Apparently there was a lot to catch up on – births, great hunts, two deaths – one natural – and three ‘new beards.’

From what David could hear, Roman evaded any detailed examination of his time in the Civ. Vague replies floated past faces eager to tell their own stories.

The leader is gone, thought David, and the people just organize themselves...

Eventually, Roman disengaged from the crowd, and leapt nimbly onto a tree stump – always proud of his physical strength and dexterity.

His face shone with what looked like genuine enthusiasm, and David noticed how much of tribal leadership is theatre.

“Comrades!” cried Roman. “I bring knowledge and new rules to us! This man here – David – is a ruler in his own tribe – although he would not call himself that – and we have returned with some – new ideas. I am always thinking of what is best for all of us, best for the tribe, and – David and I have come to an agreement, an understanding. As you know, in every negotiation, no one gets exactly what they want, but you find some way to meet in the – middle. This is the middle – I agree with some of it, I don’t agree with all of it, but... This is what we have decided.”

He took a deep breath, gesturing at the falling petals and darting blackbirds.

“We know that Nature is – harsh, unforgiving. Mistakes – she punishes them with maiming or death. We have always respected that, and raised our children to respect Nature, to have discipline, lose their fear of pain, embrace hardship – and survive!

“What they call ‘the Civ’ – short for ‘the civilization,’ a prideful word, as if there were only one – has taken a different – approach. They keep Nature at a distance, they keep their feet on the neck of Nature, they seem to – dominate her completely – and they are doing well, in their way – again, I don’t agree with everything that they do, and every outcome they have embraced, but my visit to their world has given me the idea that...”

David could see Roman struggling mightily with his speech, and almost expected the older man to call him in to finish the thoughts, but he cleared his throat and continued.

“As you know, this entire – affair – began because of my son, and David’s daughter. She is raised...” Roman’s voice cracked slightly. “They call it Peaceful Parenting – I have called it *weakness* and *spoiling* and *coddling*, but – and this took me a while to understand, so I have to sprint through what you are learning – I hope that you will continue to trust me, as you always have...” He cleared his throat again. “I first thought, when I looked at their buildings and machines and ease, that they didn’t have to – discipline – their children, because they had mastered Nature so completely... I don’t know if mastering Nature so greatly comes with risk, but they have done it for a long time, and nothing – really bad seems to be occurring, or coming, so I guess at some point imagining disaster just becomes a kind of curse we are putting on the Civ for reasons of...”

David scanned the men, women and children in a semicircle around Roman. Although a dispassionate observer might accuse Roman of rambling, watching a leader think in real-time was fascinating to them – as it would be to anyone.

“So – I thought they were – soft on their kids – because they had conquered Nature, and turned their machines into – slaves, or not slaves but – workers, I guess. But David tells me that is not the case. They have not achieved such control and ease...” He shook his head rapidly. “They are not soft on their kids because they have conquered Nature – they have conquered Nature *because* they were soft on their kids, or – not soft, but...” He grimaced. “I hate to say ‘reasonable,’ because there is reason in what we do as well – *strong* reason – but they do not punish their children, and so Nature – or the cycle of history – *does not punish them!*”

The last four words sank deep into the listening tribe. There was a silence and concentration in the air – as there always is when an essential truth is circled and approached.

David wanted to say: *it’s not about controlling Nature*, but held his tongue. Roman needed to be in charge here.

“Now, they have this rule, the nonaggression principle, which is you can’t start the use of force against others – even if you think that will – help your children, in the future, as we do. Hitting children, punishing children, yelling, harsh words even – these are forbidden, in the Civ...”

David's eyes narrowed at the mistake – they are forbidden universally, according to morality, to Universally Preferable Behaviour – not just in the Civ, as a kind of cultural or local preference. He wanted to leap up and proclaim the truth, but once more bit his tongue – and the funny thought passed through his mind, that he was initiating force against *himself*...

Roman continued: “Now the people in the Civ, they hold this to be a – universal value, a global truth, so to speak, though I imagine it is true on other worlds as well...” Roman smiled painfully. “And they hold this to be true here, in this tribe, in our world.”

Roman's wife scowled. “Why – words?”

He looked at her expectantly.

She continued: “Even if we – accept the rules they have, for their *own* children, I don't get why harsh words are the same as spanking. I thought they were all about ‘free speech.’”

Roman shrugged, turning to David.

David stood up and said: “Hi, hello, good morning. Great question. We have machines to measure how a child's brain – develops. Harsh words have a measurable negative effect on a developing brain. The moral rules that govern parents and children are different from those governing adults. Like – I don't have an obligation to feed every child in the world, but if I'm raising my child, I am obligated to feed that child, because by keeping him at home, I am preventing *other* people from feeding him.”

“What the *hell* does that have to do with free speech?” demanded Roman's wife, her lips taut with tension.

“You are free to swear at me,” replied David, “because I am not obligated to listen – I can leave at any time – and because my brain is already fully developed. You are free not to feed me, as well, because I'm an adult, so I can get food anywhere, and my body is already fully developed. If I was your child, you would not be free to starve me, because my body is developing, and you are my sole source of food. In the same way, you are not free to verbally abuse your child, who is in an unchosen relationship with you. You *chose* to have a child; your child did not *choose you as a parent* – and is not free to leave. Children are like prisoners of Nature, which means that the very highest moral standards apply to parents. We also have very strong rules against what is called defamation – destroying people's reputations by lying about them – and a parent who verbally abuses a child is defaming that child, by calling him ‘stupid’ or ‘lazy’ or ‘clumsy’ – or worse. It harms the child's view of himself, and it is false.”

Roman's wife squared her hips belligerently. “Are you saying that there are no stupid or lazy children?”

Roman's sons took a step back, away from their mother.

David pursed his lips. “When you hunt, and you shoot an arrow, and the arrow misses, is it the fault of the arrow?”

She did not answer.

“Is it the fault of the bow perhaps? Or the deer you are shooting at?”

Silence.

“What about your fingers? Are they to blame, should they be punished?”

Angry silence.

David could not resist – he turned to Roman. “Do you see what I mean when I say that raising children harshly does not make them stronger – you see she will not even respond to my questions?”

Roman scowled. “They are stupid questions – and I can say that, because you are not my child!”

There was a murmur of tense laughter around the half-circle.

David said: “If your child is stupid, then either you have taught him badly, or he has a physical problem with his brain. If you have taught him badly, then you are like a silly hunter blaming the arrow for missing. If his brain is physically damaged, then you are insulting him for something beyond his control. The word ‘stupid’ implies a misuse of the brain – we don’t call dogs ‘stupid’ because they can’t read or write. If your brain is physically damaged, you cannot be insulted for its deficiencies – that would be like calling a man with no legs ‘lazy’ because he does not walk, or a very old man ‘lazy’ because he does not run.”

Roman smiled scantly. “They are tricky, these wordsmiths from the Civ.”

David noticed that all the children of the tribe were leaning forward.

Roman said: “I had these debates – and more, and more and more and *more* – when I was in the Civ. And – to return – and – for us to live as we see fit, here in the wilderness, we have agreed to – to...”

“To *what?*” asked his wife scornfully. “What have *you* agreed to – on our behalf?”

“It’s a very strange tale, so it is probably better to show than to say,” replied Roman slowly.

He turned to David, who waved his hand in the air.

A giant red container floated nimbly over the tangled trees at the edge of the ancient crater.

The tribe cried out, dove into battle positions and readied their weapons.

Roman cried out: “Be at peace, it is not dangerous!”

Yet, said David silently.

Roman added: “This might be a bit surprising! Be at peace!”

The container settled on the ground – crushing some berry bushes and scattering a gray rabbit – and opened its lid.

Two dozen pink babies floated up into the silent air, smiling radiantly.

There were cries and screams from the assembled tribespeople – although a few of the girls looked at the floating babies with rapt attention.

“Don’t shoot!” called Roman, but it was too late.

Two arrows flew towards the floating babies – and then froze in midair, and snapped in two. As one, the floating babies drew their own bows and readied their own crackling arrows.

David said: “These are called ‘Angels’ – they are here to protect your children. They will not harm you in return as yet, but you cannot attack them!”

One mother grabbed two young children and started dragging them away from the clearing. They cried out in fear and surprise.

Immediately, an Angel flew directly above her.

“Release your hold on the children!” it instructed in its strange deep voice.

David suddenly realized that this was all moving too fast – but then, at the same time, he also thought: *Meh, might as well get it over with as quickly as possible...*

The mother turned and spat at the Angel. It hovered above her, and repeated its instruction. The children – quite young – burst into tears.

She turned to Roman, her eyes wide, angry, helpless.

He said: “Let them go.”

Clearly against her will, she slowly let go of her children.

“Thank you,” said the Angel politely.

Her children burrowed into her rough skirt, clutching at her hips.

The Angel hung over them in silence.

Elsewhere, there were cries and screams, people running back and forth. One father pulled his children into a rough stained tepee.

Immediately, an Angel flew to the opening.

Screaming, the man tried to push the floating baby away, but it dodged his hands.

Using laced ties, the man worked to close the opening of the tepee.

“I cannot see the children,” said the Angel impassively. “Please do not hide the children from me.”

As the confrontation materialized, people stopped their frantic movements and turned to look at the tepee.

The man screamed vile epithets at the Angel, and continued to lace up the opening with his shaking hands.

“I cannot see the children,” repeated the Angel. “Please allow me to see the children. And please do not curse in front of the children.”

The man cursed again, and finally finished lacing up the opening.

Everyone watched in wonder as the baby’s blue eyes glowed for a moment, and – with a brief round flash of red light – the animal hide suddenly showed a bright hole, just wider than the Angel. The Angel moved through the hole, into the tepee.

The man screamed again, and his fingers appeared under the tepee. Jerking upwards, he ripped the side of the tepee from the ground, and it began to collapse behind him.

There was a strangely comical moment while the Angel – hidden from view by the animal hide – held the tepee aloft – then there was another flash of light, another hole, and the Angel once more hung over the man, who huddled with his children, his face white.

“Thank you for letting me see the children again,” said the Angel.

The man glared up, hatred in his dark eyes. His hands clenched – everyone could see that he was preparing to leap.

“DON’T DO IT!” screamed Roman. “Calm down, everyone! Be at peace!”

Roman’s wife strode up to him and shook his shoulders. “You unbelievable idiot, what are you bringing these – these demon babies here for? Oh great, here it comes!”

An Angel baby zoomed over her, through a blossoming cherry tree, ripping pink petals in its wake. Its smile had vanished.

“Please do not attack the man. This is your final warning.”

She drew her head back scornfully. She smiled, then reached forward to hug Roman, keeping her eye on the floating infant.

He flinched – but embraced her back.

There was a subtle movement – underneath her voluminous skirts, a sudden shift.

Roman stifled a groan.

There was a raised bow, a sudden flash – and Roman’s wife went staggering backwards, her hair smoking slightly.

“Please do not strike the man in his genitals,” said the Angel, lowering its bow.

With a blur of instinct, Roman turned to the Angel and drew his fist back.

The Angel raised its bow again. “Do not strike me.”

Everyone stopped moving at this point, starting at the scene: the Angel with its raised bow and blue crackling arrow – and the primitive hunter, his fist raised against the Angel, the protector of the helpless – against morality itself, against *any* limit on his instinct for violence...

The baby broke into a disarming smile. A woman’s voice came out of its tiny pink mouth: “Please lower your fist, friend!”

Roman’s wife turned to David and screamed: “TURN THEM THE HELL OFF!”

David shook his head. “I cannot turn them off – and wouldn’t even if I could. For me – for us – it would be like turning off gravity.”

A grim sense of helplessness and terror swept across the tribe, scattered in the crater of an ancient war. All the brutalities and beatings and sarcasm and insults that had accumulated hatred and damage within them – all the little violations that had led to the global Cataclysms – all seemed arrested in the tangled depression left by a long-vanished bomb.

And – and the silver line between the hands raised against the children, and the bombs dropped on the adults, seemed to suddenly stretch tight and taut in the minds of everyone – Roman, his wife, the man with his children, David, the tribe – and the coming of the Angels that actually protected people – children – in the here and now – seemed to summon all the devils that most needed to be banished...

Chapter 30

David had to flee for safety – not his own, because the Angels would have protected him, but because the ferocity of the Tribal adults was so intense that he was concerned that they would be shocked within an inch of their lives if he stayed.

He sat in the sky-taxi, alone in the white pews, heading back to the Civ, his heart pounding so hard in his chest that it felt like a boxer trying to punch his way out of a curved white cage.

It was a brush with the Ancient World, the world before the Civ, and – although he had read and studied history for decades, being dropped into the bubbling cauldron of primitive violence deeply shocked his system.

He didn’t know how to frame it in his own mind – his relationship with his daughter was so peaceful and enjoyable that it seemed – it *was* – incomprehensible to him that parents would voluntarily choose to assault their own children for the voodoo crime of ‘disobedience.’

David loved his wife – it was similarly incomprehensible to him that husbands would choose to assault their wives – the supposed loves of their lives – for any reason at all.

*Don't they know that the dark joy of immediate triumph comes at the expense of **all** future love? Don't they know that they are shredding their **own hearts** on the altar of vanity and victory?*

It is always the way, when looking back into the past – even when the past erupts into the present and tries to claw you back. The decisions of the self-destructive are incomprehensible to even *basic* morality. To trade future comfort, security, support and love for the sake of ape-like dominance in the here and now is so fundamentally irrational that it is hard not to view such impulses as the result of foundational brain damage – a form of self-mutilation designed to appease the dark gods of personal prehistory.

David had once read the diary of a woman from centuries past, who did little but insult the man she claimed to love – and only accepted 'negotiations' in the form of abject and groveling apologies and submission. She triumphed in this, genuinely believing that she was all-wise, all-knowing, and that her boyfriend – and later, at least for a few short months, fiancé – was a kind of idiot puppy who needed to be trained with the stern whips of sexuality and scorn.

She was so desperately insecure that she hid advertisements that came in the mail depicting attractive women. She fueled her own vanity with dreams of a career in the arts – but only used these fantasies to escape having to make any real decisions in her life. Her boyfriend became more and more successful, which made her more and more bitter and neurotic. She was greedy for his income, but terrified of his growing confidence, and alternated between praising his achievements, and cutting down his pride.

She was able to regard and review her own darker impulses, but helpless to change them. Reading her diary was like watching someone trapped on a conveyor belt, being fed into a grinding machine that took months to crush her into a flat puddle of pure regret.

When he brought her to social functions, she remained paralyzed with fear – and projected all her insecurities onto *his* imaginary social gaffes, grinding down his security on the drive home, making up all sorts of fantastical offenses she perceived him creating.

She became exhausting – by her own admission, she was tired of herself – but she had no ability, it seemed, to be able to pull the reins back on the horses dragging her to her doom. She whipped them, perhaps to just *get it over with...*

It didn't take very long for her fiancé to realize that she was not a superior being handing down hard-earned approval to his inferior and awkward self – instead, she was a shaming-spiral neurotic pushing herself into a field she had no intentions of mastering, because of vanity-laced 'girl power' propaganda.

Inevitably, he left her – and she contacted him, years later, over some inconsequential paperwork, when she was paralyzed, and he was a great success.

She complained of feeling lonely – hoping to trigger his white-knight responses – and he merely replied: “You are alone with being right.”

Some sentences are like an axe that descends on the stump of our lives, splitting it in two, sending the shattered sides spiraling in opposite directions. This sentence did it for her – she hung up in a panic, and was never the same afterwards.

So much of life, of society – of culture and the arts – is designed to keep the shortest, shattering sentences out of our own ears.

She was never the same. She followed his subsequent successful marriage obsessively, raging that his new wife had inherited the improved man that she, his former girlfriend, had created out of the unproven clay of his broken self.

Thus might you dig for weeks – then take a short break, and find someone walking away with a diamond you had *almost* unearthed – it was impossible for her *not* to feel stolen from; that another woman had inherited all of her hard work and reforming strictness.

David read her diary and – as anyone would when confronted with the intimate and unspoken thoughts of those long dead – wondered what had become of the woman. Did she ever find wisdom? It seemed impossible – David knew enough about human nature to know that the first twenty-four hours after a significant moral mistake are crucial. If she *justified* her own errors – and he could see it, page after page, word after word – in fact, the entire diary seemed to serve that purpose – then not only would she not learn, she would never be *able* to learn. She was writing a fiction about her virtue and moving into the sky-castle of her vanity, away from everyone...

What we justify, we repeat. The justification and the repetition are one and the same... Excuses are promises of repetition.

It was so hard for David to understand this perspective in history, because the Civ was founded on the repudiation of vanity. Vanity demands that we never admit fault – that we become infallible gods in the fantastical pantheon of our own professions – but all foundational societal progress results from the most elemental self-criticism of all: the fundamental question – *Am I wrong?*

Morally: *Am I evil?*

A person – a culture – that can never ask that question must project all its immorality onto those who deviate from vanity. Vanity requires the most fundamental *un-originality* regarding empirical information – you can only ever believe what serves your *happiness* – your *relief* – in the *moment* – you must *never* compare your resulting actions to universal standards, because your self-hyped vanity will evaporate under the infinite constellations of absolute morality.

This long-dead woman had obviously created her sense of self on the wobbly altar of *superiority* – which condemned her to constantly denigrate those around her. For her, there was no height without depth; there was no ceremony of the self without the sweaty dug graves of others.

She sailed through her life, through her squandered ambitions, her fading fertility, her aging and souring face – utterly convinced of the rightness of her position, and the wrongness of the world that failed to support her vanity.

She *felt* herself to be right – and the days and years that she used to reinforce her justifications were like the days and years that pass after a person goes missing. The first hours – the first day or two – are the most crucial... The odds of finding a person alive after a decade are virtually zero. In the same way, the odds of foundational self-criticism emerging after decades of self-justification and blame are also virtually zero. It happens – just as you can jump out of a plane from a great height and somehow land without injury – but it's not something you should *ever* count on...

And her demands grew – every man she met was required to reinforce her justifications, to join her in burning the endless effigies of people long-gone from her life. *Wasn't he so terrible, aren't I right, don't you agree, I wasn't to blame, he did me wrong* – these demands to be initiated into the inner cult of her vanity were endless, and drove everyone of any quality out of her life...

And then – and then, the Cataclysms began – more rapidly than anyone outside of philosophers imagined – and her mortality was suddenly served up to her, and the self-nagging of endlessly propping up her own imagined virtues suddenly collapsed, and she was faced with real and present danger – of hunger and the hunt for food and the rape of the roaming – and her anxiety overwhelmed her, and she ran to men for protection – men who abused her – but she could no longer afford to put *them* down, because she needed them – and her random scriblings grew more and more disjointed and desperate – her last entry was a frantic plan to escape from the guarded settlement that was her sanctuary and her prison, because she had been designated a 'useless eater' due to her age and infertility...

Nothing came into her mind – or her writing – of any use or depth or value *whatsoever*.

The fact that she had milked her looks, avoided motherhood, insulted good men for failing to support her fantasies – that she was a former feminist who had built a certain road to her end-role as a bitter, scorned and rejected concubine – that she could no longer manipulate resources out of the desperate and gullible – that all of her power had faded into nothing – and she had invested *nothing* into her relationships – she had no nieces or cousins who loved her, no aunts or uncles grateful for her gentle ministrations of their aging illnesses – she had *consumed* others, satisfying only their lust and thirst for subjugation – she had no reciprocity in her relationships, she gave away only what she had not earned – her beauty – she generated no new values – or value – and she busily remonstrated with the gods of her own fate that she could no longer vote her way out of her dangerous and decaying subjugation...

"The true nature of men has been laid bare..." she scribbled in her last entry – heading out to death as surely as she had lived, without a glimmer of insight into her own role in creating the world she now fled.

Really, thought David, reading her last words with a sinking heart – *what could she possibly say, at this point?*

*'I created a world of brutality by greedily inflicting falsehoods on the insecure? I used others – now I am **wretched** that I am being used?*

When the central principle of people's lives manifests around them – when their living of that principle *creates* the monsters that enslave them – their vanity demands that they take *no responsibility* for the world they made...

And so the woman – now 50 – disappeared into the night, into the wilderness, leaving her diary behind, probably as a testament she imagined would generate endless pity for her in the future – instead of the sorrow and horror that David felt. His mind was tempted to follow her into the wilderness, to wonder what happened to her, a used-up woman who had used others up, but he had to draw a stern line around his own wandering imagination.

We must learn from history, not follow fools into their own graves...

On reading the diary – found on a burnt scrap of hard drive after the Cataclysms – David felt the kind of chill that he supposed former readers of ancient history had experienced when reading about the tortures and mutilations committed by ancient tribes against themselves, and their children. The ancient South American culture of the Aztecs believed that the tears of children would produce the abundant rains necessary for their crops – so priests would physically torture the children to collect their tears – before slaughtering them. Their parents would sing and applaud the sacrifice.

Cannibalism, the murder of infants and children – rape as a weapon of war, the habit of some ancient tribes to carve a hole through the base of the penis of a boy going through puberty – these prehistoric horrors sent ice through the veins of all researchers with a shred of conscience – what David read about in the decades before the Cataclysms was a form of *spiritual* self-mutilation.

The concept of 'sin' had been cast aside, and all the accumulated and concentrated wisdom of self-broken people casting their bitter knowledge back in time, like black pearls of revulsion and repulsion – the seven deadly sins, the 'ape categories' of self-destructive behaviours – the mere mammals versus the sublime angels – the rocket of escape from the greedy meat-pockets of mere flesh – propelling the blind photocopying of genetics up to the super-human sky-castles of universal abstractions – the acceleration into the airless sky that felt like dying – all of this was *lost* – and no one thought for a *second* about *why* sin existed, *why* the punishments of hell and the rewards of heaven had to be so extravagant – how much the greedy apes of our meaty natures scrabbled in the ground of fighting and sex and food and laziness, terrified of losing their fur, their certainty in the pursuit of their lusts, so afraid of anything greater than muscle and semen – so that *all* abstractions – moral abstractions in particular – hunted them like ghosts, as they raced through the jungles, through the cities – and eventually, through the sewers, hiding from the radiation – chased and hunted by their own super-human potential, which nagged and bullied and bribed and humiliated them as they squatted over the prey of their own higher selves. They were hunted *because* they had hunted. They refused to pray, and so became prey – the prey of ignorance and greed and the mad manic desire of *all flesh* to satisfy itself in the moment, and to hell – literally, to *hell* – with the true and the beautiful and the good. Paints were

snatched to cover the face in the bright rainbows of war – to re-create a sunset on the wall of the cave was incomprehensible.

Women prettied themselves in order to be assaulted – men grew muscles in order to strut and stride. Language was used to chisel guilt and resources from the morally sensitive. Morality was destroyed in order to be replaced by the hysterical attacks of a mob. Conscience – the thumbprint of divine universals on the mind-muscles of the moment – was *destroyed*, replaced by the lust for destruction common to all who have surrendered their common humanity for the sake of the self-shredding pleasure of *approval*.

Parents were easily taught to abandon their children to the machine-monsters of State indoctrination. Mothers fled the dark warmth of the nurturing cribs to blink and shrivel under wage-slave fluorescent lights, handing over their screaming babies to scornful, indifferent and underpaid foreigners.

The basics of science cracked and shattered – taken over by the State, science was turned into a weapon against the common sense of the tax cattle. Science became a giant club to destroy and de-platform *anyone* skeptical of the objectivity of vacant bureaucrats in white coats sucking at the teat of billions of dollars of made-up money...

History was a madhouse that only seemed 'normal' to those incarcerated by the accidents of time.

Everyone looked back to prior ages with the delicate revulsion of horror – and then turned their gazes to their own creeping insanities with the complacency of habitual normalcy.

All who came before us were mad and evil, in equal measures – but my world is the end of history, the sane and serene harbour that all the broken ships of the past have taken refuge in...

As David rocketed away from the warring Tribe, he wept.

He wept at the arcs of light that flashed through the forest, as the Angels threw their electric shields over the futures of the children.

He wept at the madness of the parents, destabilized to the point of self-dissolution at the absolute lightning protection of their victims – morality finally as a *true* bolt out of the blue.

He wept with relief that the madness of history had finally come to a close with the Civ.

He wept with relief that he had never had to weigh his future desire for children with the fear that the growing madness of the world would swallow them whole.

He wept at his time-window view of cultures lost in history, arising in the present only as the most terrible reminder of everything humanity had escaped...

He wept for the thousand generations of parents who unknowingly created predatory rulers by preying on their own children.

But mostly, he wept because he was free to escape the madhouse – the violence and evil – of the past by flying through the brisk air back to the Civ – while the children behind and below him snarled and dodged and rebelled and taunted, protected at last by the electric arms of the flying Angels.

Chapter 31

Roman's sons were named Ain and Kable. Ain was in his mid-teens, Kable a year or two younger.

Everyone thinks that the most important relationships in childhood are with the *parents* – which is only true if there are no siblings. Like most primitive older brothers, Ain was consumed by the unearned privilege of an early birth. He was taller, of course – stronger, faster at everything except sprinting, a naturally gifted athlete and hunter. Kable was more sensitive, more drawn to their mother, more dreamy and abstract – and thus more subject to scorn and humiliation at the hands of his older brother.

Vanity is rage spread thin – Ain could be bitterly funny, but was also perpetually angry. Some people have the disorienting habit of switching emotions without transition – from laughter to rage in a moment; Ain was one of those, and Kable learned quite early to not bother trying to figure out his brother's moods, or trying to appease or placate them.

They were both raised in the harsh straitjacket of grim necessity – babies died, women expired in childbirth, infected fingers had to be hacked off, the hunting herds had to be followed, the conveyor belt of food had to run constantly. You had to hunt when you were starving, and give food to those who had stayed home. Elders were respected – venerated even – until they consumed more than they could possibly produce, at which point they were expected to take a noble stroll to nowhere.

Over many years, a strange bifurcation had occurred in the culture of the Tribe. They had a few solar powered book-libraries; they taught their children to read, debated philosophy and morality – and whether there were any limits to the duties owed to the Tribe. They had fallen from a high place, which was *very* different from rising from a low place. Their natural intelligence prevented them from falling too far; they had actually become the mythical creatures talked about so often throughout the ages: the Noble Savages. They spun complicated stories, invented endless songs, learned and taught complex dances – and justified their Spartan lives with appeals to abstract principles of self-reliance, unadorned natural living and the usual environmentalist fantasies that technology was a wall between mortals and their true humanity.

They did not revere Nature, but viewed her as a blind, tough adversary. Almost unknown to themselves, they were part of the sentimental nostalgia common to all human history, where people living complicated lives cast their minds back to an imaginary simplistic vision of hunting and eating and sleeping. The stress of civilization has always turned to imaginary dust in the face of spear-throwing, face-painting and crapping in a hole.

Their lives were occasionally stressful, but the stress never lasted for long – unlike the Old World, which seemed designed to slowly murder people by incrementally drowning them in endless cortisol. It is hard

to enjoy your life if you are trapped on a ship that takes fifty years to sink – in the Old World, the unsustainability of the system was deeply felt by the Ice People – those who had evolved with the instinctive stress-measurement of the longevity of proposed resources. *Can we make it through the winter?* Those carefree souls who failed to answer this basic question accurately froze in their huts come March.

The Old World had no chance of lasting – mathematically, demographically, morally – in any and every way – and those trapped in its crippling-slow decay choked, suffocated and drowned in their own rising stress. The human system of survival – the adrenaline-dumps of sprinting from predators – were stretched to unbearable lengths; hormonal responses designed to last minutes were stretched out to decades, and people turned into fitful ghosts, dragging the chains of their own mismatched biology.

Neither the parents nor the children slept the first night that the Angels hovered overhead, outlined against the ghost-clouds and stars. Sudden shifts in elemental power can scarcely be navigated by the trauma-frozen mental maps we use to navigate brutal authority.

The parents were beyond uneasy – they no longer felt like parents, in fact.

At some point, about halfway through that dismal night, Roman threw aside his covers and stepped out of his tent.

It was a starry night, and a slow breeze brought chill hints of the coming winter. The constellations blazed and shivered, supremely indifferent to the mad changes in the world they barely lit.

Roman coughed, hoping to summon other parents.

Almost immediately, tent-flaps opened, and parents came filing out from their sleepless teepees. Gratifyingly, no children emerged.

Roman gestured for the parents to follow him towards a low tangle of cherry trees.

Immediately, an Angel flashed before him, saying: “Please do not leave the children unsupervised.”

Roman grunted and nodded, feeling a choking stab of rage. He turned around, and gestured for the fire to be re-lit in the center of the encampment.

The parents all sat cross-legged in a circle.

The Angels ringed them, like the outer rim of an arrow target.

One man with thick black hair said: “I could *skin* your goddamned kids, Roman.”

An Angel appeared on his left shoulder and said: “Please note that some children are awake. This statement is unacceptable.”

Roman said: "Let's talk about raising goats."

A shiver of nervous laughter ran around the dark circle.

He turned to the closest hovering Angel: "That okay with you, you fat floating freak?"

Roman could see the firelight reflected in the twin floating dolls-eyes of the baby.

Silence.

Roman turned and said: "I don't know how the hell you are supposed to raise goats without discipline."

A father grunted. "Those damn things will eat you out of house and home unless you put fences up."

A mother said: "And what on earth do we do with the – goats, if all the fences come down, and they're used to fences, and they just – wander around, getting in the way, not being productive – and not listening, being – disobedient..."

Another father whispered: "They're just going to turn on us. They're going to – butt us, in our sleep. It's going to be a – war."

A woman said: "How the *hell* am I supposed to raise goats totally different from how I – all of us – were parented? We might as well just try and invent some new clicking language..."

The circle of blue eyes hovered impassively.

Another man growled: "Look at us here, sitting in the night, whispering like thieves, hoping we don't get our asses stung by electricity – what kind of authority figures are we supposed to be for our – goats?"

A wide-eyed woman said: "Make no mistake – this is the end of us. Roman says we came from the Civ – all right, we live hard out here, that's our way – it had honour because we kept to the path, and we could teach our kids – goat kids, you floating freaks – but if it all ends here, if we can't – be ourselves, with our goats, then what the hell was the point of freezing our asses off out here all these years – we might as well have just - plugged into the Civ, with honey and heat and robot butlers and whatnot. It doesn't just make a lie of us, here and now, but of everything, in the past, that we..."

Her eloquence failed her, and she sunk into a gloomy silence.

"I won't have it!" cried another man suddenly, turning defiantly to the floating Angels. "There has to be some – way."

Silence and smiles from the floating blue eyes...

Roman grunted and said: "I went over all this with David. They have us beat. Even if we could – disable them, they'll just send more. They can hear everything, see everything, cut through everything, report home..."

An older woman burst into tears. “God – it can’t be – it can’t be – so hopeless! I don’t know how to even wake up tomorrow! *How are we going to get them to do what we want?*”

“What we *need*,” said the dark-haired man evenly.

“We sacrificed so much,” said another man softly, gesturing into the night. “There’s a line of – ancestors, going out to the horizon, all shaking their heads and wishing they could come back to life to knock some sense back into us!”

A woman said, tearfully: “Who are we, if we are not – in charge?”

Everyone suddenly looked at Roman. They could see – almost scrolling across his face – the words: *I don’t know...*

One of the Angels turned to him.

“Scans show no goats in the vicinity. Please do not use analogies when discussing your children.”

The dark-haired man jumped up, shouting with rage, and leapt at the Angel – which darted nimbly up, escaping his outstretched fingers.

The floating baby smiled. “Please do not attack the Angels. Everyone gets one warning.”

One woman said: “Would it – be helpful if we – got some – *actual* goats? Then we could...”

Roman sighed. “It won’t do much good to try and outsmart them. They’ve been battle-tested, so to speak, in just about every environment. They beat the whole world...” He stood up. “No – we will have to find – another way.”

Everyone’s eyes stared at him expectantly, hopefully.

He shook his head again. “I’m not saying what you’re thinking.”

The eyelids fluttered, the eyes lowered, the mouths pouted.

Roman awoke feeling tendrils of uneasiness in his belly – an instability, a ‘hanging by a thread being hunted’ sensation.

It was late, midmorning – far beyond his usual rising time – but he didn’t feel rested.

It was like when hunting was going badly, and he rehearsed endless successful kills in his dreams, but awoke feeling hungry and exhausted.

He leaned up on his elbows, turning his face to the left and rubbing his eyes.

The tepee was stained, silent. Above him, a little to the right, blocking the small hole designed to let the smoke out, hung a silent floating Angel. The pupils of the blue eyes were trained on him, and he had a sudden shudder, as if he were being watched by a pink devil, or a malevolent ancestor – or his own *conscience* – the sudden thought came to him, and he smiled grimly, with the pretense of courage, because he was now being watched for – how long?

Until I change, the thought came to him.

He did not want to get up. He wanted to lie in a fetal position, hugging his own tension, circling it like a useless toothless shark.

But he willed himself to rise – in part because, being over fifty, he had to pee.

He stumbled stiffly out of his tepee and looked over the encampment.

Very few parents were up. Children milled about, playing various games, watched over by the attentive Angels.

Ain and Kable were playing ‘rock paper scissors’ in front of his tepee, over the fading smoke of the night fire. They looked up at him with a curious and complicated mixture of emotions – fear, defiance, resentment, anger, uncertainty...

“Morning, dad,” said Ain warily.

Kable nodded in agreement, and Roman returned the greeting.

Roman felt sudden anger – the children were just milling about playing listless games, rather than doing the work necessary for *survival!*

*It’s not **abuse** if it keeps us **alive!*** he thought with sudden savagery.

He was developing a kind of sixth sense about the location of the Angels. He knew without turning around that the Angel inside his tepee was now floating behind him, staring at the hairs on the back of his neck. It wasn’t that they made any sound, or had any electrical presence – it was more like...

He suddenly remembered that, as a child, he had fingered threads while going to sleep – and always had a great instinct as to when a thread was just about to end.

All predators understand predators...

The thought struck him with such sudden severity that he truly imagined that the Angel behind him had said something.

Are they controlling my brain?

Given that he did not understand the technology at all – he doubted many people did, even in the Civ – he would have no way of knowing, but he did begrudgingly accept that the Civ robot-pimps believed in free will, and wouldn't program him that way...

It's your inner Angel, answering the outer...

Roman grimaced and put his hands to his ears, uselessly.

He turned to his kids.

What the hell are you doing? he was about to demand, but checked himself.

"What are you – up to?" he asked.

Ain ducked his head, glancing just above and behind his father.

"Just – waiting for you to get up, I suppose."

Kable, his youngest, said: "Are you hungry?"

Roman waved him off. He caught the eye of another father, across from the central fire pit, who cocked his head and shrugged slightly.

Roman's eyes narrowed. "Do we need to talk?"

"About what?" asked Ain with pretend innocence.

There was an awkward pause. Roman could clearly see that his boys wanted to get back to their game, and suddenly felt further anger.

Unwanted...

He looked at his boys closely – Kable could not yet grow a beard, but Ain possessed some fairly robust stubble.

Unnecessary...

Roman wondered where his wife was. He saw a line of people walking in the heat-hazed distance – probably the women, going to get water.

Roman had no idea what to say to his sons.

He opened his mouth, then closed it, like a slow-motion fish out of water.

"What – what are you boys up to today?"

Ain looked at him with a flash of defiance. "We have no idea."

What is *that* supposed to mean? Roman was about to ask – but realized he could not neutralize his tone to the satisfaction of the floating Angel.

Roman took a deep breath. “All right, things have changed, let’s not pretend...”

Kable swallowed, his cheeks reddening, and wiped his eyes with self-conscious anger.

Ain said: “It’s hard to know who’s in charge now...”

Roman said evenly: “You brought us down this path – on the mountain that night, with those girls.”

“You told me always to defend what’s ours!” cried Ain.

Roman felt hot rage. His fists clenched, and he felt a tickle on the back of his neck with the approach of the Angel. A floating baby in the back of his brain froze his tongue.

“I didn’t tell you to bully – girls,” he said with effort.

“Oh yeah, dad, because bullying whoever is smaller is totally *bad*, right?”

Roman’s mouth fell open. The *scorn!*

He took a deep breath. “Oh, you are very brave now, with your little allies.”

Kable said: “I don’t like this any more than you do, dad!”

“Oh shut up,” said Ain carelessly.

The baby Angel was silent.

Roman leaned in, towering over his eldest son. “So you want to be in charge now, right?” he murmured. “You’ve got your little sky-buddies, you’ve got half a moustache, you’ve got your skinny little muscles and your – little bit of armpit-arrogance. I understand, happens to all. So *be* in charge. I promote you. Go on – get all the food and keep everyone in line and... watered. These Angels don’t want me to – treat you like a child, so – don’t be a child. Be a man. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“Dad...” murmured Kable, obviously frightened.

“Oh God, don’t be such a baby!” cried Ain in frustration.

The Angel darted forward from behind Roman, and said: “Please do not insult your brother.”

Roman’s eyes widened slightly. *How the hell does it know they are related?*

He felt an elemental invasion of his privacy. He glared at the floating blue eyes.

“How the hell do you know that?”

Silence.

“I want to talk to David – put him on.”

The Angel said: “I am not a communications device.”

Ain looked up, squinting against the white glare of the clouds surrounding the Angel. “How long are you here for?”

Silence.

Roman’s hands itched for a giant stick that he could use to smash and smash the Angel into easily-buried history...

He then felt a – sudden rush of sadness, of loss – and remembered his own father, towering over him, exacting vengeance for some slight he could not remember.

DON'T DO IT!

*Who am I without **power**?*

The most fundamental question of humanity shot through his mind, chased by crackles of trauma.

Roman squatted down in front of his children. “If you want to learn how to live, you will do what I say, although I am now prevented from punishing you, or raising my voice. Sitting here playing your – finger games – will not put any food on your lap, or water in your belly. You don’t want to be – irresponsible. You need to hunt, you need to set traps, you need to make sure that the women are getting – what they need. Life is a circle that goes around, day after day. Your bodies are always eating themselves, whether you feed them or not. Do you *understand*?”

Roman’s voice rose slightly at the end of his speech. He flinched involuntarily, but apparently he was still within bounds, because nothing happened.

Ain’s eyes also narrowed – almost in imitation of his father, it seemed. “I’m tired of hunting.”

Kable inhaled sharply, sitting back.

Roman said: “I’m not going to talk about this again. We are hunters, not – farmers.”

Ain jutted out his lower lip and said: “We didn’t get in trouble because I pushed a few girls around. We got in trouble because you beat the hell out of anyone who wants to plant crops! We got in trouble because we are always moving around, so we don’t have any property, we don’t have any rights – and you said yourself that the Civ is all about property. You blame me for your own dumb decisions, *dad*.” He imitated Roman. ““We are hunters, we throw spear, we eat meat, we are brave warriors who shoot deer and beat children!””

Kable was too frightened to laugh.

Ain continued: “And you never have to take any responsibility. We could have half the land growing food for us, but no – we have to be *hunters*, we have to cover our cheeks in blood, that is – what do you say, ‘our way.’ Well it’s not ‘our way,’ dad – it’s just ‘your way.’ And you yell at me for not taking responsibility – but you *raised* me, dad. Who am I but the shadow of you, of what you want, what you have – done? I’m not some carved-off – thing that has nothing to do with you!”

“That’s right,” said Roman grimly. “Blame me for *everything*.”

The Angel moved forward slightly and said: “Irrational absolutes tend to escalate conflict.”

“OH SHUT UP!” screamed Roman, raising his arms, thick with fight-or-flight blood.

Roman woke up in the late afternoon.

His wife Sarah was leaning over him, pressing a cold cloth to his forehead.

“Oh you’re back,” she said simply. “Turn your head, look around.”

Roman grimaced and obeyed her.

Lying on hides were a dozen women, and half a dozen men. All were in various states of dazed disrepair.

The dark-haired man from the previous night was next to him. He smiled wryly at Roman.

“Well, we can confirm that the Angels work at least.”

Roman said: “I don’t remember getting a warning.”

The dark-haired man leaned over with glowing eyes and whispered: “You were *magnificent*! I’ve never seen more electricity, except from the sky.”

The Tribe fell apart – there was no other way to put it.

The women stopped having sex with the men. The men wandered around, depressed, anxious – almost formless, it seemed. Some were seen shaking under the scant starlight, as if withdrawing from a powerful addiction – as in fact they were.

The older children – having been ground down by brutal authority their entire lives – attempted to enter the power vacuum caused by the Angels, but the floating eyes were having none of it. Elder siblings were commanded to refrain from verbal or physical abuse against their younger siblings, against other children... If they were young, the commandments were very gentle – and if ignored, the Angels simply interposed themselves between the children. If verbal abuse continued, the Angels played classical music at very high volume, driving the attacker away.

Children wept in the dirt and dust, bereft of form, shape and personality. Mothers wept with them, side-by-side, without touching, as if in strange solidarity.

Men hunted with increased ferocity. They shot animals only to wound them, then stood with their feet on the necks of their prey, firing arrows into their fading eyes.

The Angels were silent – with one exception. Apparently, the nonaggression principle applied only to humans.

The dark-haired man was electrified because he was clearly torturing a rabbit.

He was not given a warning.

Roman felt himself strangely emotional – he had previously controlled his emotions by controlling his children. These eruptions of random feelings were extremely disorienting to him, and he went on long solitary hunting trips – once even forgetting his arrows – so that his status would not be destroyed by the rebellion of his heart.

He dreamed of his father – and his mother – almost every night. They raged at him – as they had in life – demanding that he honour their memory by maintaining their rules. In a strange reversal of what had actually happened to him as a child, his mother raged at him, while his father sat in silent and claustrophobic disappointment.

DON'T DO IT!

He awoke from one of these nightmares with a distinct and metallic thought dancing on his tongue.

I was not beating my children, but my parents...

He could not follow that thought – he lacked the language. Self-knowledge is the most foreign tongue to primitive personalities; they may as well be dropped into ancient Greece to debate Socrates. Every true thought about themselves feels like gibberish to those who have externalized and punished their irrationalities.

The work ethic of the Tribe largely collapsed. The raging men killed so many animals that the careful weighing of consumption so essential to their survival vanished, and they ran out of meat within a fortnight.

In many ways, it was even worse for the women. Female aggression is often secondhand – they cannot beat up other men, but they can spread rumours, attack children and provoke their mates into fighting other males.

The women of the tribe also used sex as a reward mechanism, but since the men were depressed and absent – and the all-seeing Angels were everywhere – they lost this power too.

With the loss of sexual power came a collapse in grooming standards. Everything the adults did in the Tribe was to dominate – in the absence of domination, they were utterly disoriented, like gymnasts in zero gravity. Their muscles meant nothing; there was no resistance, and therefore no strength, no purpose. All their prior ferocious skills sagged into twitchy and flaccid emptiness – their rage blocked them from learning any new skills, since the new rules were enforced, not accepted.

The scorn and rebellion of the children grew in leaps and bounds, because they saw the soft victim underbelly of their prior tormentors. When violence in parenting is removed, parents are revealed as helpless and empty, at least for a time.

You could have stopped anytime, if you wanted to...

And:

*You stopped beating **us** because the Angels are beating **you**...*

As the collapse of parental work fueled the growing hunger – and the survival of the Tribe became a very real question – some of the older children began to step into leadership roles – but a very *different* form of leadership than had been inflicted before.

Ain in particular felt a growing and grudging sympathy for his parents. Aging patriarchy has long swung from violent abuse to rank self-pity – as strength fades from striking muscles, soul-sucking emotional manipulation takes its place.

Fear of violence gets replaced by fear of guilt.

Ain could see that his father was shrinking physically – his pride in his lean legs and broad chest had collapsed in on itself. Ain was reminded of the first tepee he had tried to build, which had similarly fallen inward.

Violent people are helpless without violence – that is mostly what the violence is designed to cover up. Ain could see the near-instant erasure of his father's dominance – and Roman's imposing physical and mental figure fell away in his mind, showing a squalling and helpless infant, working the levers of a giant warrior's arms.

Ain remembered, as a child, curiously hacking back the shell of a dead tortoise, and being surprised at the soft and helpless thing inside.

The helplessness and the armour are the same thing...

He felt sympathy for his father's exposure – but he also felt a cold anger. Sympathy for brutalizers can be warranted – but it is usually a step too far to demand it from their victims.

Finally, Ain grew tired of half-measures, and demanded that the Tribe assemble. The adults were so inert that they simply allowed themselves to be led and sat in a circle around the main fire pit, like so many legless sacks.

Below were the men, women and children – floating above them, like pink proximate constellations, were the tousled blonde Angels – silent, smiling, implacable, absolute. Their bows were out.

“So – we are not doing so well,” said Ain. “The elders, you have all gone walkabout, you’re just – hunting and eating at a distance, staying out for days, not bringing much of anything back, and the kids – well they’re not doing so well either...” His voice cracked, but he struggled on, not even sure what he was going to say next.

“And it’s a shock, I get it – these – Angels – have changed a lot – everything really. But – it’s not like they’ve turned us into another kind of animal. We can still hunt, they are not interfering in – survival, because that would violate their rules or something. It’s a big rule, I get it, not hitting, but I don’t get why everything has just fallen apart, so fast... You can’t hit us, you can’t yell at us, but we still – need you. You have – learned *other* things than hitting and yelling, and I don’t want to have to learn everything for myself, all over again. Dad...” he said, his voice breaking. “When I twisted my ankle, running after that rabbit, we were like halfway to the horizon, and you just tied it up and told me to walk, and it was a long way, I think I remember just about every step – you told me to be tough, you gave me a stick to bite on, I was like six or something. And you’re getting close to fifty I think, and I know you can deal with just about any kind of pain, because you taught *me* to, so I don’t – understand why you can’t just – put one foot in front of the other and make your way home. And Jesse...” Ain pointed at the dark-haired man. “Every day you attack the Angels – more than once sometimes – and you just lose all the time, and we are all terrified that you’re going to get some permanent damage, like you’re going to glow at night and your bones are going to snap when you take a step. What are you doing? You were always telling me that if something doesn’t work – like being upwind when you’re hunting – then you just stop doing it. You had these rules – like my dad has these rules, like you all have these rules – and you’re just not applying them now, and it’s driving me crazy. Why are these floating babies undoing everything about us? Why can’t we hold anything together?” His voice rose. “We’re going to die, die off, if we don’t – change, learn something, whatever it is that we have to learn. We can’t get enough food and water for all the kids – and you – without your help. You’re all turning into these useless eaters – but you’re not going off into the wild like grandpa did, you’re just – consuming everything, giving nothing...”

Ain was struck by a sudden thought.

“Do you want – forgiveness? I don’t think it’s guilt, I don’t think that, but – something... Dad...”

Roman raised his dead eyes to his son. He slowly shook his head.

Ain gestured helplessly. “Are we supposed to – just – wander off and leave you here, to survive on your own if you want? Is everything being run by ghosts? You’re still my dad, even if you don’t hit me – maybe more...”

Roman felt a deep vibration in his soul, like a rolling church bell. A choice arose in his heart that he did not expect. He had demanded apologies almost every day from those around him, from his children – but he could not remember offering a *single one* as an adult.

DON'T DO IT!

To hell with inner voices, I will act!

Roman wrestled himself to his feet, as if he were underwater, weighed down.

He walked to his son on numb feet, on a new path, in a new world.

He opened his arms.

The circling Angels smiled and put away their weapons.

Chapter 32

As the leader of the free world, I am not unused to getting my way.

After my wife removed her face – revealing a swirling galaxy floating in a void – I *roared*.

That has always been my way, the sword of Damocles hanging over the puppet strings of everyone around me. When you are born with a big face, and a strong jaw – and you are taller than normal, with a full head of thick hair – rising impatience followed by table-pounding roaring just – scatters everyone into conformity around you. People are like salmon – if you're a strong enough current, everyone gets in line.

Tentative people drive me insane – or rather, they would if they weren't so damn useful. So many people try to be 'nice' – but nice people never get anything done – at best, they are as valuable as the mortar used to build a cathedral. Without mortar, I guess, there is no cathedral – but no one cares about the mortar, or comes to see it.

The man who came into my room after my faceless wife floated out was impossible for me to read.

Let's be honest – when two people – two men – come together, it's like two airplanes flying towards each other. One goes up, one goes under, or everyone dies... Life is nothing but status – we are haggling apes in suits, nothing more, nothing less.

I can always sniff deference in the air – and create it if necessary. Escalation is the key – you just have to clench your jaw, stare without blinking, and raise your voice to the point where people fully, truly and deeply *understand* that they will have to kill you to get their way. Iron will is the inevitable physics of our universe – people have no more choice to obey the resolute than water has to obey the tide.

Occasionally, I come across another alpha – and we try our usual tricks on each other, and then both end up laughing, shaking hands, and going our different ways. It's kind of like two lions – each thinking they are hunting a gazelle – coming across each other in a bare-claw flurry of comical surprise. No one expects them to eat each other – they part as friends, knowing there is more than enough meat for every predator.

I was *so* glad not to live in a time of duels and honour and pistols at dawn. I could lie and spread rumours and undermine reputations without a thought – no one was going to slap my face with a glove and shoot my kidney out in the morning mist. Consequences are an insult to the kind of ambition I was raised with – the only cure for addiction is a hangover, and I never had any of the hangovers of guilt or shame or regret. I don't think in my life I ever really felt fear – caution, for sure, when I was in the presence of a dangerous enemy, but not outright fear.

I was originally kind of – worried about all the supposedly good people in the world, but I remained strangely invisible to them. I am the natural prey of abstract virtue, but I was like a zebra wandering through a pride of lions, watching them scabble for ants in the dust – invulnerable in my obviousness.

Jane's funeral showed me who *really* ran the world...

You run it, or you get run over.

The first few tendrils of power are tough – once you snag those, they turn into a kind of wobbly lasso you can use to capture more. The moment you have any shred of *political* power, you can punish your enemies and reward your friends – so your enemies fear you, and your friends love you.

In every successful politician is the basic thought: *How can I possibly get away with this?*

I promised not to raise taxes, then I raised taxes!

I promised to reduce immigration, then I increased immigration!

I promised transparency, then slow-walked document requests for years!

I praised free speech, then imposed censorship!

I promised more press conferences, then rambled my way through remote teleconferences!

It all reminded me of pulling out a stubborn tooth when I was a kid – you're frightened of the tug, then it turns out to be nothing, just the snapping of a thin thread, a mouthful of temporary blood...

The press was my friend; reporters attacked *all* my enemies, making up lies and sending the innocent tumbling into the humiliating canyons of self-justification. Academia praised me in obtuse syllables; movies portrayed my kind as noble and heroic, economists told everyone I was in total control when things went well, but a victim of blind market forces when my economy went into the crapper.

I was hated, sure, but you can't be any kind of leader if you fear disapproval – leadership is all about forcing people to do what they damn well don't want to do – like being a general in a war – and forcing

people makes them upset, sure. But it was pretty easy to deal with – I had the magic spell of the “common good” which I could use to curse anyone who didn’t do what I wanted, what I told them to. I represented this common good – I was its bland and enslaved acolyte – so it wasn’t *me* that people had to obey – it was the good of *everyone* – themselves included – even if they didn’t see it at the time. :-)

People shuffled into my life on a continual basis – it was a total conveyor belt of hypocritical need; we all played the game and danced the dance. They talked about the *common good*, and I talked about the *general good*, reporters wrote about *democracy* – and everyone got free stuff, and I got more power – and the ‘common good’ lay twitching and hyperventilating on the carpet, like a frat boy after his first prison shower.

Damn those were great days!

You rise as smooth as sunshine, and people feed you and lay out your clothes – it seems vaguely offensive to have to shave yourself – and you take your meetings with excellent coffee, and sunlight pours in through the windows on deep, rich mahogany tables – and the paper is always crisp, and aides lean into your ears and whisper sexy secrets into your brain, and everyone dances a disco dance of verbal avoidance of naked self-interest, and the machineries of pen and paper create legal mazes that mice have to forever sprint through to get a scrap of cheese, and your heart swells with the joy of control, and you know that no one – not one single soul – will *ever* speak the words that will undo everything. We know that it is all a theatre of blood, that the State escalates until citizens comply or die – that all the creamy white walls and pillars are the blended bones of freedom – and if people would only tell the *truth*, it would all go away – but they are addicted to the lies, and – and here was the most *perfect thing!*

I understood incredibly quickly that anyone who talked about freedom from me, freedom from *us*, freedom from lies – was roundly attacked by everyone else. I didn’t really need to lift a *finger* to control speech – *thought* even – because anyone who talked about property rights and ‘taxation is theft’ was *destroyed* by their fellow citizens. I found this hilarious – it was like thinking you needed bars to keep the monkeys in your zoo, when any monkey that even *thought* about escaping would be beaten within an inch of its life by every other monkey around!

Saves a lot of money on security!

I found it sooo amusing, watching the libertarians and Austrian economists wail and bleat about central banking and the counterfeit nature of government money – they genuinely seemed to think that their words would undo our electric power to type whatever we wanted into our own bank accounts! I imagined them walking on a hot beach and shielding themselves from burns by endlessly muttering the word ‘sunscreen.’

It took me awhile to learn that you cannot have power without spreading it around – otherwise you create implacable enemies who will offer more to the court toadies dependent on the steady drip of government cheese.

Sure, we created whatever money we wanted – but we spread it around, we gave it to the bankers, we gave it to those tight to the center of power – and we gave watered-down remnants to the poor, the single mothers, those dependent – or so they thought – on us, our ‘generosity.’

They all stood and placed their hands on their hearts when the flags flapped and the anthems played – because they were worshiping the gang that gave them cash. And it was a cosmic comedy, how everyone self-righteously lied and paraded and pretended. It was the new religion – except we could offer them something more visceral than heaven itself: *the money they needed to escape their terrible decisions*. Single mothers *always* voted for us – they couldn’t choose a good father for their kids, but they *sure knew* how to choose a political leader for the entire country! It was hard to give those solemn speeches about their noble, stunning and brave sacrifices without bursting into laughter.

Once the government can spread trillions of dollars around the economy, it becomes *deeply* hilarious to watch everyone talk about the noble and abstract responsibility of voting. *A solemn civic duty...* At the end of any election cycle, my cheeks were *raw* from biting.

To be fair, there were a lot of True Believers in my inner circle – they genuinely thought that we *were* there to help the poor, to protect the nation, to keep people healthy and happy.

They hurried to endless meetings with badly-wound neckties, growing flop-sweat and a panting, almost hysterical earnestness – and they genuinely believed that as long as *anyone* suffered in the land, they just weren’t doing their job properly!

They had this aching hypersensitivity to unhappiness anywhere in the world – literally, *anywhere* in the world, it was incredible! – and their entire identities were based on alleviating suffering – which meant that any idiot who pretended to suffer controlled their entire existence!

But – they were incredibly useful as human shields to any philosophical skepticism about the virtue of what we were doing – you could prop them up totally drunk on a lie detector, and they would absolutely pass it, if they were asked: “Are you here to do good?”

I found their earnestness deeply creepy; their essential monkey brains had been gouged out and replaced by unearthly girly angels. They were the opposite of me, but we complemented each other perfectly. I did the messy dealings with the machinery of power – where fingers and souls get lost on a regular basis – while they covered the unholy mess with a sheen of self-righteous stained glass. I did the screaming wet-work of carving bloody laws from squealing self-interest – they covered up the inevitable abattoir with apple-cheeked earnest choirs.

God, who else..?

Oh yeah – there was the gang called the *Dreadnoughts* – they didn’t have my sunny and joyful passion for the exercise of mere power – oh no, they had some mysterious darker purpose to their daily grind. They *hated* something – or *wanted* something – and no one *ever* tried to plumb their black depths, because they were such useful weapons to point at intransigent enemies. The *Dreadnoughts* would

comb over a person's entire history, finding something – or inventing something – to kill off their public lives. Nuance was their enemy; “out of context” their ranged weapon.

There were also the *Enforcers* – for anyone we couldn't snag legally. They attacked anyone who supported or went to the speeches of these paladins. They called in the bomb threats and death threats. They were mostly single sons of single mothers, sent out by the unconscious terrified greed of the matriarchs – we secretly called them *state-riarchs* – to wreck and destroy anyone who might interfere with the free flow of tax revenue to their ample polyester laps.

It wasn't a simple thing to be a politician – you had to have an instinctive feel for all these colliding alliances – you had to manage the idealism of the choirboys, and use it as a cover for the Dreadnoughts, and make sure the Enforcers didn't go too feral. You had to – I'm not sure exactly how to put it, it wasn't exactly 'overlook,' but – *bypass* everything that was going on. You couldn't look at anything directly – we all knew that – but you had to – work with it, examine it... It sometimes felt like fixing a complicated watch in pitch darkness – your sense of touch goes astronomical, but you can't *see* a damn thing!

It was all collusion and back-scratching – I remember, as a rookie, going on talk shows and being interviewed by reporters – and I was young and naïve enough to cautiously imagine that the reporters were tough-as-nails confronters of the powers-that-be – I guess I had imbibed too much of the Kool-Aid as a teenager – but they were all mild sycophants, only dangerous to anyone who challenged their vanity – which *I* certainly wasn't about to do!

They would ask 'tough' questions, and I would dance a two-step of staccato avoidance, and then they would just – move on. They wouldn't try to pin me down, they wouldn't ask for clarification or – God help us – *definitions*...

They would ask, I would avoid – and they would pat themselves on the back for the *professionalism* and *toughness* of their interrogation!

I remember being on a City Council, early on, and some half-bald doofus was making a documentary, and marched up and challenged all of us to explain how we were going to *pay* for everything we promised!

We all gave each other a smirking side-eye, and had him hauled out by security.

It was just a silly yet dangerous question – it wasn't like we were providing any real value – that's not the point of government. The point of government is *power*, and you *get* power by giving things away – but it's not actual power if you have to give your *own* stuff away, that wouldn't make any sense at all! The whole point of having power is to remove yourself from the mere mortality of mathematics.

I remember my father explaining this to me, when I was very little, after we watched some stupid superhero movie – what my dad called “kick-bangs”:

“Son, these superheroes, they can do the impossible – defy the laws of physics, fly, shoot fire from their hands and lasers from their eyes. They are wrapped in magic – that's what 'superpowers' means.”

He took an amber sip from a crystal whiskey glass that never seemed to empty.

“And that’s my job – and one day it will be your job as well – to defy reality, to break math, to plant impossibility and harvest power. We are the farmers of what should never be, but always is. And everyone worships the impossible, that is the root of patriotism – did you see the happy faces of the people in the crowd when the superhero flew by? They love him because he makes heroism *impossible* for them, because they can’t fly. They love him because he fights evil, but he is *impossible* – which means it is impossible for *them* to fight evil. It eases their conscience for doing nothing about...”

He laughed.

“In the past, with Jesus, you had to try to do what He did – although He was a superhero in his way, you *could* be like Him. Now they want billionaires with impossible gadgets to fight evil, because they can never – approach him, be like him. Jesus left us with the commandment that everyone had to fight evil, and that everyone could be like Him... These new gods, the superheroes – you can’t be like them, that’s the point. They are everyone’s excuse for doing nothing, which is why everyone gets addicted to them, and excited by them, and will pay to relieve their own conscience. In the past, you had to go to a priest and confess your sins, and make amends, and do better – now, idiots slap down twenty bucks, cheer the impossible, and walk out absolved!”

Some words sit in your life for years before they are properly understood.

Fighting evil is a dangerous business – it gets a lot of people killed and destroyed – but no one wants to be ashamed of their own inaction, so *we* exist as a kind of ‘pretend virtue,’ so people can pretend to do good without actually angering evil. Everyone wants the slender waist, nobody wants the diet – everyone wants to feel heroic, no one wants to put themselves in danger. So – they come to us and demand that *we* do good, and every couple of years they scribble an ‘X’ on a ballot and consider themselves the ultimate saints of human history...

The same thing was true for video games, but I never really understood how anyone could take pride in pushing pixels around a dead screen, so I didn’t bother to analyze it too much. I do remember laughing once about a professorial paper on ‘virtual currency’ in some gaming environment – the economist seemed to have absolutely no idea about the true nature of fiat currency.

I shake my head as the sandy-haired man walks into my room.

God I *have* to stop ruminating about the past – I know that it’s all I have, in whatever world I have woken into, but I absolutely *must* find a way to excavate my prior skills into the here and now.

I’ll be *damned* if I will rely on my historical reputation – being the Napoleon of my day – to gain authority and power in the present. I loved the exercise of power – it was my very reason for being – and if I can’t make it happen *here* – well, I’ll just tell them to put me back to sleep and damn well wake me up when I *can*!

The man pulls a chair to the foot of my bed, sits down and regards me with – what the hell is that expression, neutral curiosity? Condescending wonder?

It's so *weird*, feeling my brain misfire in this way – I can read any expression from anyone, down to the last atom – but I have *no idea* what is going on in this man's head...

I don't care how long it's been, people are still people...

I suddenly realize I would much rather be paralyzed than lose my ability to read people – *that* is a handicap I cannot stand!

I will my brain to process the face beyond my covered feet.

The hair is light, mildly side-swept. The forehead is wide and strong, the eyes light – I can't quite tell their colour in the dark – and the face angular, as if composed of geometrical blocks tightly packed. The mouth is not sensual – but not stern either. He does not look at me with respect, or fear – or much curiosity for that matter – or wonder.

He looks at me like – like...

I want to make a fist and rap my knuckles against my forehead – but I know *that* would be an unpardonable show of weakness. It is *incredibly* frustrating to be unable to read this man, to figure out his weaknesses, his desires, his fears – I am as terrified as if I have woken up in the pilot's seat of a plunging airplane, and none of the controls move at all...

I am terrified...

The import of the thought strikes me like a spinal fist – *this is – fear...*

The man leans forward. "My name is David. Welcome back to life. You have no power here."

Chapter 33

I take a deep breath.

"I want to know it all."

David sits and nods. "Where do you want to start?"

I muse for a moment. Now is the time to begin scanning this new world for opportunities, for weaknesses – for – yeah, fear and praise and respect. I know myself well enough to accept my vanity.

"Well, the standard question for someone waking up from a coma – and I guess this has been a very long coma, is – how long has it been?"

"A little over five hundred years."

I inhale sharply – and suddenly remember some VR game my grandson had strapped me into – more than half a millennia ago now – where I floated above the rings of Saturn – I remembered – and remember now – the feeling of looking at the tiny sun, and feeling so terrifyingly far away from everyone and everything that I involuntarily ripped the helmet off, and never put it on again. The idea of floating in a dead void – countless miles from the teeming ball of life that gave me strength was – unendurable.

David says: “It’s a lot to process, we can stop here if you want time to...”

I raise an imperious hand.

“Don’t be ridiculous, I’m a grown man...” A harsh laugh escapes my lips. “Perhaps the oldest man in history. I don’t remember much about my – last days – but I guess I wanted to live, and they froze me, and you found a cure, and I’m back to life now – dear God, I don’t even know how old I am!”

“You are 76.”

I furrow my brow. “That’s – what is the longevity here?”

“With luck, you could have another fifty years.”

I clap my hands together, rubbing the palms furiously. “By God, this is a brave new world – that’s *fantastic!*”

Something in his eyes flickers – a kind of vague warning that I should not be *too* happy about my future lifespan – but again, he is *so* hard to read that I decide to avoid any puncturing of my sudden, savage joy.

David purses his lips. “I want to correct you on something, though – we didn’t just find the cure for your illness. It was found centuries ago, but we didn’t know about your existence until recently.”

I nod slowly. “So – there must have been a significant – discontinuity – in the history of my nation.”

David stares at me. “The greatest possible discontinuity, I would say.”

A slight chill flickers through my heart. “It’s been taken over then... I assume – China?”

“Your nation no longer exists, but it has not been taken over.”

I laugh involuntarily. “Oh, so it sank under the sea – global warming? CO2?”

“No, your nation was not destroyed by plant food.”

I feel an odd shimmering mixture of despair and hope. I gain power by lying, but not having to lie – I could see that being a sweet relief of a kind...

“I don’t know what to ask next.”

“Well, you have a lot of physical needs to attend to. We have been stimulating your muscles, but you will still need to learn how to walk again. There’s going to be a lot of physical therapy, I assume you don’t want to use a sky-chair – a wheelchair I mean.”

“A – sky-chair?”

“It’s a floating chair, controlled by your eyesight.”

I ponder this for a moment. My extended zombie-life was like falling asleep in 1600, and waking up in the twenty-first century. I feel a sudden attack of strange giggles, imagining me zooming over a crowd, gesturing while giving a speech, like some comic-book villain from the future.

I then feel a sudden stab of regret, because I have not asked about my family.

*Damn it – that does **not** make me look very good...*

I make my dutiful inquiries, but David informs me that no other member of my family was found in the underground facility they discovered – quite by accident – and that every other capsule was broken.

“To be honest, we had some discussion about whether to raise you at all, since you are alone, and we had no contractual obligations to do so. But we still have some – work to do, absorbing and understanding the past, and you can be a crucial part of that process.”

I feel dizzy. “Tell me what kind of world I’m in.”

David takes a deep breath. “It’s glorious.” He gestures outside my room. “It’s very different from – how you grew up. Society is run on a series of voluntary contracts – everything from police to courts to prisons to geographical defense – I’m using old terms, you get the idea – and everyone competes to give you services, you can cancel at any time...”

He stops, noticing my expression.

“Say it – you can be frank, whatever you are thinking.”

I snort. “You really want to know what I’m thinking?”

“I do.”

“My first thought is that I took a nap in the afternoon, went mad, woke up in an asylum, and you are my cellmate.”

David smiles. “I can totally understand what you mean. If I had gone back in time, I would feel that I had woken up in a mental hospital as well.”

So many questions are tumbling through my mind... I have a sudden, vivid memory of being a young child, in some ancient arcade, in a wind machine, trying to push my sister’s blowing hair away from my stinging eyes...

“Well – who the hell is in *charge* then?”

Annoyingly – enragingly even – I get the sense that David understands my question perfectly, but avoids answering it.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, don’t be obtuse!” I snap, in my ancient habit of escalating others into crumbling deference.

David spreads his hands. “You and I are separated by many centuries... The language has remained similar – because it turned out that language usually mutated to escape trauma – but many of the words have changed meanings, so I need to ask you – what do you mean when you ask ‘who is in charge?’”

I take a deep breath. Suddenly, I do not want to ask the question directly – which is unusual for me, because my bluntness was always a great way to get others to give way...

“Who is – the – central authority?”

David purses his lips. “All right – you know that in some cultures, marriages are forcibly arranged by the – elders, right?”

I scowl. “As a man over five times your age, I don’t think I need any anthropology lessons!”

I feel another thread of panic sowing its jumpy way through my heart – my ill temper and impatience seem to have no effect *whatsoever* on this man David.

He says, mildly: “I’m choosing to use an analogy as a – path for you to walk, so that you can arrive at a clear understanding of the world you have woken up to. I can certainly continue – or I can stop now, it’s entirely up to you. I want to respect your choices.”

I grimace. “Are you a Christian?” I ask suddenly – having no idea where the question comes from.

“That reference is probably the closest you can come to understanding who I am – and the world that exists.”

Once again, my words arise without my willing them: “Are you an angel?”

David laughs. “Probably a devil, a little bit, from your perspective.”

I scowl. “If we brought my wife back in here, the one without a face, do you think that *she* would answer my questions directly?”

David pauses. “It’s probably clear that I’m trying to – lead you somewhere, slowly, but I know that you are a strong-willed man, so it doesn’t surprise me that you are not easily led...”

“Let me tell you a story. When I was little, I used to pick and boil peanuts, and sold them at a county fair for twenty-five cents a bag. I made enough money to invest in barley, when the price was down because the weather was good – and then I sold that barley for a huge profit. I then bought a series of houses

from the county – I found out who had died from the mortician, and got the places for pennies on the dollar, because there was usually no next of kin... I rented out these houses – I was just a kid, remember – and brought three huge dogs with me when I visited – anyone who hadn't paid his rent. And I let the dogs loose if no one was home, because I knew they would probably find the deadbeats hiding in the woods, up a tree or something. And I *got my money*, do you understand?"

My voice was soft.

"And I got my money because – one time, the dogs had their way, and word got around, and nothing happened to me because of my father, and that was the *basis* of my money, my ambition, my understanding of how the world worked. You either have dogs, or you hide in a tree. Do you understand?"

David looks – what, vaguely nauseous? Concerned about sharecroppers centuries dead?

"It's a hard frame of reference for me to – process, but I think I understand."

I narrow my eyes. "Well, the test of your 'understanding' is whether you just tell me the direct goddamned truth going forward. I turned dogs loose on deadbeats, sonny – I think I can just about handle whatever syllables you want to shake out of your unwilling – mouth."

I was going to say 'teeth,' but I don't want to remind him of his power.

David pauses, then nods slowly. "Okay. When couples were forced to be married, the elders were in charge. When that changed, and couples could choose each other, who was in charge?"

"The couples themselves," I reply instantly, wanting to vault past all this abstract nonsense.

David nods again. "Your society worked – so to speak – because there was a small number of people right at the center of everything that happened – and they had the 'law,' and the 'laws' were enforced in the – region, the country. If you raised taxes, of course, people had to pay, or go to jail – and if they refused to go to jail, they could be forced – and if they resisted being forced, they could be shot... Your system – worked on the escalation of violence against the general population until they either complied, or were killed."

I snort. "I have no idea what kind of ridiculous history you've been reading, but that is the most – deranged and uncharitable interpretation of my world that I could *possibly* imagine!"

David does not blink. "Go on?"

I wave my hand. "Oh God, I'm not going to – give you some total explanation of how everything worked in the past – Lord above, what kind of – social discontinuity happened, where you have no idea how – all of human history actually worked? I mean we – knew a lot about the ancient Romans, how their society worked, what their laws were, but... Are we deep underground?"

"No, why?"

I laugh silently. “Oh, when I was a kid, there was all this propaganda – turned out to be total Soviet agitprop – about how *bad* nuclear wars were, and how everyone would end up living underground, with their skin falling off. I just – guessed that maybe there had been some kind of nuclear war, some kind of civilizational suicide, and we were hiding underground like a bunch of glowing moles!”

“There was no nuclear war.”

“Okay – then, what happened?”

It is David’s turn to pause. “Now, I have to say that I’m not going to give you an entire history lesson of the last few centuries – some of which we don’t really know much about – but I will tell you, if you like, how the world works at the moment – at least most of it.”

I nod, my eyes cold.

David leans forward.

“After a truly unbelievable amount of suffering, throughout most of the world – which we refer to as the Cataclysms – everyone was so exhausted and broken that they decided – or at least some of them did – to start with a clean slate, I think the same term was used in your day? Yes, good. Societies – society – gets into trouble when it takes universal moral commandments, and breaks them in two.”

David picks up a wooden tongue depressor from my bedside table, breaks it, and hands me one half.

“This is one piece of wood – it’s supposed to be the same between us, but it’s the total opposite. Let’s say that the wood is ‘thou shalt not steal.’”

David points at his own chest.

“This means that, for me, I can’t use force or fraud to take someone else’s property.”

He points at the piece of wood in my fist.

“But for you, as the – Head of State – it means that you *can* use force or fraud to take other people’s property – which you call ‘taxation,’ or ‘the national debt,’ or ‘inflation’ – there were a lot of words for it, as you know.”

I hurl the stick aside.

“Okay, this undergraduate popsicle philosophy is – well, you’re like that libertarian roommate everyone has for at least one semester, who complains about the State – mostly because the laws interfere with his drug habits. ‘Taxation is theft,’ ‘Don’t tread on me,’ that crap. Like an Objectivist friend I had when... And it’s interesting, I guess, as a kind of mental exercise, but you have to remember,” I say, leaning forward, “that people *voted* for me – I was popular because I did what the people *wanted*. You complaining about me is like getting mad at – Coca-Cola for being popular.”

I lean back and smile.

“I truly hope I have not woken up in a world where the general perspective is that everyone who disagrees with you is a *tyrant*.”

David laughs shortly. “*There’s a lot to unpack there*, I think the saying used to go... Look - I have been chosen to chat with you because of my fascination with – the Old World. Not that I’m going to lecture you about how things worked in your world from a – practical standpoint, because you actually lived it, whereas I only study it, so you know infinitely more than I do – my argument is *moral*.”

I scoff. “Yeah, yeah – I met those libertarians on occasion, even after college, sometimes they would razzle my speeches, but it was so crazy, so – impractical, that they might as well have been demanding that everyone come and live with them in some Dungeons and Dragons Renaissance fair! It was sad really, I saw that mind-meme take down a few fairly brilliant people – some smarter than you, I think. It’s this – Platonic world of purity and abstractions, it turns people from brilliant designers who could be great architects into – people who never build anything because the bricks are jagged, and the mortar is porous, and nothing is perfect, so nothing can be done – they all just kind of turned the world over to me, if you understand. People like me...”

I feel an increasing annoyance, because David gives me no indication *when* he is about to speak – he is all about the patient listening – and so I don’t know how the hell to wind down my own sentences.

It’s one hell of a power play, I have to give him that...

David says: “Is stealing wrong?”

I snicker. “If this is – if this world doesn’t know the answer to *that*, just put me back to sleep, and wake me up *when*...”

“You controlled trillions of dollars, millions of enforcers, the education of children, the creation of money, the *price* of money, the interest rates – you were at the very *center* of power... Everything you *did* had moral implications – I’ve listened to your speeches, you were constantly invoking the common good and the general welfare and charity for the underprivileged and sensitivity to the excluded and kindness to the vulnerable – you were like a *machine gun* of morality, so to speak...”

Again, David notices my expression and stops. There is a strange – intimacy between us, as if two trapped miners found each other underground, and hold hands as the air grows thin...

“We are right at the root of things,” murmurs David.

I nod – again, involuntarily.

“Your skills will not help you here,” he says gently.

I shudder.

“Is stealing wrong?”

I nod.

“Why?”

I open my mouth, then close it again. I have a sudden urge to call a lawyer – as I had to many times in my political life.

“Your government threw millions of people in jail for stealing – your government used force and fraud to take trillions of dollars – but you don’t know *why* stealing is wrong? And there’s a *very good* reason for that – we are adults enough not to simply take religious absolutes as moral understanding – and you will see a world that truly understands why stealing is wrong the moment you get out of this bed and walk through that door!”

I force a laugh. “How much will it cost me to go back to sleep?”

David stares at me and says: “How do you know you were ever awake?”

Again, chills run through me. “Okay, Morpheus...”

David smiles. “Like the ancient meme says: I understand that reference.”

He takes a deep breath. “Are you ready?”

“For more cryptic questions?”

“Stealing is wrong because it cannot be universalized. Morality is *Universally Preferable Behaviour* – we refer to it as UPB, obviously. There are three classifications of human behaviour – *neutral*, like running for a bus; *aesthetically preferable*, like being on time – and *universally preferable*, like respecting property rights and not initiating violence. Neutral behaviour is not the subject of morality – aesthetically preferable behaviour is the subject of social norms – politeness and so on. Universally Preferable Behaviour is the subject of morality. UPB examines the nature and content of morality, validating which behaviours can be universally preferable...”

I hold up a hand, yawning. “These – undergraduate assertions rest on the assumption that there is such a thing as ‘universally preferable behaviour’ in the first place.”

David lifts up his hand and ticks off his fingers. “If I may – you’re going to say that people and cultures believe different things, that people disobey morality, and that there is no such thing as universally preferable behaviour to begin with, am I right?”

“More or less,” I say grudgingly.

“Do all cultures believe in the scientific method? Of course not. Do some people – even scientists – disobey the scientific method? Of course. Does the scientific method exist objectively, like a tree or a cloud? Of course not. Does that mean that the scientific method is invalid or subjective? *No!* Some people avoid math, some people are bad at math, and some people cheat at math – that doesn’t mean that mathematics is subjective or arbitrary. It’s the same with morality.”

I snort. “Sonny, I’m not even giving you your first premise. Morality isn’t universal.”

“So – your argument is that there is *no such thing* as Universally Preferable Behaviour?”

I smile. “Close enough for government work.”

“And you believe that I should stop making false arguments?”

“It would be a damn good start.”

David purses his lips. “So – people should make true arguments, and should reject false arguments.”

“Yes,” I state confidently.

David snaps his fingers. “UPB – right there! You cannot tell me to *reject* UPB without asserting that it is Universally Preferable Behaviour to *reject* falsehood. You *need* UPB to *reject* UPB – it’s like trying to use the scientific method to invalidate the scientific method, or logic to disprove logic. It does not work!”

I notice that my lower lip is jutting out, and self-consciously pull it back in. “What if I just avoid the topic altogether?”

David smiles. “But you didn’t. You *corrected* me, you *told me that I was wrong*, that I was *incorrect* – not subjectively, not according to *your* personal or aesthetic preferences – but *objectively*, according to the universal rules of reason and evidence. The moment you did that, you *affirmed* UPB!”

I laugh. “Permission to strike from the record!”

David looks a little sad. “You are more right than you know...”

I scowl and shift between my sheets. “Ah, we are back to the cryptic.”

“It takes a while to understand and absorb the former argument – let’s just leap over that for the moment and talk about stealing.”

“I make no concessions.”

David smiles. “Duly noted. If the proposal is that ‘*stealing is universally preferable behaviour*,’ then we run that through the machinery of UPB to see if the proposal *can* be universalized. It’s kind of a tautology, but that which cannot be universally preferable behaviour, cannot be universally preferable behaviour.”

“That’s not ‘kind of a tautology’ – it’s the very *definition* of one!”

David shrugged. “More of an ‘a is a’ thing... So – let’s talk about the idea of stealing as universally preferable behaviour. The proposition fails on two counts: first of all, it is physically unachievable. If *stealing* is UPB, then *respecting property rights* – the opposite of stealing – must be immoral. That which conforms to UPB is moral, that which is the *opposite* of UPB is immoral, just as that which conforms to the scientific method is science, and that which is the opposite of the scientific method is unscientific –

or, to be more precise, *anti-scientific*. If *stealing* is UPB, then *not stealing* must be immoral – which means that anyone *not* actively engaged in stealing is *evil*.”

David points at me, his dark eyes intense.

“However, a sleeping man is not actively stealing – and it seems strange to say that a sleeping man is evil. A man in a coma, a man frozen for centuries – these men cannot be evil, although they are not stealing. So UPB cannot be a *positive* action – morality cannot *command* people to do things, because there are many times in life where it is impossible to initiate action, which means that it is impossible to be moral, and inevitable to be evil, against one’s will and desire. That is the first objection.

“The second objection has nothing to do with sleeping or action, but with *logical possibilities*. Stealing is taking someone’s property against his will – but if stealing is UPB, then everyone must *want to steal and be stolen from at all times!* However, if you *want* to be stolen from – if you *want* someone else to take your property – then that is *not stealing!* Stealing is *unwanted* property transfer – UPB would demand that everyone *wants to steal and be stolen from*, which eliminates the entire concept of ‘stealing.’ If you *want* to be stolen from, no one *can* steal from you!

“Thus we know that the proposition that ‘stealing is UPB’ is invalid for both behavioural and logical reasons.

“On the other hand, if we say that ‘respecting property rights is UPB’ – or, ‘*not stealing* is UPB’ – then we are in the right realm. First of all, a sleeping man is not violating property rights. Secondly, *not stealing can* be universalized – it is possible for all people, at all times, under all circumstances, to *not* violate other people’s property rights!”

“But they will!” I exclaim. “Stealing is a – constant in human society, which is why we have – had – laws against it... I don’t know what the hell you’re doing now.”

David nodded energetically. “Of *course* people steal – or at least, they used to. People also want to eat food that is not good for them, and often don’t like to exercise. That’s why we need nutritionists and physical trainers. The fact that people do not conform to abstract ideals does *not* mean that those ideals are invalid – it’s exactly why we *need* those ideals in the first place! As I said before, some scientists – many in your world – were corrupted by money and power to falsify data and create future models that served – well, people like you, politicians in power. And we know that those scientists deviated from the scientific method *because of the scientific method!*”

I pause. “Don’t make the mistake of thinking that I am stupid or anti-intellectual. That’s just a cliché.”

“I don’t believe that. But – have you ever noticed that people in power have a habit of constantly attacking philosophers?”

I snort. “Is that what you call yourself?”

"I do. But it's more of an – inheritance, than a profession. I am empirical philosophy – UPB manifested in the real world."

A curious phrase of my long-dead grandson floats into my mind: *Grandiose much?*

David sits back in his chair.

"It's the same with rape – rape is unwanted sexual contact, therefore rape can never be Universally Preferable Behaviour, because if rape was UPB, then everyone would want to rape and *be* raped at the same time. But if you *want* to be raped, then it is not rape, since rape by definition is unwanted sexual contact. Assault works the same way – assault can never be Universally Preferable Behaviour, because assault is unwanted physical violation – unlike, say, boxing or surgery. So if everyone wanted to assault and be assaulted, then the category of 'assault' would cease to exist! Behaviours *which cannot be universalized cannot be moral* – if universalizing them turns them into a kind of mirage that crumbles to sand in your hand as you approach them, then they cannot be a valid mental construct. Murder works the same way – murder is unwanted killing – if everyone wants to kill and be killed at the same time, everywhere, then not only would this be impossible to achieve, but *wanting* someone to kill you is not in the same moral category as being murdered – it would be more in the vein of euthanasia."

I stare at him. I can feel these words washing over me like a spring melt over pebbles – but they don't reach any part of me that has any depth.

Hamlet's famous: "Words, words, words" washes over me as well.

I tip an imaginary hat at David. "My God, you must have some desperately dangerous impulses deep within you."

David's eyes remain attentive. "Go on?"

"Eh, in my experience, moralists are always using these weird philosophical abstractions to just – strangle their own demons in the crib. What terrible things you must want to do to the world, to feel the need to create all these windy nothing-gods to restrain you!"

David smiles. "By that reasoning, scientists follow the scientific method in order to – what, subdue their own inner witch-doctors?"

"I was advised by a lot of scientists, way back in the day. It's not as bad an argument as you think."

"Perhaps, as you say, *way* back in the day... A writer is not combating blank pages, a singer is not combating his hatred of music – these kinds of twisted reversals were common in the past, as far as I can see, but they don't really exist in the present."

I shrug. "But what is the *point* of all this? Philosophy might be a fine way to while away a dull winter's evening, before the invention of electricity – but words have never stopped a single bullet in the history of the world."

“No? We could argue that, but it might be outside your current frame of reference – no offense.”

I ponder this for a moment, surprised that I do not react more strongly.

I sigh. “I suppose I have to get used to being told that I am but a babe in the robot woods of the future...”

David narrows his eyes. He gestures, and the light grows.

“Do you remember why you wanted to be – preserved?”

I think for a moment – back to my tumbling-up of consciousness when I was thawing out, all of the rolling dice of ancient history...

“I was not done with the world.”

“What does that mean?”

I take a deep breath. “I’m not sure how frank I can be. What is private in this conversation?”

“Nothing is being recorded, and nothing will be revealed – by me – about what you say.”

“And is anyone else listening in?”

David shook his head.

I sigh. “You would not believe the number of secrets I’ve had to keep. I disliked it intensely, had to avoid it in my mind all the time. You can talk to your wife, you can talk to your priest, you can talk to your lawyer – or lawyers, I had whole teams of them. But you can’t talk to your friends about what is *really* going on in your life, who you *really* are, what you *really* want, because – because the best way to get to where I got to is to live right here on the surface, to turn into a teleprompter – to pour yourself into what you are saying so it becomes your entire self.”

I lean forward, feeling the easing of a great tension within me.

“The people, we all – participated I suppose. Everyone said they cared about the *common good*, everyone grabbed all the free money we willed into existence, covering themselves with words like a – like a chameleon covers itself with the – background. This is all nonsense, of course, but I understood so much about the world I ran that I – that I didn’t want to just fade into nothing and take all these secrets with me. I am of course quite delirious, so none of this makes any sense, and none of it is true in any way, but these are the words that are – coming out of me. Obviously...”

David nods. “I love history, but you could never *talk* to anyone in the past – anyone who mattered – because they were either dead, or lying. Anyone who mattered became – prominent or famous – because they kept secrets. They – lied. You read an autobiography from the past, it’s mostly just a bunch of self-serving propaganda. Only charming weaknesses were revealed, everything else – even those – was just a kind of self-portrait of self-conscious magnificence. I don’t know what Socrates *really* thought,

or Plato, or Diogenes, or Alcibiades – or Napoleon, or the Duke of Wellington – or you. I made a very strong case for returning you to life – there were *many* who opposed it... I am your Doctor Frankenstein, your necromancer.”

“Why were they opposed?”

David pauses, and I feel a certain iridescent delicacy in his oblique considerations – and once more I *curse* my inability to read people in this mad future realm.

He takes a deep breath and stands.

“I’ve given you some – bare details about the world you have woken up to. You will – take a long time to absorb how things are, how they work... And when you went to sleep, as a prominent man, a President – the world’s most powerful man, some would say – you had an expectation of waking up in a world where you would still be – I don’t know if ‘revered’ is the right word, but you would be a historical figure, prominent, weighty. I mean – if Napoleon were to come back to life, if we found him frozen in a glacier or something like that, then – well, what would you think?”

I smile inwardly.

“I would have a lot of questions. I wouldn’t agree with everything he had done, of course, but he had his time, he had his reasons, and no one can doubt his importance in – European history, French history, legal history, world history...”

David puts his hands on the railing at the foot of my bed and leans forward slightly.

“And – and – how would you *judge* him?”

I shrug. “I don’t know that ‘judgement’ would have anything to do with it. What am I going to do, cast my morals back a couple of centuries and try to catch him? I would be curious – he would be a forceful personality, you can imagine, and – and I guess he would make and break some historical controversies, but I suppose historians would either believe him, or not believe him, depending on their own beliefs.”

David leans forward slightly more. “And what about a *slaveowner*?”

I start, and shrink back – almost imperceptibly, I hope. “A slaveowner...” I whisper.

“Yes.”

“Those were very real questions, in my day...”

“I know.”

I laugh suddenly. “It would have been a pretty wild thing, to hear a living man make the case. It would have driven the lefties wild. He never would’ve made it out of – wherever he was speaking.”

“What was legal in his day was so utterly immoral in your day, that...”

My face freezes suddenly.

It hits me like a comet.

"Oh my God I'm a war criminal!"

David's eyes widen slightly. He pauses. "Not necessarily."

"Judgement at Nuremberg..."

"There will be a trial, and you will have your defense. But you – and your son – set the Cataclysms in motion, and humanity – the billions dead – require a – reckoning."

I snort with false courage.

This future world of crystalline abstractions seems too – delicate, too refined, too – I can't think of the words, but I can feel my way through the ideas...

Unspoiled... came the thought – but to me that was more about childhood than nature.

I force my distractions aside.

"You would put – Napoleon on trial?"

"Would *you* have put a slaveowner on trial?"

"We're not *talking* about slaveowners," I say evenly. "You did not correct me when I referred to Nuremberg. We're talking about – National Socialists. Nazis."

"Not really," said David.

"No? It sure as hell seems so."

He purses his lips. "The National Socialists were tried, most of them were sentenced to death – and of course the soldiers were let go, because they were only obeying orders... It was the military and civilian leaders who paid the highest price. And no one could resurrect that deadly movement, humanity had learned its lesson, history and morality won in that case. But it was – it was those who thought that all the evils were in the past, and justice had been done, and the final lessons had been learned – who created the worst possible world. Whoever *genuinely* questions morality is incapable of great evil, because doubt clouds their resolution. Those who believe that the morality of the moment is like eternal physics are the ones who set fire to the world. Tell me, Mr. President – did you ever *doubt* what you were doing?"

I do not answer. *I-plead-the-Fifth* echoes in my mind, set to the opening notes of Beethoven's most famous symphony...

"I don't mean the strategy or the tactics or whether you would win or lose, but – deep down, the entire system, the lies you talked about, the – unsustainability of it all. You had to know that your country was

coming apart, that bad actors operated every level of your – government. You had to know – mathematically, that which cannot continue will not continue! The schools kept getting worse, the unfunded liabilities were twenty times the size of the entire economy, the media lied with impunity, foreign billionaires corrupted your entire legal system – what did you do with the knowledge that it *could not continue?*”

I laugh suddenly. “Are you *really* saying that you have no politicians in your world?”

David nods. “Your world now. By choice.”

“I believe you... I truly do!”

He cocks his head. “Why is that?”

“We didn’t think – that long, in that way. We talked about giant abstractions – I guess like you do, but for an entirely different purpose I bet – but we just – operated minute-to-minute. I inherited these unfunded liabilities from – what, two or three generations before me? Everyone just – wanted the ride to continue for another year, another month – another minute.”

“Like addicts,” murmurs David.

I sigh. “No, not like *addicts*, David. Yeah, we inherited a mess – and anyone with half a brain knew that it couldn’t continue forever – but I tried to – grab the reins, perhaps to slow things down little bit before... And here’s the thing – in the world that *was*, the world I won, you couldn’t – tell *any truth at all*, you know. For reasons I could never really understand – but which I’m sure you will lecture me to death about one day, quite soon – people had just become – enraged by the truth. The body politic – the voters, the citizens – were like an immune system, and the truth was like a deadly virus to everything that *was*. A couple of people every generation would somehow escape this basic fact, and sail confidently into social discourse – especially after social media, I’m sure you know what *that* is – and they would cling to and grip the truth as if it was some kind of magic shield that made them – bulletproof or invulnerable, to blowback. It was like watching a kid – I don’t know if you have kids, probably you do, you have that air – but when kids are little, and they’re playing hide and seek, and they cover their eyes and squeal that you can’t see them, because they can’t see you. I guess that’s cute for a toddler, not so cute for a middle-aged man.” I laugh. “These ‘truth-tellers’ would hold up their arguments and diagrams and charts and data – all very well sourced, all totally impeccable – and they would summon this intergalactic crap-storm – and you could see them, you could hear the *creak* of their eyes widening, and they would hold up their facts like that would stop the bombs falling on them – and it really was – pitiful, really. You’d think that somebody who claimed to deeply understand the truth would actually *know* that the truth didn’t mean a damn thing in the world – the truth had value if it served power, that’s about it – and anyone who spoke *any* truth that interfered with power – well, we had our foot soldiers, we could just target-paint these heroic truth-tellers and just – nuke them from orbit!”

“So – you knew what was true.”

I snort impatiently. “What was true – maybe not now, I can’t imagine... What *was* true was that the ‘truth’ didn’t help you at all! Quite the opposite. Look – if you’re a sailor, a captain in the middle of the ocean, and for some reason the Earth’s magnetic pole reverses – well, you just have to go the opposite of what your compass says... I had a friend, when I was younger – really cynical guy, but very funny – well, he got into old-timey photography, developing actual negatives, no computers. He got so good at looking at these negatives that he could literally see the actual picture in the negative – in the opposite of what it was! When the truth becomes a landmine, you just dance in a different direction. And believe me – there were *way* worse people than *me* circling the throne! *Way* worse! One of my uncles was a trauma surgeon, on the battlefield. Sometimes, he just had to hack and slash people, because everything was an emergency, every body was falling apart. Was that *ideal* medicine? I don’t know how to answer that – I don’t even know what the question would mean! I’m sure he cost some lives – he told me so himself – but what was the choice? The price of saving lives was costing lives, there wasn’t any other way...”

I force myself to stop talking, and I realize something about myself – my general habit of conversation was to speak words while constantly scanning the heart, mind and soul of my – opponent, or conversational partner I guess I should say.

But David’s face was a wide pool of listening, still and deep – and my own concentrated sky-skidding manipulations began to emerge from his still eyes. I had a sudden urge to scratch them out, knuckle-deep...

David says: “You are wondering if it was a good idea to wake up.”

I jut out my lower jaw. “I was about to say that it was not my choice, but I suppose it was, because I chose to go to sleep to begin with.”

More words came.

“But I will say this, though...”

I clear my throat suddenly.

“No, it’s a question. *My* question... Other people wanted to let me sleep, perhaps forever, I don’t know who’s paying the bills anymore... But you say this is a – kind world, a gentler world I suppose – but you also say that there was a lot of debate about waking me, and that you won... And I don’t imagine you have a – death penalty, for whatever the hell I’m going to go on trial for, because there wouldn’t be much point waking me up just to kill me – but do I have the option of you – putting me back to sleep?”

“You want to escape judgement?”

I laugh harshly. “For all I know, *David*, I died the moment I was frozen, and this is the – *trial* that everyone talked about when I was a child...”

David’s face has grown unusually attentive, and my words scatter. “The trial... If I were Peter...”

My words scratch their way out of my throat in a hoarse whisper.

“Everyone – everyone, it didn’t matter if you were in church or not – everyone I knew, we all gambled, like the opposite of Pascal, that all of this, all that this may be, would – was never going to come to pass, that it was all just a scary story invented by wolves and shepherds to keep the sheep in line. And we were *proud* to be above it – that give us strength, like superheroes... The people who feared that this – could happen – they *had* to tell the truth, they *had* to keep it in their pants, they lived in fear – but we didn’t *want* to live in fear – but now I wake up in a white room I cannot leave, and my wife has no face, and you are standing there with your goddamned frozen face, talking about good and evil and trials and guilt and punishment – *punishments* I assume. And I am scared, and I don’t admit that very easily. Is this the future, or is this hell?”

David’s eyes sharpen further, and I can see – almost like scrolling text – the phrase: “*Why not both?*”

He leans even further forward, almost over my legs.

“It’s horrible to sound cryptic, but it’s a complicated question. Heaven is *hell* for the devils. Maybe it’s the same place – you love it if you’re good, it’s hell if you’re... Huh... I used to think, when I was younger, when I read about it, that hell was not a lake of fire, but the absolute certainty that you had been evil – the stripping away of every delusion about virtue, every manipulation of morality. Nothing but mirrors and regret, forever.”

He gestures at me.

“You lived in a world that supported and reinforced *everything* we now condemn. You chose, I suppose, to navigate according to approval, popularity – the success that would have been denied you if you had asked any *real* questions... And it’s tough – I understand that, I sympathize with that, but the truth is that the world that woke you up – the world that *is* – only came into existence because people *rejected* approval and popularity and – conformity. You know the stories of Jesus, of Socrates and Aristotle and Plato – and countless others – and all the scientists and doctors who were condemned for advancing their disciplines. If you can’t be hated, you can’t help the world. And you had a choice, because there were many, many people in your world, in your day, who chose the truth over – success or popularity. Over *power*. And that’s *why* we have this world that we love. If everyone had been like *you*, there would be nobody left to wake you up. The power would have failed, and you would have rotted in your icy box. You would be dead, in a dead world... So – you are alive – it’s a strange paradox – because people were the *opposite of you!* They only exist to judge you – the *world* only exists to judge you – because they were *nothing like you at all!*”

David shakes his head with a little shiver, as if clearing water from his ears.

“No, Mr. President. This is not hell, and you are not dead. Although, by the end of the trial, you might disagree.”

I feel a sudden ancient strength flow into my arms.

I reach over and pull my sheets aside.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and struggle to stand.

David catches my elbow and helps me up.

I turn my scornful face to him.

“I’ve slept enough...”

I rise to my full height.

“Judge me, and be damned!”

Chapter 34

I was allowed to roam around the hospital, which generally catered to people being lowered into the grave by an almost-unfathomable number of decades. The staff told me that most diseases had been eliminated; the dying muttered darkly about these *Cataclysms*, which had so reduced the population.

Unusually for me, I shied away from these details, because David had hinted that I had had something to do with these mysterious disasters, and I didn’t want to burden myself with any imaginary guilt or foreboding.

It was strange – I’d never really had this kind of leisure before – I worked hard and early, and rarely took a day off. I was writing my autobiography when I got really sick – that’s probably why my early life filled my brain as I woke – and I laughed when I remembered this, because nobody on earth could *imagine* the final chapters to be – to be *this*...

I lived to work – I only survived this forced inactivity because I was learning to regain control over my body. My *Resurrection Project* – my name, not theirs – involved learning how to use my limbs almost from scratch. It reminded me of my first time as a kid in a Chinese restaurant, trying to pick up a boiled egg with chopsticks. So – I suppose I had a job, which was learning how to crawl out of a coffin and master the world.

I was prone to strange fits of emotion, which continually baffled me. I focused on the present, on what I could touch and taste – but so often, I would feel a kind of thin silver cord stretching back through the centuries, from me to everything that was before. I had lived my life as a captain on the prow of a ship, guiding and commanding as we sliced through the parting waves – from this view of myself – a realistic one – I now had to view the ship of my life as an encrusted wreck lost in the depths of history, brought to the surface by robot magic and half-decayed muscles.

I felt cold rage as well, when I was too exhausted to work my muscles, and had to lie with my own thoughts.

I used to mutter a prayer to the demons of doubt, before going to bed, so they would leave me alone for the 15 minutes it took me to fall asleep – the window they always tried to crawl through – but sleep was uncertain now – I had slept too much for many lifetimes – and they scratched and called *incessantly*...

Power is the power to avoid yourself...

I had felt this iciness before, throughout my life, and it was a constant sign that some interest of mine was being threatened. My instinct was to leap into action to protect what was mine, to gather the necessary weapons – to reward and punish the pawns of the world into parting before me, supporting me, paving my way...

And I found myself jumping up, reaching for a nonexistent phone, angry words of stern command rising in my throat – I wanted to yell for secretaries, get reporters on the line, threaten to withhold funds, offer subsidies, collude in the foggy back rooms of ultimate power – but – but there was *nothing*, I had no power – at least not yet – and no threads ran from my hands to the testicles of anyone around...

It was like starting all over again – physically, obviously – but also – no, it was *worse* than starting over, because I didn't even have my father's power to piggyback on.

My father would always tell me, when I was a teenager: "All I can do is get you in the room, son. After that, it's up to you."

But in politics – perhaps everywhere, I don't know – *access* is power, and I could always get my father on the line.

He never made explicit promises or threats – always *way* too smart for that – but everyone knew that he wanted me to rise, to be offered opportunities, to learn how to strengthen my being by learning the magic words of control. I thought I needed to learn how to work the media – the media that had plans for all of us that seemed larger, deeper and more threatening than any power we as individuals could gather – even when I was President.

I controlled everyone around me – but I knew that I was controlled as well, by that media, which could make or break a candidate in any 90-second slice, twenty-four hours a day. They promised to get me into power – and they sure as hell helped – but they never seemed to want anything in return.

Everything I did was balanced on the knife-edge of unenforceable contracts – handshakes and winks and nods and understandings – but the media that pushed me into power – pushed me on the population – *never asked for anything in return*.

I remember asking my father about this, but he just laughed.

"These are semi-divine mysteries, son. They got me in, but never wanted anything back either. If they are the devils, they never get to collect – they must have learned how to live without souls I suppose."

I said: "Is it – that they don't want a paper trail, or to be recorded, or – why? Every time my phone rings, I think it's going to be some media mogul using a voice changer telling me to nuke the Kremlin, or they'll

do to me what they did to my opponent – remember that guy who left his phone on the subway, they went through everything, published everything, found out he was into weird tentacle stuff from Japan... Why don't they ever call?"

He shrugged, filling his veins with micro-sips of whiskey as usual. "Don't know, son. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, I suppose – this is the *only* time that rule applies, every other gift horse in politics is a Trojan, but these guys – who knows what they're up to, it doesn't really matter, just keep doing whatever you were doing that got their support, and you'll be fine."

I remember, the second time I ran, I cornered a media mogul at a winter party, a bald guy with a giant jaw and hunched shoulders.

As if I were running for a local school board, I put my hand on his shoulder – his very soft and sloping shoulder – and asked if I could count on his support.

He looked at me blankly – and I swear I'd seen more human animation in the two coals I stuck in my kids' snowman's face that morning.

"We support democracy, Mr. President," said the man. His bald dome reminded me of a recently-found dinosaur egg, stillborn for 200 million years.

For one of the few times in my life – up until now – I let my compulsive curiosity get the better of me.

"You've always been – very kind to me."

The man nodded blankly, his cocktail eyes roaming the room like a creepy portrait in a haunted house, following naïve thieves.

"I wonder – do you believe in me?"

The mogul turned to me, but his eyes appeared to fix on the wall behind my head.

"We believe in democracy, Mr. President."

"But – you must – agree with what I represent."

A tiny smile. "What would you say you represent?"

I suddenly couldn't remember anything – all the speeches and debates and policy papers suddenly turned to ash in my head, like a library under the nuclear fire of a blowback bomb.

"The will of the people..." I said, somewhat lamely.

The tiny smile grew. "Well, that's more than good enough for us."

There was a slightly awkward pause.

I said: "In my game, everything comes with a payback, everyone has a price. It's not all money – some people want power, of course, and some people want to pursue their ideals..."

He interrupted me, which I recognized immediately as a power-play, which few dared to impose on a sitting President.

"Which do you think *you* represent, Mr. President, of the three categories you mention – or is there another that you haven't?"

It was an oddly Frankenstein sentence, stitched together out of order.

I leaned forward, thrilled, as if I were revealing a secret. "I'll tell you something – whenever I feel low – not often, mind – I just read an article you've written about me, and I find myself – regarding myself like my wife looked up at me on our wedding night."

The mogul slowly nodded. "We hold the mirror up to *nature*."

He emphasized the last word slightly – human nature? Nature itself? The man's words were a mirror maze.

I couldn't help myself. "What do you get out of it?"

He looked at me curiously, and traced the bowl of his chin from one side of his lip to the other, back and forth.

Wait a minute – he's tracing the letter 'U' on his face – he means: 'You, we get you!'

I shook my head. Paranoia was all well and good for a politician, but it doesn't serve your purpose when the media is serving your needs.

The giant jaw stifled an obvious yawn. "What's really on your mind, Mr. President? Are you afraid we will not continue to support – democracy?"

"No – I just wanted to – thank you for your altruism. There is a kind of – purity in our relationship, in that we don't actually have a relationship."

The finger stopped tracing the chin, and tapped it instead, as if trying to patiently create an attractive dimple. I thought of Spartacus on a cross...

"Purity..." he said musingly, enjoying some obscure joke. He reminded me of the Cheshire cat, obviously – but also something that my wife sometimes talked about, whenever we would watch some old Jane Austin series, which was the women – the heroines – always had this 'secret smile.'

"Oh, it's sooo predictable!" she would say with enjoyable exasperation. "They always open with this apple-cheeked heroine strolling the countryside with her *secret smile* – the smile that says she has an interior life of superior amusement, which the man can buy forever for the low low price of a wedding ring."

And she would turn and give me that ‘secret smile’ – and it really was remarkable, how adept she was at creating the alluring illusion of inner amusement – and how damned attractive it was, too.

She laughed. “All women know how to do it – at least, the slightly less-than-classical-beauties do. The rest rely on cheekbones and cleavage. That’s what you were eyeing when we met, but hovering above my décolletage was my *secret smile*, which was all the more powerful because you refused to look at it directly.”

I laughed with her then. “Are you saying – that this weird bemused smile is like a soft trap that men fall into?”

“Oh yes – willingly, happily. You are all just so – pathetically grateful for female attention. We spend most of our lives rejecting the men we don’t want – so getting the man we *do* want to approach us is like coaxing a wild squirrel to feed from our palm – ‘Come here boy, don’t be afraid, we won’t bite, nice food for you!’ You’re all so nervous, it makes no sense that you run the world!”

“Do we?” I murmured “I didn’t even know about the secret smile that is the entire foundation of our family, apparently.”

I came back from my reverie, having completely forgotten the thread of the conversation.

“You headed off to parts unknown,” said the bald man. “Most unprofessional.”

I couldn’t tell if he was joking – reprimanding the President was a fairly risky business. I had a sudden sense of – falling, as if I had reached the summit of a high mountain, that was now collapsing into the widening mouth of a volcano.

Who is in charge? The words dried in my mouth, my tongue turned into a tombstone.

“I’m going to put this down as a lapse,” said the giant-jawed mogul pleasantly. “Everyone has these doubts, suspended between heaven and hell. Success!” he added energetically, raising a fist.

I knew he wouldn’t leave the conversation – that was an unwritten but absolute rule while talking to me – but I also knew that he was finished with the interaction.

Again, I felt a mild disorientation – and wondered if I might not be coming down with something, some virus or malaise. The ship analogy rose in my mind again, because it felt like the shiny wooden floor was tilting.

“Well, since you are being impartial – since you claim to be, and I’m sure that you are – then I don’t have anything to thank you for, but I do appreciate that your dedication to democracy and – the good stewardship of the nation – tilts my way so often. I suppose – I appreciate that you appreciate my virtues, such as they are...”

Dear God, shut up man! cried every one of my horrified political instincts. I felt an acute vulnerability that I would normally smash through with anger, and suddenly *I* was the desperate one – who wanted to leave the conversation.

I pretended to be summoned from somewhere else in the room – I could tell that the mogul knew I was faking, and that he approved for some obscure reason.

I made it over to my wife, who was currently blinding some young ingénue with the disco spray of white light coming off her diamond necklace. Her cleavage crusting was like the puffed-out red neck of a monkey.

I pulled her away and related the conversation.

“Well, this is rather unlike you, dear,” she said, seemingly unconcerned. “You’ve got an ace in the hole, a groundswell of support, clearly they love you to death – what the hell are you doing poking around such an updraft?”

Her uncanny habit of effectively mixing metaphors struck me for the thousandth time.

“I guess I’m just having a – moment. I want to know what they’re getting out of it...”

“Why?”

“I don’t know... I barely made it in last time, and I’m older, more tired...”

“Dear,” she said with that peculiar feminine decisiveness that instantly kills the motor of an over-revving male mind. “I will give you this one exception, because your instincts are usually – *so good*.” She brushed off some imaginary dust from my tuxedo lapels, which gave her the excuse to lean in with a broad smile and say: “Do *not* screw this up. They like you because you *are* you. By asking them *why* they like you, you are changing *who* you are. Just stop it. If you never ask the question, their support is as certain as my goddamned bra. If you ask again...” She whispered: “Ka-boom.”

Of course she was right. I understand now, thinking back on it, that they didn’t need to ask for anything in return for supporting me, because my presence in the White House *was* their payoff. Something about me was a return on investment...

And then I apparently killed half the planet, and my son the other half...

My joke fell flat in my mind, impaled on the sharp top of my spine.

So – I had to learn how to walk all over again – and I had to learn how to talk, without power, without influence. It was like being a baby with certain knowledge of a past life...

Chapter 35

I first met Cornelius Kreighorn the same day I successfully walked across the torture chamber known as my physical therapy room.

As someone with no shortage of charisma myself, I recognized his power because his personality seemed to enter the room before his body did – like when my kid brother used to rub his feet on a carpet and zap my earlobe with his electrified finger – you could feel it before it happened – but too late to stop it.

Cornelius was not fat, but he was overweight enough – compared to the lean inhabitants of this post-post-modern world – to stand out in a crowd. His white hair curled in mobius ripples along his skull; his fleshy face still retained the lines normally associated with leaner visages. His eyes were dangerously merry, as if to say: *I will tell you my jokes, and you will laugh now – but be appalled later...*

I also recognized that he was strong and certain enough in his dominance that being submissive did not bother him in the least – in fact, he used that tactic with me regularly, which I appreciated, despite my better instincts.

He swept into the room like a pendulum at the bottom of its arc – unstoppable, inevitable. I stuck out my hand to shake his out of a sudden strange anxiety that if I didn't, he would just walk right through me.

“Good morning, Mr. President,” he said in his rich, mellifluous voice. It contained honey, and ease, and subterranean power. My wife claimed a God-given ability to know who was a good singer, just based on his or her speaking voice. She would've guessed: Paul Robeson baritone.

The man said: “My name is Cornelius Kreighorn, and with your permission, we will become close and fast friends.”

He flopped into a chair – too small for him – in a way that only amplified the bulk of his meaty presence.

He leaned forward conspiratorially. “How much have they told you, about what they have in store?”

Clever, I thought. He is aligning himself with me already...

“You must be a lawyer,” I said.

His eyes widened, and he raised a finger to his lips. “Shhh – we don't use that word here anymore, it has an unholy ring to it. I am your *representative*, your guide so to speak, as we aim to navigate the – a situation that lies ahead of us.”

He stared at me expectantly, but I said nothing of course.

“You are most likely going to be put on trial for various crimes that you committed over the course of your administration – alleged crimes, of course, as I will constantly reiterate. And I shall be your human

shield, your armour, your..." He pulled his hands apart slowly. "...bullet-time slowdown of whizzing principles. Your *angel*, if you understand the reference."

I did feel a bit dizzy – and a secret thought came to me – as it had for decades – that I *never* would have shared with anyone, under any circumstances, at any time.

Stroke of the pen, law of the land...

When I was President, I would wake up every morning in a disorienting and dizzy daze, completely astonished that I could – not exactly *get away with* – but – *do* what I did.

I was not a lawyer, but I knew the law. Through the central bank, I – I know it was more 'we' – could create a trillion dollars with the snap of a finger. Another snap, we could raise the debt ceiling. Another snap, we could force people to buy things they did not want. Another snap, we could legally buy votes by firing monopoly money at the dull-witted open-mouthed masses. The media covered for us, destroying our enemies with lies, saving us with lies...

I never played Monopoly with a kid who thought you could just pencil in more zeroes on the paper money to pretend to pay your debts – but that's how we all governed, across the world, all across history...

I remember being sworn in, on that bitterly cold day, and remembering the long-ago – long-dead – priest of my childhood telling me that, with the right scissors, the Bible was a manual for atheists.

"In the Bible it says, 'The fool in his heart has said: there is no God.'"

He chuckled.

"Take off the first seven words, and you can prove that, right there in the Bible, it says that *there is no God!* There is a reason that Satan is called the master of lies – lie about a man, and he is cornered, erased, destroyed. Call him a monster, and he either struggles to deny it – attaching the label even more – or he ignores it, which makes him look like a coward as well as a monster. And even if he somehow struggles through to legal proof of his innocence, you just have to ignore it and keep lying – and it will be as if he never fought at all. You know the term 'McCarthyism.' Joseph McCarthy won a libel suit against a newspaper, but it doesn't matter now, and it didn't matter then. It doesn't matter that books have been published proving that he was even more right than he knew – it doesn't matter that the Soviet Union released decrypted cables *proving* McCarthy's allegations. None of that matters – the myth becomes the truth, the truth becomes the moral, and all who oppose the moral are labelled evil. Most people are failures – relative to their youthful dreams at least – so they're always hungry for any 'fall from grace' narrative. Find the stain on the hero, and you make a hero out of the stain, because it releases people from regret – at least for a moment. All who are great are examined for flaws, and the flaws are magnified to swallow up the greatness – and people grab at these flaws with great hunger, mad need. Greatness is an *insult* to the pettiness of their lost lives. People don't feel short in Japan until a Swede strides in. The destruction of the ideal is the fundamental plan of most of mankind. Resentment, bitterness, rage – these are all potent fuels used to light the pyres that burn down anyone who makes them feel inferior – or makes them *feel* their inferiority, which is not quite the same thing.

The old priest had an odd habit of chewing gum, puncturing his deep sermons with wet pink *pops*...

“And Satan tempts the great with pettiness, with silly flaws and blemishes – and the great so often succumb, partly because they know that if they offer up the sacrifice of their own greatness, the mob just *might* let them live... This is why happily married men constantly reiterate that their wives ‘somehow put up with them.’ This is why beautiful women denigrate their own dresses, their own figures. The world lives in constant terror of *resentment*. The zombie mob of abandoned ideals is constantly hungry to feast on any grand souls who escaped their own smallness. Any greatness that exists without appeasing the mob invites its own self-destruction.

“Any man who arises from humble origins, and achieves superiority – in particular *moral* superiority – must be sacrificed – the hatred the mob has for its own self-betrayal is projected onto the hero, and he is slaughtered as a warning to their own potential. The mob destroys the hero to justify its own rejection of its capacity for heroism. Mothers need neighbourhood children who are harmed by not listening to mothers, as examples to force obedience from their own children. The mob needs to destroy its heroes in order to turn its own *cowardice* into ‘pragmatic wisdom.’

“Only when the heroes are separated by enough time – usually centuries – can the mob start to worship them. When the world of the present no longer matches the world of the hero, the hero can be tentatively respected – because the hero’s life was so different that it no longer repudiates the current cowardice of the mob. The mob can revere Socrates only when separated by a thousand years.

“The supply of lies about heroes is driven by the *demand* for those lies – and the demand is driven by the need to escape the self-hatred of a cowardly life. Sophists cook up falsehoods because the mob is so hungry for them – the sweet relief of projecting pettiness into the souls of great men is too addictive, too delicious...”

Father Gregory taught me a lot.

He thought he was teaching me humility, wisdom...

Oh no.

God no!

The good Father taught me how to *rule!*

When you understand that most men break themselves into atoms, into nothing – and they desperately need a scapegoat for their own self-destruction – then becoming a politician is *simple*.

People who fail to even *try* are life’s losers – and they desperately need to invent ‘bias’ to justify their own lifeless lives.

'I failed because people hate me' is the bottomless mantra of these empty lives. The real hatred is for the self – and usually justly earned – but it is a fertile crop to feed the pursuit of power – it really *is* power, if you take a moment to think about it. Politics is *always* about the punishment of success – and its mirror image: the bribery of failure. Anyone who doesn't pay sufficient obsequiousness to the twitchy mob is marked for destruction, and better lace up his running shoes.

The media magnified my enemy's flaws – and hid my certain crimes. They invented the most errant nonsense about my foes – that they were colluding with foreign powers to steal elections, that they praised bigots and hated women, you name it – and covered up my own blindingly obvious corruption.

Frankly, it was all pretty amusing – and I've never been one to stand between a mob and the effects of its mistakes. The mob wanted lies, the mob punished the truth – so the mob was ruled by liars, and truth-tellers scrambled to obscurity for safety. Occasionally, one or two honest souls would erupt – and even be tolerated for a time – but the moment they interfered with the pursuit of power... Ah well, lies were invented, reputations destroyed, access to the public was detonated, and they withdrew to their distant caves of bitter wisdom.

They served as wonderful examples to the mob – and of the mob's power. I used to wonder, sometimes, if I had been raised in a more honest age – if such an age ever existed – if I would have been tempted by abstract virtues, the virtues talked about by my Father Gregory – in particular, the commandment: "Thou shalt not bear false witness."

He used to tell me, over and over: "There's a reason it does not say: 'Thou shalt not lie.' 'False witness' is a legal phrase, it means don't lie about important matters of morality, as if you were in a courtroom – it is the theological equivalent of perjury. No one cares about little white lies, they rarely lead to major corruption. But when you are asked about important matters of conscience, of virtue, of honour and reputation – by heaven then you *must* tell the truth, or be damned!"

I used to question him about hell, back when it was a thing.

He would shrug and pop his endless gum.

"Hell is just an analogy for how desperately we are addicted to lies. A man greatly tempted by great evils needs great punishments to restrain himself. The church had to escalate the punishment to eternal Hell itself – which is not really in the Bible – because that's how tempted we are to lie for advantage. If we weren't so tempted by lying – and if it wasn't so profitable in the here-and-now – we wouldn't need endless lakes of fire and torture to consider rejecting the temptation."

Even when he used to sit and talk with me about these issues – I could tell that he was himself a frustrated moralist – and I had heard hints of the crimes of his congregation – I felt a great weariness and avoidance settle upon me.

Father Gregory liked to walk and talk in the graveyard – I suppose he felt that, Hamlet-style, it gave his words extra-spicy depth and power – and the sliding shadows of the gravestones would slowly crawl

up our legs as the sun fell in the sky – but his frustration had the opposite effect, as frustration usually does.

By endlessly talking about the impossibility of virtue, and the power of the mob, he finally convinced me that I must either end up ruling the mob, or waste my life frightening – then boring – children in a graveyard.

Of course, my earthly father paved the way, but it was my spiritual Father who laced up my shoes.

*Why wage endless war against endless temptation – why take up arms against the mob that can always overwhelm you with blind numbers – why reject the reality that lies can summon gold from the shallow earth – why not just **embrace** it, get it over with, and **rule**?*

Of course, my priest would say that we must reject the material – resist the temptations – to escalate into heaven.

But it always seemed – lonely – his vision of white clouds and droning angels. The masses of men are beasts – worse than beasts, who can never reason. To me, the select few who make it to heaven seemed increasingly to be a pompous lot, full of self-congratulation, smug superiority and a preening avoidance of the necessary battles of this earth.

Live for heaven, abandon the world – to who?

Increasingly, to people like *me*.

Moralists produce malevolence because, by accurately describing the world, they turn morality into masochism. The mob uses moralists to create anti-moralists – by punishing and excluding the virtuous, they train the young to *avoid* virtue.

The mob would never complain about my crimes, because the mob was a criminal enterprise. Would they ever call me out?

Does the Mafia call the cops?

I had an opponent, early on, when I was running for governor...

In a truly stunning development – and I mean that most sincerely – he actually tried telling the truth to the masses, as if he knew nothing about the history of theology and philosophy.

He told them that the welfare state was destroying the family, that the national debt was selling the next generation into financial slavery, that the government existed to protect *itself*, not them, and that there was no money left to fund old age security, and so the richest generation in the history of the world was pillaging the young to fatten itself.

I watched his speeches in literal awe – sometimes live. His words struck me like the match struck that old Buddhist who set himself on fire.

He seemed to be the incarnation of the old myth that those outside the circle of power always tell themselves – you know, how they are going to pretend to be power-hungry and corrupt, rise to grab the ring of power – and then *wield it for good!*

It never happens, of course – they would either get corrupted along the way, or they would be quickly identified and ejected – destroyed, most likely. Power never lasts if it is unable to detect those who would corrupt its corruption – and *our* power has lasted for tens of thousands of years...

Man – the media just shredded him – revealed his address, where his children went to school, where everyone in his social circle worked – and all the glorious bloody-fingered foot-soldiers of falsehoods quickly went to work filling his mailbox with death threats, mailing thick envelopes filled with baby-powder to everyone he knew, protesting at their workplaces and demanding they be fired, targeting the clients of their businesses, getting them cancelled on social media – it was a gloriously coordinated campaign – the beauty of it was that it was coordinated not by any central planner, but by a completely unified and streamlined self-interest.

Once the government keeps people alive – at least, as they see it – any proposal to reduce government expenditures is experienced as a death threat by those dependent on the government – and it really was about half the population, by the time I came around. Everyone was worried about a Civil War, when the Civil War actually started long in the past, when direct payments to the poor began.

My opponent was instructive – very instructive, particularly to my own occasionally-uneasy conscience. He was hounded out of – not just public life, but life itself. He ended up buying a farm in the middle of nowhere, and was still occasionally photographed hoeing the back forty – or whatever the hell farmers do – as a warning shot to anyone who might even *think* of bringing uncomfortable truths to the mindless masses.

His campaign inoculated an entire generation against idealism – they bayed over his destruction like giggling hyenas chancing upon a fresh kill. His children turned against him; his wife stayed by his side only because his destruction had left her with no civilized options. The man couldn't even get a credit card, he literally had to eat what he killed in the wilderness...

Frankly, truth-tellers made my job so much easier – their crucifixion allowed my life to bleed freely across the landscape, turning the entire horizon a profitable rusty red.

And I used to wonder, when I was younger, before I got into the game, whether people in power really *did* meet in smoky back rooms to cut deals – and of course, we did, when it came to regulations and legislation – but in terms of what was necessary to maintain power as a whole, in principle – well, no one needed to meet about *that*, because no one got to our level of control without deeply understanding how to maintain the machinery of the mob.

If you train citizens to attack each other for telling the truth, free speech is dead. Of course, it's deceptively simple to have a right in *theory*, while having no capacity to exercise it in any practical

manner. Citizens had the *right* to free speech, but they were doxxed and destroyed when they exercised it, so we didn't have to worry about that at all.

I could be dignified and 'above the fray' and refuse to respond to even sensible criticism – knowing full well that either the media or the black-clad street enforcers would destroy my critics.

All this – and more, perhaps – floats through my mind as Cornelius Kreighorn stares at me expectantly.

I clear my throat, feeling my old self rear up in my mind.

"Problems with your formulation of my 'crimes,'" I say crisply. "Number one – I never killed anyone, and unless your legal system is radically different from every other legal system in the known universe, the statute of limitations for any other crime must *surely* have expired after so many centuries! Number two, you are judging me by your own current legal system, not by the legal system *I* operated under. Number three, I am an unwilling refugee in your society, and so cannot be imagined as *ever* having consented to live under your laws. Number four – while ignorance of the law is no excuse, I have no idea what your laws are – and would have no way of knowing – so I cannot be bound by them. Number five – all witnesses – or those with direct knowledge of whatever events are in question – are many centuries dead, and so cannot be called to testify. Number six – I cannot cross-examine – or you can't – any of my accusers, because those I allegedly wronged are *also* dead these many centuries. I'm sure there are more, but surely that should be enough."

Cornelius stares at me in that unsettling modern manner of open-minded curiosity that frustrates and enrages me no end.

"Get it all off your chest," he suggests kindly.

I feel another stab of anger. I rise awkwardly. My cane leaps into my hand, but I throw it aside.

"Well it's all so – ridiculous! I never expected to wake up to be President, or in charge, of course – I can't really say that I thought much about waking up at all, I was just – sprinting away from the man in black. I expected – now, I suppose – to be a kind of – resource for history, for the past – and as a preeminent historical figure, I know that there are always controversies, but I suppose I hoped that these – controversies – would be somewhat ameliorated by the passage of time, and some kind of – settling would've occurred on perspectives of my – Presidency. I did not expect to still be controversial so many centuries after my..."

Cornelius nods slowly. "Rule, Mr. President. I think you were about to say – rule."

I shrug tightly. "That's not the right word. We were a democracy, a Republic. And by the way – where the hell am I, geographically? Am I on the landmass formally known as the United States?"

"Well, you woke up where you went to sleep, of course – you have not been moved in the interim."

“I don’t know what the hell you people are capable of,” I grumble, though without conviction.

There is a slight pause, and Cornelius gestures for me to continue – which makes little sense to me.

“Look,” he says easily, after a minute or two has passed. “You don’t have to retain me, this is – you used to call it *pro bono* I think – a hobby, a – fetish, perhaps.” He laughs. “I am very curious about you, Mr. President – and I’m not alone in that, of course – you are right, you are a polarizing and – significant, highly significant – historical figure. Believe it or not, you have your defenders, as well as your detractors – you are not exactly polarizing, we are not that interested in politics, which has become a merely historical discipline or curiosity – but you are – there are people divided about your legacy, and your choices. On the one hand there are those who say that you are a product of your time – as we all are, of course – and that we should not judge you according to modern – or rational – sensibilities. On the other hand, there are those who say that morality is eternal and universal – those who know about your relationship with Father Gregory – you are startled?”

I have a sudden uneasy feeling. “Father Gregory...” I take a deep breath. “How much do people actually know about me? I thought that everything was – lost, like the library at Alexandria, during these mysterious Cataclysms.”

Cornelius shrugs. “Well, there are claims, and then there is the truth, and sometimes it seems that never the twain shall meet, at least in a courtroom.”

“I thought everyone in the future was perfect, and never lied...”

Cornelius smiles wryly. “Perfection is for the past, for abstractions, for dreams, vanity and ambition. Never in the here and now. I’m a healthy man, considered overweight by some, and I have a small cyst on my right shoulder – am I in perfect health? It doesn’t mean anything. People – in the here and now – disagree about contracts and property and the breakups of their marriages and a whole host of other – problems. They are not omnipresent, and they’re not insurmountable, but they still need to be resolved, and fortunately there is enough human imperfection left in this perfect world for me to still make a decent living resolving disputes.” He wags his finger slowly. “But – but I have never come across something like this, which is why I – leapt at the opportunity to work with you, to represent you. If you will have me.” He smiles modestly. “I am on the side of letting sleeping dogs lie, which is to say that I was on the side of *not* waking you. My apologies for comparing you to a dog... But woken you were, and you will need to find a way into this world, to live here, among us – for many decades, I daresay.”

“What do you do about – immigration?”

Cornelius looks surprised for a moment, then laughs. “Why of course, you are an – immigrant – not from other shores, but other centuries. What was called in your day a – Dreamer, I think. An unwilling immigrant, brought here by circumstances, just as children were brought to your country by their parents. Or perhaps you are analogous to a man who has committed a crime while sleepwalking. But you asked about immigration, sorry, I have a wandering mind, a Gypsy brain. Moving is not a violation of the nonaggression principle, anyone can come to live here who wants to live here, and who can secure a

contract to operate within the – machinery of modernity. You can't get anything done here without some kind of contract – although the DROs make it as easy and painless as possible – and if a DRO will take you on, then you can participate in all the glories of the modern world. But you'd be surprised how few people actually want to move here, it's really quite remarkable, because if I still lived in a statist society, I would be trying to get out like a crazed ferret digging its way out of an overturned aquarium! We don't give anything away for free – as a society, of course there are individual charities. In your day, immigrants could earn 10 to 20 times more from government welfare than they could by working hard jobs in the hot sun of their homelands!" He waves his hand. "But these are boring issues, unworthy of our intellects. If you want to move here, come on by! But you'll have to submit your children to Scans, which means no hitting, no yelling, no abuse."

"What about you? Did you have Scans?"

"I came as an adult. My parents were pretty good, but I still had a lot of work to do, to fix my trauma. To have Scans good enough to be insured by a DRO."

"Work?"

"Self-knowledge. Talk therapy. But enough about me. They say to immigrants: *you will have to earn your keep, or find some charity*. It's similar to the start of your country – the geography we both still share. 'He who does not work shall not eat.'"

I scowl. "That's a quote from communism."

Cornelius half-hides a smile by pursing his lips. "Well, your government controlled much more than half of the income of your citizens – communism was 100% control, you were maybe 75% – so you were much closer to communism than us – than the present."

"Well, these debates seem quite – arcane. Unworthy, I think you said. So how does this work?"

Again, he just stares at me.

I gesture angrily. "You know, what am I charged with, how am I morally responsible, what is my punishment, how will this work, what are the laws?"

Cornelius takes a deep breath and stands. "My doctor keeps nagging me to walk more, and my health insurance is going up if I don't, so if you can manage it, we should take a turn around the gardens."

He signs me out, and I summon my cane. We walk through a wall with the outline of a door – most unsettling, it makes me feel like a ghost, but I feel nothing passing through.

Outside, a lush green sloping hill eases down to a forest of oak and elm. In the distance, I can see slender spires that seem to defy gravity – and that would snap before a medium wind. I don't have my glasses, but my eyes instantly focus on the distance, and I can see small dots of moving – something, machines probably – and I gasp involuntarily.

“I can see!” I exclaim.

Cornelius smiles. “Well of course we fixed your eyesight, we are not barbarians!”

“It’s my first time – out...” I murmur. I take a deep breath through my nose. “That air is... wow...”

“More wealth, less pollution...” says Cornelius.

My eyes ache slightly, reminding me of the time Hamish and I spent an entire day skipping from movie to movie in a theatre, then stumbling out half-blind into the late-afternoon sunshine...

It is quiet out here – I spent my entire life in cities, in the noise and screams and sirens and trucks and horns and catcalls... I didn’t even realize I had developed mild tinnitus until one weekend in a terminally-silent rural retreat my wife dragged me to so we could “work on our marriage...”

I shake my head, gazing at the clean wonders of simple nature spread before me. A faint tendril of peace drifts through the eternal tension in my gut. I feel it passing through in wonder, then shudder.

“So damn peaceful...” I whisper, then clear my throat. “My wife always loved these nature pictures – tall trees, majestic mountains... I just saw death-berries, biting bugs and freezing to death on a snow-capped peak. Nature just made me itchy, but I have a weird impulse to just – walk through those woods. Ech – they probably have butterflies that sing your name...”

Cornelius smiles. “We have this concept of a – benevolent universe – which I suppose sounds flaky or mystical to you, but really it’s the argument, the perspective, that nature is very kind to those who respect her rules – and I’m sorry to anthropomorphize natural reality, but I am a sentimental soul. All that we have, all that we have achieved, is based upon the enslavement of our minds to the rules of nature, the rules of logic that we get from her, and the rules of morality that we inevitably impose upon each other.” He smiles in deep contentment. “And all of this was available to everyone, every society, every – place – throughout any time in human history. I do sometimes think of the ancient Romans – and speak of them, when my wife wants to have a nap I think – and remember that they knew all about the steam engine, and the market system, and there was no actual reason why they could not have had the industrial revolution – I know, I know, slavery and all that – but they also had the conception of human rights, which they applied to the rulers and the upper-middle-class – and it pains me, now, even now, thousands of years later, that someone didn’t just take all of those ingredients and put them together, and save the world over two thousand years of misery, slavery and subjugation. The modern world is a fantastical dish – a beautiful thing – and the ingredients were scattered all around the chefs of human history, they just had to – reach out and open them, and mix them, and what we have now could’ve been achieved at – any time.”

I open my mouth to speak – hotly – then close it again.

Although Cornelius is not looking at me, he turns his head and says: “Whatever you say, I cannot repeat, that has not changed.”

“Everything that everyone says to me about this – modern world – is kind of like an advertisement, like you are in a cult. It’s a middle-aged woman with too much makeup. Let’s say that it is all – as wonderful as you believe – and my God the air does smell sweet here, I will grant you that without hesitation – and you have cured my disease and brought me back to life and fixed my eyesight and – I don’t know, made my heart grow three sizes, what do I know – so maybe it *is* perfect, and I am just a bitter historical cynic – but if you want to lay at my feet all these – cataclysms and disasters and prevention of this paradise, this heaven on earth – then you will have a tough case to make, because I...”

“Did the best I could with the knowledge I had...” murmurs Cornelius. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but it’s like when you see your favourite band playing your favourite song, you know it so well that you just feel – compelled to sing along, however badly.” He turns to me. “This is the typical excuse – and I will call it an excuse, because we are going to have to start preparing to defend you at some point.”

I snort. “I think I may have to – consult with more than one person.”

Cornelius nods. “A second opinion is always wise – or a third, or a fourth. But if I may suggest – our laws are so simple because we profit from resolution, not complexity – so you will be able to understand the law you are bound by within – a few minutes, believe it or not.” He pauses for a moment. “It really comes down to the – rapport or personal connection you have with your representative. Personalities have a kind of synchronicity, in my experience. The law is as simple as simple arithmetic, you don’t need an even smarter math teacher to teach you the basics – but you learn, or share in the learning, based upon the – synchronicity of your minds. I think that you and I can have that synchronicity – I have felt that ever since I first saw your speeches.” He laughs shortly. “Perhaps we are related, or come from the same tribe of origin – but I see myself very easily fitting into your world, which means that – I think – I can help you fit into this world, my world – to make it *our* world. Maybe you will find that with someone else – even more, in which case, please hire them.” His eyes narrow. “But I will fight for you – I have no ambiguity about that at all. I don’t agree with you being charged, I don’t agree with you being tried, and I – *like* you, as a person – you are a man of extraordinary talents and passions – not a dinosaur, but old blood that can refresh the new world, so to speak.” He laughs again, shaking his head. “I am rambling, all the while I am watching all the emotions pass over your face like so many clouds. Everyone here just – waits for other people to finish talking, with this...,” he sweeps his open palm up and down in front of his nose, “...blankness, have you noticed?”

I strongly resist the urge to nod, but fail.

Cornelius snaps his fingers. “Exactly! And their – waiting – seems to just pull the words out of you, like fish on a hook. This must be resisted!” he says energetically. “And together, we shall resist!”

I say: “Ah. As you are an – immigrant, too.”

He nods in obvious satisfaction at my insight. “Precisely.” He thumps his chest. “Raised in a state, now stateless.”

“Why did you come?”

“Well, that is a long story...”

I gesture at the sun, whitewashing a murky cloud on the mid-horizon. “It is only midafternoon.”

“Despite what my friends say, I do believe I can be brief... In my – well, I’m not supposed to say ‘home country’ anymore, I used to nag my wife about that, when we first got married and she would talk about going ‘home’ to visit her parents, and I would say to her that *I* am now her home, our house is her home, that is just where she *used* to live. So – where I came from, we have – if you stack the law books – yes, they still have them – on their side, one on top of the other, they reach two stories of a building high. I actually know this in fact, because once one of my clients was prosecuted for violating an obscure law, and I actually stacked all of the law books, right there in the courtroom – which fortunately had a very high ceiling – and before I had finished, I was punished by the judge – although I had a good point, which is: how on *earth* are we supposed to expect people to obey the law, when the law is like memorizing all of the plays and poems of Shakespeare, in three different languages as well!?! Ignorance of the law is no excuse, that is an old historical argument – and I agree with that, as long as the law is not so complex that no one man, no one person, understands it completely.” He gestures at me. “And in your country, this land, as it used to be, it was the same thing – thousands of laws, hundreds of thousands of regulations – it was impossible for people to obey the law. Wasn’t there a book about people regularly committing three felonies a day, back in your day? I could not keep up with the law, but I was supposed to inflict it on people with no legal training at all!” He takes a deep breath. “And there I was, one weekend, at a conference about new regulations, new laws – and I felt my brain, the thread in my mind, just kind of – snap.” He lowers his voice, as if someone of significance could hear us. “And I really think that this also happened to my colleagues, my fellow lawyers, but for some reason I was unable to tie the broken thread back together, or ignore the snapping sound, like a violin string breaking in some ancient Chekhov play. And I could not inflict a law on the average citizen that I – with all my training – could never fully understand. It felt less like a legal system, and more like a voodoo curse. The law of my land was a strange beast, a most odd net, because it would catch all the smaller fish, while letting the bigger fish – the sharks – swim free and clear. And in my research on legal systems, I came across what had been – and this sounds strange, because it – it is very hard to suppress information now, it is so available everywhere – but none of my training had ever exposed me to the laws here. But I came across them, and I – I’m not ashamed to say it, I just – wept. They are as simple as sunrise.”

I shrug angrily. “Jazz seems simple to the experienced players.”

“Wisely bitter,” he says, wagging his forefinger at me. “But it really is.” He stops walking and plants his two feet shoulder-width apart. I can see his left toes wiggling through his soft brown shoes. “On the one hand – foot – you have the nonaggression principle, thou shalt not initiate force. On the other, you have a respect for property rights. These are so rarely violated that you could starve to death prosecuting them. They have the right idea about childhood here, it is the furnace for the future. If we clap our hands together over our two feet, we have the final ingredient: *keep your word.*”

I shrug contemptuously. “This supposed Holy Trinity is the basis of every – common law system throughout the world. I fail to see the genius.”

“Yes, well, the trick is in the word ‘basis.’ Your society – your world – built from these simple principles an entirely contradictory cathedral of complexity. There are only twenty-six letters, but a sophist can twist them into endless confusion – can literally drive people mad with his language. The genius is in the simplicity. Do not use violence, respect property, keep your word. That is the entirety of the law.”

I am about to speak, but Cornelius pulls out a short pamphlet, perhaps twenty pages long, from his jacket pocket. He hands it to me.

“In your honour, I had this printed out, so you could feel the weight of how few laws there are.”

I look at the cover. “The Laws of Anarchy.”

“Well that seems like quite the contradiction.”

He nods. “I felt the same way, I received the same propaganda. ‘Anarchy’ simply means ‘without rulers’ – it does not mean ‘without rules.’ In fact, the argument went – and was resolved centuries ago – that a statist society has incentives to create such complexity of laws that it ends up existing without any comprehensible rules at all. The lawyers enjoy the complexity, because they get paid well for navigating it – the courts enjoy the complexity, because they can be used to punish the enemies of the state – and the state of course enjoys the complexity because it can deem anyone ‘illegal’ for just about anything.” He *tsks* between his teeth loudly. “It is, of course, far too much power for any human being to wield. We are like little delicate fuses – power runs through us, and we blow our conscience, *tzzzt!*”

I have a sudden urge to throw this little booklet away from me – and suddenly have the image of myself as a demon being handed a holy text.

“You do not want to open it,” says Cornelius softly. “I actually made a bet with myself that you would not – open it. I would be shocked if you did, you probably want to throw it into the forest below.”

I hate being predictable, because that means I am controllable. But I know that if I open the booklet, I am still being controlled.

“I will look at it later,” I say flatly.

“Yes, you will, I know,” says Cornelius reassuringly. He turns to me, looking into my face, my eyes. “Do you like me?”

“Do you care?”

He laughs. “How quick your response is! If you like me, we can work together - I can defend you. I promise you that I have no arcane knowledge of arcane laws, you can become a – lawyer – over a long weekend if you want, it’s so simple! But if you like me, if you understand that I believe in you, and want to protect you from the – vengeance of the present, which still remembers the Cataclysms, and might in fact be looking for a scapegoat, that’s my theory – then we can work together, and not only can we survive what is to come, but we can emerge – wiser, better, like coal under pressure turning into a diamond!” He smiles self-consciously at the cliché of his analogy.

I purse my lips. "Something my philosophy teacher said, so many years ago now – 'compared to what'? How can I say if I like you, I've met so few people here?"

He wags his finger at me again. "Wisely said, most hesitant and wise. And you've been through a lot, by gaining your life, you have lost the entire world. I grew up not – entirely opposite to how you grew up, and I have made the – transition – to a free society, and I have raised my children in the manner of the New World, and it is a beautiful thing, it does work, and they are wonderful people. I have made the journey that you are going to make, over the next few weeks. In your day, trials could take years, I'm not sure if you read the old novel *Bleak House*, but it was along those lines – but here, justice delayed is justice denied, and a trial – even one as complex as yours – will only take about a week, because if it goes on for much longer, the process *is* the punishment. As soon as you choose your counsel, your – representative – the trial will start within a few days, and be over in a week. A week after it starts, I mean. But you will not have very long to choose your representative, because that's just another way of delaying the trial. Do you follow?"

I smile thinly. "As long as I discard the tangents."

Cornelius roars with laughter, and grabs my hand. "It is like we are already married!"

"I think we could get along, but you have not answered any of my six objections."

"Yes," he replies fluidly, ticking off his fingers. "The statute of limitations, judging you by our current legal system, your status as an unwilling refugee, your incapacity to know our laws, your inability – our inability – to cross-examine witnesses or your accusers – were those what you mean?"

"Yes," I say, impressed despite myself at his steel-trap ability to retain earlier statements.

"I will answer them now, if you like."

I nod.

"Have you ever known a crazy person?"

"Yes, of course. Two. I hired one of them as my campaign manager, and married the other."

"No, seriously."

I shrug. "Yes, the bachelor uncle who lived in the attic and collected – strange artifacts that no one understands, I suppose that would be the craziest I knew."

"Would he have been guilty of a crime, if he had committed it – was he sane enough?"

"I don't know. Probably not towards the end of his life, he got – Alzheimer's, and really went off the rails."

Cornelius grimaces. "It seems strange to offer sympathies for a death centuries past."

“Forget that.”

“The law – and I’m speaking in ideals here, as well as what is practised in the present – should only punish a man for violating moral standards that he himself accepts. I know you have a million objections, give me a moment please. We punish a thief for stealing because he objects to us stealing his time by punishing him. A man steals a month’s worth of labour from his neighbour, then spends a year in prison – we punish him because he objects to the year we are taking from him – just as his neighbour objects to the month that was stolen from him. A thief takes a – car, and then is outraged if someone steals the car from him. It is through his outrage that we can punish him, because he wishes to retain the property rights he has violated in others. Makes sense?”

“I’ve never heard it put that way, but yes – I suppose the insanity defense is when a man who steals does not object to things being stolen from him.”

Cornelius snaps his fingers. “Exactly. We punish a murderer and a rapist and a man who commits assault for the same reason – they strongly object to their *own* behaviour being inflicted on them, which means that they accept the ‘thou shalt not’ of whatever they did.”

As the sun begins to set, and the shadows stretch, a tiny light begins to arise in my mind, like an unfathomably-distant fireworks show.

I murmur: “The slaveowner objects to being sold into slavery.”

“Precisely. And it doesn’t matter what the laws are, it doesn’t matter what his government permits him to do, it doesn’t matter what he enforces upon others – morality is universal, and if he objects to being subjugated under that which he inflicts on others, then he is as guilty – as – sin...” Cornelius draws out the last words.

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” I say.

His eyes widen slightly. “I was not sure how well you had absorbed your childhood theology. But yes, that is the essence of the golden rule. Yes, treat others as you want to be treated – but if you strongly *object* to being treated how you treat others, then we need no other – example, or recourse, or external law.”

I take a deep breath, and sit down suddenly on the grass. I do not even try to make it look voluntary.

“So – what, am I going to be judged by my own – conscience? Is there some – a robot that is going to crawl into my ear and unravel my entire inner life – or a – machine that knows if I am lying somehow?”

Cornelius sits backwards, and a brown chair erupts downwards from his trousers. He smiles apologetically. “Getting down is the easy part, I shall have to sit. What you said – all the – options that you have considered in the rapidity of your mind – these have all been suggested, that judges deploy some form of truth serum, or some mind-reading device, or some scan for falsehood – but although this society wishes to outsource just about everything to robots and machines, it draws the line – for

reasons, some of which I can understand – at using machines to judge morality. It is the final frontier of humanity, a line they will not cross. What is most essentially human about us is our capacity for morality, and while it is fine to have a machine make your food – or support your ample rear end – it is not allowed for a machine to judge your conscience. Also, the argument goes, if we outsource moral judgement to machinery, we lose our capacity to judge morality ourselves, which means we lose what is most human, blah blah blah, you get the idea. So no, long story short, you will not be invaded and unraveled by machines or drugs or Scans – this will be a human conversation, with a judge, a jury, lawyers and representatives – a prosecution and defense, with you – and your entire history – right at the center.”

I laugh in shocked bitterness. The ancient and long-dead Father Gregory arises in my mind, as if he had been sleeping for centuries with me, and is awoken by reinforced and external self-righteousness.

In the long-buried graveyard of my childhood, as we strode between the stones, he knew that I was slipping away, to the material, to the ambitious, to the acquisitive immorality of my mere blood-and-bone mammalian nature.

His words grew desperate, as our connection frayed and eventually snapped.

“God has a backup plan for rejecting Him,” he said. “God is also an analogy for our conscience, which He has placed within us for the inevitable day that we decide to go alone. Our conscience will draw us back to God, because our conscience *is* God – the closest we get to Him while still being mortal. Our conscience is the universality of the morality we enact – in the style of Immanuel Kant, our conscience takes our own actions and universalizes them, makes them eternal, whether we like that or not. And we can pretend to escape God’s judgement by rejecting Him – but the God within, the fragment of the universal divine that cannot be killed in our mind – that will always judge us. Do you understand, child? You will always be judged, though you become the most staunch and bitter atheist in the world. And here is the great secret of the modern world, my friend...” His voice grew soft and annoying. “When you reject God – and I know you are very close, very – you reject the possibility of forgiveness. God Himself, God entire, will forgive you your transgressions – but the fragment of God within us called the conscience does not have that capacity, I suppose God needed to make Himself small enough to fit in our mind, which means he had to shave off the whole ‘forgiveness’ part. If you abandon God – or rather ‘when,’ since it happens to all – thinking that you will escape morality, all you are doing is escaping the possibility of forgiveness, because you will be judged by the future, whether you like it or not, and it is far better to have the forgiveness of God on your side, rather than the somewhat demonic intransigence of your own conscience. But you will be judged by the future, like it or not...”

I shiver at this memory, and feel great rage. *Let’s not pretend that Father Gregory could see through his rheumy eyes through the tunnel of time to this moment of reawakening – of my rebirth, of being born again – to the judgement of the future that he predicted – that he predicted in order to scare me, in order to keep me close – he wanted **me** to abandon power over the material so that **he** could retain his power over me, it was the same thing from the other side...*

Cornelius leans over me, his bulk and white hair blotting out the sky.

“What are you thinking?” he asks gently.

“I refuse to participate,” I say coldly.

“If your government was prosecuting a man, would that be an option for him?”

“But you are so much better than me, it can’t be compared!” I say bitterly.

“So – you are saying that it is better *not* to prosecute someone who refuses to participate?”

“Shut the hell up!” I say in a kind of panic – and then instantly savagely smooth my own passions. I do not apologize.

“You do not have to participate,” says Cornelius. “The closest analogy would be a civil matter in your time. If you don’t participate, you are tried *in absentia*, and a judgement will be entered against you.”

I grunt. “Come on, we both know the truth – this is just going to be a show trial. A kangaroo court, they used to call it.”

“I promise you, my friend – I will not let that happen.”

Promises, promises... It seemed probable that no one even knew that song anymore.

“In my day, the idea that a lawyer had power over the courts was laughable.”

“It is not your day any longer.”

I say nothing, because all my responses seem petty and resentful... ‘*As I am repeatedly reminded...*’

I finally say: “Okay, so what the hell are you going to get out of this? If I’m tried for war crimes, or some grand immorality, is everyone now so perfectly principled that they are just going to respect you for your abstract moral stand?”

Cornelius turns to me. “Ah, for me to answer that... I know you were a man for keeping secrets, but that was then...”

“If you get me off, you can tell me you have three testicles, and I will take it to my grave.”

Cornelius gestures at the distant forest, the distant slender spires. “It’s – a little smug, a little too certain, it has lost the spice of self-doubt. Humanity was supposed to be on a journey, not squatting with infinite self-satisfaction on a mere – destination. Why are we not going to the stars? What is our next goal? You strive, or you sicken. I suppose I want more than you to wake up.”

“You want to – undermine.”

Cornelius considers the word for a long moment. A rabbit emerges from the forest, licks its paws, then vanishes into the undergrowth.

I say: “If I was still sleeping, I would never have known that rabbit existed.”

It is cheesy undergraduate philosophy 101, but somehow I do not regret saying it.

“This world takes entirely too much for granted,” Cornelius says finally, turning to me again. “If they survive us, together, I will accept their wisdom.”

I feel a sudden flurry of hope, like hummingbirds in my chest. “Then let’s take it down together!”

Chapter 36

Cornelius left me soon after, with the useless and annoying suggestion that I “get some rest” – as if that is a choice for the sickly.

I retired back to my room with the booklet, and decided to enjoy my little secret about myself.

I don’t feel fear.

Power is fear avoidance – it is escaping the need to please, the need to be “of service” – and I loved how, back in my day – in my heyday – I was referred to as a “public servant.” I turned the public *into* servants, I did not *serve* the public. A servant can get fired, a servant has to be good at his job, and requires excellent references. The whole point of power is to escape the voluntary – to wrap yourself in propaganda and coercion and charm to the point where you can defy the natural laws of physics and step up and slide down rainbows.

One of my economic advisors – part-time of course – was a free-market fanatic who literally enjoyed government-protected tenure – he couldn’t be fired – at a government-funded university, teaching government-funded students! He was the furthest thing from the free-market that you could find, because at least a Gulag guard doesn’t obsessively read Milton Friedman. I *loved* him for that – I loved that he taught principles utterly in opposition to how he actually lived his life! I *loved* that his students would never believe in the free-market after being taught by him. But most of all, I *loved* the security that his life gave to me – I slept like a baby every night, secure in the knowledge that, even if we gave everyone a PhD in free-market economics, they would *still* run to government protection and government benefits every single time! I loved the vapid stink of his hypocrisy every time he leaned in to tell me to deregulate something. I did once play with him, offering to deregulate universities and eliminate tenure – not something I could exactly snap my fingers and achieve, but it was enjoyable to watch him crow with cracking enthusiasm about being cast out into the free-market he pretended to love *so much!*

This is the thing, one of the things that kept me free of fear – everyone wants the free-market when they are the *consumer*, but nobody wants the free-market when they are the *producer*. It’s like egalitarianism versus meritocracy – everyone loves egalitarianism in theory, but when a heart surgeon is operating on their beloved daughter, they want pure meritocracy all the way!

Haha, I'm not complaining – if people *weren't* hypocrites, I would've had to get a real job...

I remember when my father would talk to me – when I got into my mid-teens – about what he was up to at the State legislature – I would be shocked – literally shocked – at what he could get away with. He got elected by promising school choice, then strengthened the teachers' unions. He promised that he had a solution for rising crime rates, then said that it was a purely local matter. He always kept his deals – he used to laugh and tell me: "Government is a way of enforcing contracts that runs on contracts that cannot be enforced!" He kept track of all the backroom haggling with an obscene abacus brain – and could hold a grudge until it grew a beard – but his sunny promises to the electorate – well, they weren't even 'violated' – they were just – they just, blew away, without a sound, without a murmur.

"People want comfort in the moment, son," he would say, creaking back and forth on an old rocking chair on the back porch, his amber cup welded to his hand. "They are like baby ducks – very affectionate, but easily frightened. Now I can't do much about the fear – that's up to the teachers and the media, to keep everybody well-goosed and jumpy – but I *can* do something to make them feel better, which is to smile, give them the 'hand sandwich,' stare deeply into their eyes and tell them that *everything is going to be alright*. At the end of the day, that's all people are looking for – life is short and stressful, for those under the thumbtack, and whatever comfort and security people can grab from others on the flyby is worth more than *gold* to them!"

I was never sure why my father dropped all these tidbits of dark wisdom in my lap, because he sure as hell didn't take any interest in my life as a whole – he kissed babies endlessly on the road, but had no interest in babies or toddlers at home... He would constantly tell me that he had to wait for me to reach the *age of reason* in order to hold his attention. But even then, he never knew what my hobbies were, who my friends were, what bands I liked, whether I tried pot – and even, once, he had to ask me what *grade* I was in when he was signing a school letter. I hated him for that, until I did the same thing with Jake, my eldest son...

I know, I know – he came from a different generation – children are to be seen and not heard – but it did bother me if I blocked his view of the television, and he would grunt: "You might be a pain, but you're not a window-pane."

Or another favorite of his: "Insanity is hereditary – we get it from our kids!"

I do have vague memories of craving contact with him when I was very young – I remember pretending to fall asleep on his lap when I was maybe two, while he was laughing at some incomprehensible comedy on the screen, and enjoying his belly pressing against my cheek, the few hairs that escaped his shirt tickling my skin.

Thinking back, I guess I should amend my earlier statement – politics is not about *avoiding* fear, but *displacing* it.

My father had one *hell* of a temper.

There was a pattern, you know. A bunch of kids would be over at the house – our huge house – and we would take over the upstairs and invent our games, our limits, ourselves – and the noise would increase, and the dangers would escalate, and then something would be broken, someone would crack a knee, someone would burst into tears – and my mother would come up the stairs with her usual shrill exasperation, which we refused to listen to – it was always vaguely shameful to submit to a woman’s upset – and she would angrily and ineffectually nag at us from the top of the stairs, while we silently bragged by continuing our mayhem – and eventually we would summon the dark force of my father’s footsteps, and he would holler from the middle of the stairs, the phone hanging by his side, on mute – and he would never say ‘listen to your mother’ or anything like that – he might as well ask us to play on the ceiling – but he would demand that the noise and commotion *cease right now!*

We took a deep visceral pleasure in freezing in place – I know now it was a way of humiliating our mother, but there was more to it than that...

I didn’t know any children – any sons – who were close to their fathers, in my world. In fact, I remember a silly joke from those days – two boys, sitting on the steps, one says to the other: “I bet my dad could beat up your dad.” The other replies: “Really? How much would that cost me?”

We wanted our fathers to pay attention to us, but they only intervened when we jacked up the chaos to lightspeed. Mothers couldn’t teach us how to be men, and it was a maternal world in those days. Nannies, daycare teachers, schoolteachers – they were all women, all frazzled, all ‘overwhelmed’ – and perpetually frustrated by boys – they basically viewed us as broken girls.

Male authorities were an oasis in the desert, the endless quicksand of the feminine... I chased my father like a dog chases the mail truck, with no idea what I would do if I actually caught him.

And he had – let’s be frank – a *very* heavy hand.

I didn’t check the weather when I was young, so every day was a surprise of sun or rain. I didn’t know the impact of the outside world on my father, so I couldn’t predict his moods. All kids are pretty selfish – boys especially – so we take everything personally, as if we are the only influence on those around us. I guess my father had his good days, and his bad days – on his good days, you got ice cream, tickles and bad jokes.

On his bad days...

I got beaten, no point in beating around the bush I suppose.

My friend and I – what was I, five or six years old – were playing some imaginary spaceship game, and I put a glass of water on an antique cabinet, and my mother burst into tears when she was cleaning up later, because it left a pale ring on the dark surface of the wood.

Children know nothing of history, of course – the world was created when they were born – but I vaguely understood that this was a family heirloom and a treasure of some kind – which made me resentful that I had been allowed to play around it unsupervised – and my father came hurtling into the

room like a satellite entering the atmosphere. With his left hand, slammed the door shut – with his right hand, he lifted me up by the neck of my T-shirt – the fabric on the back cut into my neck savagely – and he hurled me against the wall, and I couldn't tell whether my mother was crying for the cabinet, or for me – and he slapped me across the face, back and forth, like a blur, I don't know how many times, and he told me to *take care of my god damned things!*

I was not in pain – that's the great secret of being hit as a child, it almost never hurts in the moment – but I remember truly understanding that *things* meant more than people – *cabinets* meant more than children.

Stains trumped bruises...

I sagged against the wall, not even holding up my hands, my body signifying bottomless compliance, a total void of resistance. I suppose he felt me go limp under his blows, and this appeased him. I thought for a moment that he was going to go and get me a towel, throw it at me, and tell me to clean myself up – as if I had made the mess – or, in the next moment, I hoped that he would burst into tears and apologize for his rage, and that the power would then swing to me – but nothing of the sort happened. He got up, brushed his hands as if they were covered in chalk, and walked out of the room.

I expected my mother to come in, tend my wounds and apologize profusely – but I didn't want her to do that, because it did me no good to have power over *her*. I've always *always* hated small talk – years later, in college, I saw a meme about the trolley problem in philosophy: "If you threw the switch and saved ten people, you then have to engage in small talk about saving them." I remember feeling a savage desire to *not* throw the switch, and let everyone die so they wouldn't have to congratulate me on my 'virtue.'

I then imagined that my mother and father were downstairs, wracked with guilt and promising to change – but when I heard footfalls on the stairs, I crept to the snow-white banisters, and peered through them like a convict in a prison of icicles – and my heart froze as I saw them step into their tennis shoes, grab an athletic bag and head out to play a game.

I knew there was a nanny in the house, I knew that my sister was asleep – I knew that I was not being left alone, but really I *was*.

I was being told *very clearly* that the drama of the assault was not even a comedy. It was not out of the ordinary, it gave me no power, it was not unjust, it was not wrong – it was the ultimate power-play, and it told me a hell of a lot about how the world worked.

If people believe you aren't bothered by something, they have no power over you.

Power is just this remote-control manipulation of other people's vulnerabilities – virtuous men care about their reputations, so you control them by attacking that. Take control away from the power-hungry, you control them. Strip hope from the depressed, you own them.

By casually sauntering off to play tennis, my parents *clearly* informed me that I gained no power over them by being beaten.

In fact, when they returned, I apologized.

I apologized for being hit!

That's power!

But I didn't know the half of it – my father's hand had loosened one of my teeth to the point where it popped out the next day. There's a feeling that children get when they expect a present – a hungry glow in the chest, an expectation of imminent joy – and I told my parents that my tooth had come out, and I put it under my pillow with the expectation of extra money for dad beating it out of my head – but the next morning, the tooth was just – gone, and instead I got a long lecture from my father about how Santa Claus was not real, the tooth fairy was not real, animals could not talk, and it was time for me to grow the hell up and stop expecting everything for free.

My mother hardened as well, in those years – she was endlessly frustrated that I would comply with strangers, while defying her. But she married a man who didn't seem to give a crap about her feelings, so I knew deep down that she was just trying to keep me a child, control me – she did not love *obedient* males, rebellion was my only chance.

I remember when I was about nine, becoming quite fascinated by my parent's relationship, and trying to eavesdrop on them whenever I could. They were cautiously reserved, and I could usually only hear murmurs through the ventilation – I suppose they were always concerned that someone could hijack their phones and listen in – but I did hear them talking once, at the foot of the garden, when I pretended to nap on a lounge chair, but was surreptitiously cupping my ear to hear the words that strangely echoed off a stone statue.

"Twenty years, I feel I barely know you," said my mother. Her tone was aggrieved, as it so often was – that morning, she had turned on a blender, but it had sparked and died in her hands, and she had lifted it off the counter as if to hurl it, before dropping it and crying out to no one that *nothing worked!*

My father had just grunted. "You've *got* to stop talking to Joan."

"This isn't about Joan!"

"Of course it is. Divorces spread like the flu, you know that – you've gotta cut her off, like a tourniquet, or we'll both bleed out."

I could see her biting her thumbnail in the shaded green distance. "But they were together so long – longer than us!"

My father shrugged. "People die younger than us, we're still breathing. Stop measuring yourself by others."

She looked at him savagely. "Oh hell, you're one to talk – all you *do* is measure your dick against everyone else!"

"Maybe – but you don't seem to mind the beautiful house and dresses it buys."

“It always comes down to money.”

My father extended his hand. “Hello, you might remember me from our first date, when I told you how ambitious I was.”

“Isn’t it enough now though?”

“Not according to your Visa bill.”

They were circling each other like wounded sharks snapping for a kill shot.

“Joan got the virus,” my father said. He imitated a woman, I don’t know who. “‘You’re just a broodmare, cooking and cleaning and wiping asses, why do you let your husband take all the glory and run the world? Get out there girl, you go and be brave and stunning, show the world what you’re made of, take the bull by the horns, go be a girl boss you empowered woman about to find her voice...’”

My mother laughed, despite herself. “I married an ape!”

“Agreed. And you’re going to stay married, and you’re going to *drop* Joan, because drowning people just pull you down. Divorced people *hate* seeing happy marriages.”

“Are we happy though?”

My father’s face crumpled as he scowled, and I realized how rarely I saw him in full sunlight. “That’s the kind of open-ended crap question that turns concrete into quicksand. Before you talked to Joan this morning, were you unhappy? Be honest,” he warned.

She paused. “I wasn’t – unhappy.”

“Good enough, not being unhappy is like not being in pain, we don’t get euphoria all day long. But she puts this – worm into your ear...” His voice dropped low and conspiratorial. “...that maybe you *are* unhappy, and maybe your husband *is* selfish...”

“Perish the thought!”

“...and maybe there *is* some undefined something *more* out there, and maybe you think being 5 foot 10 is tall, but there are people out there who are 50 feet tall, so you’re really short after all!”

“Oh come on, you had me until...” My mother waved her hand.

“Maybe, maybe, maybe... That’s just – acid conjecture, like the ‘we are in a simulation’ lunatics. Here are the facts: Joan is a plain woman in her fifties who’s going to find out that the wonderful world she is setting out to join is just a refugee ship of broken people with broken lives, and she doesn’t have the sexual power she had in her twenties, and she’s going to end up burying her regrets in cat litter. And all the money she thinks she’s going to get from Bill, well that’s just going to the lawyers and two houses and eighteen vacations. It’s pathetic, and I hate her with all my heart for sowing this stupidity in the minds of her friends. She screwed up, she got greedy, she overreached – and now she’s fallen out of the cruise ship, and we cannot circle back to find her.”

My mother gnawed at her thumb. “She’s so sad, she needs someone...”

“She *had* someone – she had Bill and a decent marriage. But someone put the worm in her ear, and now she’s trying to put the worm in *your* ear – don’t let her, don’t do it, it’s a hole with no bottom, you know it!”

“So I’m supposed to just – abandon her, in her hour of need?”

My father shrugged angrily. “She abandoned Bill. She’s got *nothing* to complain about.”

They moved on, and their voices no longer slid round the semicircle of the stone statue’s outstretched hands to my cupped ears.

I’d heard enough. Women had to be wrangled, their sympathies were their weakness.

Or, as my father once told me, “Women will always find someone or something to mother – if they don’t have kids, it’s cats or immigrants.”

I sometimes wished that the whole world was women, when I was running for office.

Anyway, I grew sick of my own inner ramblings – I felt a sudden savage yearning for *action*, and instantly remembered my own eldest son, who I had grudgingly taken to a petting zoo when he was young, because – according to my wife – he was turning into a little brat in pre-K.

He was so goddamned *mournful*, that boy, almost from the beginning – he moped and sighed, and was congenitally ungrateful, which drove me quite mad – I fantasized that my wife had had an affair with some man-bun soy-drip barista at the local coffee shop.

Jake just talked and talked – he once complained that he was dying of boredom.

“You can’t die of boredom!” I snapped.

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve *spent* months listening to you go on and on about that Robocraft game!”

I had to savagely cut him off when he went on these – “rambletangents” I called them. Endless stories of his dreams and ideas and plans – I didn’t even bother to listen, just thought my own thoughts and went all Zen and into the future, like he was a trickling brook of vapid nonsense.

My daughter was a talker too, but you could get a word in edgewise. I remember her describing her ideal restaurant once – in the woods, high in a treetop, birds on the leaves, rope swings and koi ponds – it was entertaining enough to interest me... I added in some robot waiters, and it was actually kind of fun...

But my eldest son, the whiner who wouldn’t get a haircut until I held him down, I spend most of his childhood just – shutting him up. He was like an impossible leaky house – every hole you patched just bled drippy water somewhere else.

He did, though, eventually.

Shut the hell up...

I had pretended to read a few books on parenting – slipping my cell phone between the pages so I could actually get something done – and knew that I wasn't supposed to make him like me – which would've been all right, if he had wanted to be anything at all. But he was born silent – I thought he was retarded at first, or whatever word you were supposed to use in the current minute, but I could tell his perceptiveness from across the room. He was silent, he moped, he was a drip – but he was – he *judged*, too.

Judged me, in that involuntary way that some children have, like they are little conscience-computers that chatter without control, like dreams. Thank *God* my second son was a mindless charismatic athletic ape who poured himself like quicksilver into whatever popular container came jostling along the cultural conveyor belt.

I was at – *damn these memories, last one!* – this petting zoo, when my eldest son – who was inexplicably obsessed with ducks – ah, his face *lit up* when he saw two of the foot-sized white birds in an enclosure, next to some African cow with a tumour for a neck – and he ran forwards to the gate waving his arms like a conductor windmilling at the edge of a cliff – then wrestling with some vaguely complicated latch – and he turned to me with a contemptible agonized begging expression – and I can still feel the wild cold rage, even now, hundreds of years after Jake's demise, because he loved the *ducks*, he cared about the *ducks*, but he only regretfully needed me to open the latch, swing the gate, and give him access to that which he treasured – I was only a means to his end – his end was never *me*, his love was never for *me* – and if he could've opened that latch himself, he would have poured his heart into those stupid birds and forgotten me *entirely!*

And what sort of boy wants to pick up and caress fluffy little birds?

I made a mistake, that day, which I worried about for over a week.

I did not hit him – I did, at other times – many times – I felt I wanted to *drive* the softness out of him, like hammering a nail can push wood out from the bottom of a plank – but my cold calculations led me to public error that day...

I watched as my son cooed over and petted the ducks. I did not enter the enclosure. I really liked my shoes, they were a rare gift from me to me.

Jake was picking up tiny leaves and plants, trying to feed them to the ducks, which showed little interest.

"We've got food, you know," said a bored blonde teenage girl scrolling through her phone – surely against protocol.

"Cones are two dollars, three for five." She pointed at a sign which said *exactly the same thing* – which irritated me even more.

Jake begged me for a cone. Once more, I was just a doorway he grabbed through get to what he wanted!

I was a wallet and a driver, an unappreciated builder of shelters and savings.

I bought him a cone – he asked for three, wanting me to take one, but it was just for show, he didn't want me in there with his precious ducks.

I turned my genial charm to the girl sitting and scrolling endlessly, as if she could somehow get to the bottom of the Internet.

"Work here long?" I asked.

She took a moment to answer – to indicate her unwillingness, and to put me in the category of dads who awkwardly flirt with teenage girls.

"Oh ya," she said in her nasal voice. She wasn't exactly pretty, but had a kind of rural meatiness that I supposed could be attractive if you had a barn to raise.

"Do you like working here?" I asked.

She shrugged. "It's okay." She thought of something, then added: "I like animals."

"Not too busy," I said in a pleasant voice.

"Gonna rain."

"I'm not one for checking the weather. Or the traffic. Drives my wife crazy," I added – mentioning my wife to show that I was *not* flirting with her.

She leaned forward and said to my son: "Don't let them jump up on you!" Turning to me, she added: "We got a lawsuit."

"He's good with the animals," I said.

She nodded indifferently, her hand creeping to her phone like a stalking spider.

I nodded towards my son. "He loves animals."

I knew she was bored – I intended to be boring – but I also knew that she was supposed to keep the customers happy.

I said: "Has anyone ever been cruel to the animals?"

She sighed. "Some of the kids can be rough, but your boy is an angel."

"He is. He'd love to work here."

She sniggered. "Maybe once he figures out the fence."

I nodded. "He wants a little time off from me, so I'm going to go and get some lunch. I have some calls."

"You're not supposed to leave him here unattended." Again, she pointed to a sign that said exactly the same thing.

I leaned forward. "But I will."

She shivered slightly. "You can't. You're not supposed to."

"But I *will*."

She blinked at me. This was always a moment I loved, when the little verbal nonsense that people spout to try and keep a conversation on a familiar track – when they realize that those little tricks don't work with me, and they are off the tracks, in the wilderness – where they might actually have to think for themselves for a moment, to evaluate risk and reward. It's like you go to pet a dog, and the dog growls and corners you – you get to live intensely, for a moment. Charisma is a kind of danger.

I turned to walk away.

The girl said: "I'll have to call security."

I laughed, then turned around. "You got a crack guard on duty here? And what will he say when I tell him that you made fun of my son? You did," I said, as her eyes widened. "You mocked him for having trouble with the latch. And you spent almost your entire time here scrolling through your phone. There is no sign for *that* here, but I'm pretty sure that is not allowed. And you've also complained about the children who come here, that they are cruel to the animals. Not a good look, not very good for the *position*." I lifted my phone. "Should I leave a review? What is your name?"

Her eyes refused to fix on mine, and darted around – as people always did, looking for rescue from the results of their own crappy behaviour.

"I'll get in trouble, if you leave him..." Her voice trailed off, and my estimation of her rose a little. The usual girly trick of appealing to a man's protective nature faded in her throat, because I obviously had no trouble making her uncomfortable. But she *earned* the behaviour, I was just *paying* her!

I stared at her, and slowly she began to truly panic. *God, it was good to help people grow!*

"What do I say?" she whined.

"That's kind of an eternal question," I replied softly. "And I'd better not get paged about an upset child."

Her eyes narrowed, and she nodded slightly.

She got it.

I went and had a leisurely lunch at the park's low-rent outdoor café, gnawing on what was advertised as a gator burger, and feeding most of it to the roaming peacocks.

I went and walked the boardwalks in some nearby woods, made a few calls.

I eventually made my way back to the petting zoo around closing time. The girl was quite hysterical, and a pleasing number of cones were missing – and my son was extraordinarily agitated, though he hid it well. He made it to the car before bursting into wailing tears.

“You ignore me, I ignore you,” I said, before turning on some half-deafening thrash metal on the radio.

Chapter 37

Bored of the useless memories, I roll over and open the pamphlet Cornelius gave me.

“THE LAWS”

Steal from Plato much?

I am mildly curious about whether this brave new world enforces intellectual property rights, so I open it up.

INTRODUCTION

The law is the practical implementation of universal morality. It has the same relationship to morality that engineering has to physics.

Physics aims to synthesize immediate experience and abstract it into the universal laws of matter and energy.

Engineering takes the laws of physics and uses them to create practical objects that serve the needs of humanity in the present.

Morality aims to define Universally Preferable Behaviour.

The Law translates morality into practical rules that enforce UPB.

The basis of the law is as follows:

1. No law is valid if it is not taught to children.
2. Any law which cannot be comprehended by children cannot be inflicted on adults.
3. No law which violates the nonaggression principle is valid.
4. No law which violates property rights is valid.

5. No law which requires an expert to interpret is valid.
6. No law which cannot be universalized is valid.
7. The purpose of the law is to prevent violations of UPB.

I chuckle. Idealistic scribbles – I succumbed to them too, when I was about fourteen. Then I grew a beard and cynicism.

Children frightened by monsters make up rituals – these children make up rules to ‘manage’ the savagery of man – silly magic in the face of bloody mammals...

I read on – wishing I had a glass of whiskey...

Human beings own themselves, and own the effects of their actions. Owning the effects of our actions is the basis for property rights, as well as morality – and the law.

When a man catches a fish...

I snort, but continue...

When a man catches a fish, he is creating the fish *as property*. A fish at the bottom of a lake is unowned, which means that it cannot be used to serve human needs. When a man invests his labour into catching the fish, he creates his property right over the fish, because he has converted it from *unusable* to *usable*.

If a man builds a shelter, he has transformed the raw materials – which do not serve human needs – into a shelter, which does.

Since a man owns the effects of his actions, he owns what he has transformed into human utility.

It is impossible to argue that a man does not own the effects of his actions, because both participants in the debate must be assumed to own their own arguments, otherwise the debate becomes impossible.

A man who creates property owns that property – a man who destroys property owns the act of destruction.

A woman who creates life owns that life – a man who destroys life owns that murder.

A man who assaults a woman owns the resulting harm to her body.

It is a falsehood to say that someone *else* committed your murder – just as it is a falsehood to say that you own someone *else's* property.

Property rights and the nonaggression principle are two sides of the same coin – since morality is universal, it doesn't matter whether you enslave someone in the present, or in the past. If you steal the product of a month's labour, you have enslaved the creator for a month.

Theft is a form of enslavement, it is an exercise of property rights without creation or trade.

The commandments given to children throughout history were always the same: Don't hit, don't steal, don't lie.

Don't hit = the nonaggression principle.

Don't steal = respect property rights.

Don't lie = contract enforcement.

A contract is a formalized promise with incentives for fulfillment, and punishments for non-fulfillment.

Failing to fulfil a contract is identical to stealing, a form of enslavement.

VIOLATIONS OF THE NON-AGGRESSION PRINCIPLE (NAP)

Violations of the NAP fall into the categories of rape, assault and murder.

Violations of the NAP are categorized as *unchosen injuries*. There are circumstances in which people choose at least the potential for injury, such as contact sports or invasive medical procedures.

Self-defense is not a violation of the NAP, since it aims to maintain an existing circumstance – non-injury – rather than create a new circumstance, which is the infliction of injury.

VIOLATIONS OF PROPERTY RIGHTS

Since we own the effects of our actions, property is an extension of the body. The NAP covers violations of the body, while property rights cover violations of the *effects* of the body, which is property.

It is no more permissible to steal a man's labour than it is to steal one of his internal organs. Universal morality does not differentiate between property held *inside* the body, and property held *outside* the body.

Theft of property requires restitution to the point where the holder of the property is satisfied, but not overjoyed. The goal is to restore the property, and reasonably compensate the owner for the lost value, but not create a situation of profit.

PUNISHMENTS

In the extraordinarily unlikely situation where a violation of the law has been established, and a punishment has been determined, but the criminal does not submit, punishments are left up to the Dispute Resolution Organization (DRO) that represents the criminal.

In general, DROs will refuse to enforce any and all contracts held by the criminal.

Furthermore, DROs will apply sanctions against any members who trade with the criminal.

The criminal can restore his Contract Rating by performing the actions required by his or her DRO for restitution.

SLANDER / LIBEL

Anyone who lies about the character of another, producing quantifiable material damage, is liable for restitution.

If a restaurant lies about finding repulsive material in the food of a competing restaurant, restitution is required.

Statements of opinion must be clearly marked as such, and cannot reference objective facts.

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY (Copyrights, Trademarks etc.)

Intellectual property is handled differently by different DROs. Most DROs will not enforce intellectual property, but a few do. It is incumbent on those who wish to enforce intellectual property to inform consumers.

PARENTING

Parents are responsible for raising their children to be empathetic, courageous and moral. All DROs require medical Scans of children – from conception onwards – to ensure healthy brain development. All parents of children who show signs of neglect and/or abuse will be instructed in better parenting techniques – if the developmental problems persist, children are removed from parents and placed in the homes of people with a successful track record of raising children well – the costs to be born by the original parents.

CONTRACTS

Generally, if a contract is violated, DROs will perform an investigation, and provide restitution to the wronged party.

The DRO will then retrieve the restitution from the party in the wrong.

TIMELINESS

DROs that take longer than a month to provide judgement will pay the salary-equivalent for all parties involved until the judgement is achieved...

The pamphlet continues, in its earnest undergraduate idiotic tone, as if these words on paper can magically reshape a society full of feral self-interest.

I idly turn to the back, which has a detailed table:

Current Crime Statistics

It is all – quite mad, and I snort again, but more self-consciously this time.

According to this – information, this *fantasy* – there were only 347 murders in the previous year, across a population of over 700 million. 312 of those resulted from brain damage, thirty of them resulted from immigrants – which left only *five actual murderers that had been raised in this society!*

The numbers were even lower for rape. Slightly higher for theft and assault, but – but – crime was almost nonexistent?

My brain races to create explanations, because I am an *expert* at sniffing out corruption.

Of course these DROs have an incentive to understate crime, because – because – they don't have to charge as much, and it costs them to investigate crime – and run around trying to get restitution from criminals, so of course they – guess low.

My mind strives to come up with other explanations – and then that strange voice emerges again.

ANY DRO THAT UNDERREPORTED CRIME WOULD LOSE CUSTOMERS...

I suck in hard on the left side of my mouth, causing a twinge in my gums.

I am genuinely shocked at myself, at my reaction.

I am disgusted at my lack of cynicism.

I rode at the very helm of the largest and most powerful government the world had ever seen. I had trillions of dollars at my fingertips, I ruled a military that could destroy the planet endless times over. I could point at a map and vaporize its colour.

I was the most powerful man in the world – in the universe, as far as we knew.

I was a superhero, I strode oceans at a step, everyone deferred to me, even my haters.

I was the center, I was the black hole, the gravity well, the puller of influence and pusher of gifts...

And now, these – nerds – claim to have solved the problem of crime – and I'm not inhuman, I wanted crime to go down, in my way – I knew that a frightened population was easier to control, but I didn't

want little kids shot in their cribs in turf wars – I have a heart, I wanted power because power is – glorious – but I also wanted to do good, to go to my grave with a better world behind me – not to just – be dug up and spat at because I was a giant freaking idiot.

And I had my advisors, this endless procession of earnest closely-shaved men and laser-lipsticked women, with their slide decks and business cards you felt you had to unfold for all the letters behind their names – and not one of those goddamned empty suits and rustling pantyhose creatures ever said: ‘Oh, Mr. President, it’s simple, we just have to turn parents into – into...’

THE OPPOSITE OF YOU, said the voice.

I feel a shock – and a faint unpleasant sensation that I guess might be fear – and then mad rage swells my biceps.

*Oh, this is a great time for you to make your voice heard – how many centuries too late? You don’t get any points, I will not submit, you have no credibility, because you were silent then, and now want me to bow down before your wisdom **after** the cure has been found!?!*

I cannot not sit in bed. Like a child – DON’T INSULT CHILDREN – **SHUT UP!** – I threw the pamphlet across the room.

I had been in the way – these numbers can’t be real – this is an asylum trying to make me mad – the devil makes up numbers for you to serve – it can’t possibly have been that simple – everything starts with the family...

And then I remember my son, my oldest son, and how I had to threaten him to never tell his mother about the petting zoo – and how he withdrew from me even further, and my aggression did nothing to have him – serve me, or want to be with me – YOU CAN’T HAVE BOTH – **SHUT UP!!** – and then the first time that I really belted him – not with a belt, but I struggled to keep my hand open, I’ll be honest – the little bastard tried to run away...

That night, lost in the murky depths of my brain – he had been roundly yelled at by his mother for sneaking cookies, she was terrified that he might end up fat, how that would look – I understand, we were all obsessively photographed, and you couldn’t hide anything on social media anymore, but she didn’t hit him, I’m pretty sure of that – and then the little weasel tried to make a run for it.

I used to be nervous of night noises, before my security detail – since they ringed me with guns and earpieces, I slept soundly, so I didn’t hear him as he went into the kitchen with a pillowcase, and stole – stole – half a bag of cookies, and then stealthily made his way to the door...

It was an annoying part of middle age – you don’t wake up having to pee, but since you wake up anyway, you end up peeing, just in case. I did wake up, and went to the washroom – shielding my eyes from the automatic lights under the counter – and after I flushed, I saw his bedroom door ajar.

I had a sudden stab of sentimentality, and went to close it, hoping to find some shred of affection at the sight of his tousled head passed out on his pillow; a parent who can't feel sweetness at the sight of a sleeping toddler has something very wrong with him.

But his pillow was on the floor – and it had no pillowcase on it, which I have no idea why I noticed, that's not the sort of thing I would...

And I heard a soft click from downstairs, from the – I didn't know where exactly, the sounds bounce around like a canyon – and I had a sudden stab of panic – I know I said I never felt fear, but this was different, it was panic at the idea of exposure – you can think of it as an excess sense of caution, rather than something pathetic like fear...

He's trying to get away, I thought grimly.

WHY WOULD HE STAY?

SHUT UP WITH BEING TOO LATE!!!

My heart was in my throat, and I bounded down the stairs – remembering that Jake always knew when I entered the room, no matter how quietly I moved.

I raced from room to room, looking for him – until I saw his little body outlined like a dark smudge against the tall white of a side door.

There were a number of locks and latches – and I remembered him at the petting zoo, struggling with the gate – and I could see in a flash that he was almost done, that he was about to escape the – I had an image that we were not in a house, but a spaceship in orbit, and he was about to break out through an airlock, where he would freeze and burst in the airless waste of space...

And I did feel an ache, then, deep in my heart, like when I started playing tennis again after two decades, and had to stop – this little smudge, this tiny being, taking his chances in the wider world rather than – rather than – stay with...

HE IS ESCAPING YOU

I WILL CUT YOUR VOICE OUT!!! I screamed mentally.

And I thought of the number of times I had held him aloft for the cameras, like a lion cub held up by a monkey, and the endless starburst of flashing bulbs, and all the women cooing *how cute he was*, and all the men exclaiming *how big and strong he was going to grow up to be*, and how unhappy he looked in his little tuxedo, and how little he looked like me – and I imagined that he was going to break out of this house – out of our house – into a constellation, a star field of flashing cameras, and headlines would be splashed across the phones and tablets and lingering print of the world: "PRESIDENTIAL RUNAWAY!" – and that could not be managed at *all!* I could coach him to shut up, to keep his counsel – but I couldn't teach him to answer all the questions about why he wanted to run away, where he thought he was going – and I imagined that I could laugh about it, saying he was unhappy he couldn't eat more cookies,

so I packed him a bag to teach him a lesson, but sooner or later his morose face, his gravitational unhappiness, his somber eyes and still cheeks – this would reveal what could not be stated, what could not be allowed to exist, any imperfection in the heart of the First Family.

His mother would beg.

I would not.

True to form, he heard me coming, and turned around, his eyes wide. I felt on my feet the soft sandy crunch of a trail of cookie dust, and saw his cheeks distended with selfish sugar – and I felt an anger that even for me was unprecedented.

I said nothing. I pushed the door, to make sure it was closed – and imagined the guards on the other side, my security detail, and knew I could not pound him there, but I grabbed him with strenuous gentleness, and pulled him up the stairs, feeling his legs tremble as they bounced on the soft steps.

“Say nothing,” I hissed. My mind scrambled to find a way to keep his injuries hidden, and realized that I had to lift him by his shoulders, and pound his head against a door frame – not hard enough to break the skin, but hard enough to daze and terrify him. I was the most successful man in the entire world, and I would be god damned if he would resist my will, everything, every breadcrumb I put on the ground to lead him to a better place, he damn well owed me obedience – or even overt disobedience, rebellion, *something!*

That night, pounding his head against the door frame, was the most strenuous self-control I ever had to master. I honestly wanted to grind him into a pulp – I had stepped, or been pushed, into the Old Testament, where patriarchs smashed the hesitant with stone tablets and flying beards.

And I wanted that old world where puppies could be drowned and children corrected without a silly mob of bored and hyper-sentimental feel-bots screaming out their pathological sympathy for any underdog they cared to invent.

I wanted to hold up his broken pieces as an example to me, to my other children – to my wife, of course! – and to the world, that if you don’t have the power to do *this*, what’s the point of having power at all?

Jake went limp in my hands, and seemed to become even heavier – I had to bite my cheeks, break blood, in order to slow and stop my pounding arms.

I pulled him close to me – still feeling rage and hatred – and caressed the back of his head – I suppose he felt it was affectionate, in his daze – but I was just checking for blood, for broken skin and bubbling brains.

He did not cry.

I’ll give him that.

And the night secrets that bind father and son together – parent and child – wound around us like the embrace of a witch. He now knew that he could drive me to desperation, and I knew – what did I know?

I knew he hated me.

I licked the inside of my broken and bloody cheeks, and also circled certain knowledge of my son's hatred for me in my mind.

Good, good...

I knew I had one son who was blind enough to love me – having one who was awake enough to hate me was no great problem – in fact, haters defined my political career entirely. Everyone who votes for you is matched by someone who hates you – the whole point is to set them against each other.

I ended up with two children who liked me, and one child who knew me – knew me completely – and hated my guts.

But he never tried to run away again.

He was never indifferent again.

He grew to hate – as the object of his hatred, I had value to him forever.

Chapter 38

I did not sleep very well – usually a sign that someone was screwing with my self-interest – so I was a little bleary-eyed when Cornelius came in the next morning.

“You want to get some breakfast out?”

I blinked. “I think so – I'm not actually sure if I can roam around without an – escort, from the – authorities, or whatever.”

Cornelius smiled. “Well, you don't have a contract presence here, so you couldn't really get anything done. You don't have a way of paying for anything, you don't actually have the right to use other people's private property – and of course everything here is private property, sidewalks, roads, you name it.”

“Wait, what? There's no – public spaces at all?”

“There is no public. No government, of course – it's a hell of a mindset to change over to, but for almost all of human history, we had slaves, but you were able to survive in a society without slavery, right? It's just another progression.”

“So – how do I – get around?”

“You’re my guest. Like a tourist. On my contracts.”

I smiled suddenly. “So you are – responsible for what I do? Liable?”

Cornelius nodded. “But you won’t do anything stupid. You have a big trial coming up.”

My elevated mood deflated. “I still don’t know what the hell – what that means, really. And I don’t even know what I’m to be – charged with. I keep thinking about the Nuremberg trials, but I didn’t run any damn genocides or invade half the world or...”

“You’re thinking of medical experimentation...”

I shrugged tightly. “It was a pandemic.”

He paused, then also shrugged. “The truth is, I don’t know what you’re going to be charged with.”

“Then obviously I might not be charged at all...”

Cornelius pursed his lips and cocked his head. “I wouldn’t hold out for that. I don’t know exactly what their thinking is, but they will communicate with me when they are ready. Anyway, I get grumpy if I end up more than ninety minutes between eating, so let’s get moving.”

Cornelius signed my day pass at the front reception, and we walked out through the entrance – and it was strange to me, to look out the front of a building, and not see any roads or driveways or parking spaces or cars. Everything seemed – incomplete. I guess roads always get built before the buildings. It was like leaving some drug lord’s helicopter hideout deep in the jungle.

“Must look a lot different,” said Cornelius. “I can’t imagine.”

“I’m torn between demanding that you explain everything, and trying to figure it out for myself.”

“These are good problems to have, relative to dying 500 years ago.”

I was about to nod, but had a deep chill of foreboding – a sense that he might not be right at *all*...

Cornelius said: “I’ve called a cab, it will take a few minutes.”

“Give me the – orbital view, that’s what my Secretary of Defense used to say.”

“All right,” said Cornelius. “We have some – not exactly cities, but downtown areas, where people like to live close to each other, and the action – dancing, dating, that sort of ‘young person stuff.’ Businesses are largely decentralized, people work virtually, although that changes, it seems, every couple of years – some genius comes along with the idea that working face-to-face is the way to go, so everyone bunches together – then someone else is inspired by decentralization, so people scatter again – it’s like this weird economic heartbeat, people just can’t make up their minds I suppose – or we love variety, and that kind of explains it. Right now, we are in a decentralized phase – at least for work. People can get pretty much whatever they want to eat at home, but most people like to congregate socially, so restaurants are still

very popular. People just love conversation – they compete for experiences, insights, mmm - storytelling. The ‘extreme sports’ people get a lot of attention – some people like to go rough, primitive, without communications or backup. I guess that’s another kind of heartbeat of the species – we are so sophisticated, so technological, that there is always this ‘back to the land’ dirty-fingernails nature cult naturalist movement. But their kids always seem to get itchy, and come right back. Lots of experimentation, you can find just about anything here – there are even people who try to do the communist thing, live in common, share everything, raise kids in a collective – but they are mostly ejected from the contract system, because – well, there’s a reason why the Cataclysms also start with a ‘C.’”

I could tell that he was dropping a hint, seeing if I wanted to know more, but I most fervently did not. If I were given the choice between knowing about these Cataclysms, and going back to sleep – or even being thrown off a cliff – I would refuse the knowledge.

As the white floating taxi came towards us, Cornelius said: “It’s a great life, make no mistake.” He took a deep breath and exhaled. “Mankind – well, we never really knew what it was like to live in a sustainable system – there was always some looming disaster – environmental, nuclear - war as a whole - debt, unfunded liabilities, demographic disasters – I don’t know how people did it, living on the knife-edge their entire lives, not knowing how their children could live – or even if they would. Charging from place to place around the world, escaping injustice and tyranny, begging for a few years of transitory and fading liberties – it was a burning zoo, animals were trapped, went mad, ate each other, their own offspring...”

I prayed that Cornelius was simply speaking allegorically. “I don’t want to know about the Cataclysms.”

He sighed. “Don’t blame you. But you might have to learn, depending on the charges.”

The broad white taxi settled just above the ground, and I climbed into the wide seating that looked like a white-washed set of pews from a new church.

“Quite religious,” I said.

“We have a more religious society than you ever did,” said Cornelius. I was curious, but he declined to elaborate, and I would not lower myself to ask.

Cornelius spoke a name – a destination I suppose – and the sky-taxi rose from the ground with an eerie and unsettling absence of sound and wind. I realized with a start that all my movement – in my past life – was loud in a way. Cars, trains, airplanes in particular – even boats, with the slop of the waves and the thrum of the engine. The footsteps of my walking, the slight sound of wind in my ear – but this mode of transport was perfectly silent. I was moving – and very fast as well – but everything was as quiet as if I were sitting in my cottage on a perfectly still day.

Again, I declined to comment. I always hated looking like a tourist. Whenever I would visit some new location, I would demand that my staff school me on a variety of local details.

“The restaurant is a long way away,” said Cornelius, trying to settle his bulk on a pew.

“Because we need secrecy,” I said.

Cornelius tapped his forefinger to his temple. “Smart man.”

I gestured at the flying pews. “So you’re saying – this actually goes a lot faster?”

He smiled and nodded.

“What about your – electronic devices?” I asked.

Cornelius laughed. “Sorry, not funny, but there’s no manufacturer that would survive five minutes if they snooped, we are totally safe that way. So...”

“This must be pretty damn serious.”

“I don’t – I’m good with words, but I genuinely don’t know how to ask.”

I stared at him, refusing to prompt him.

Cornelius said: “What could they charge you with?”

I laughed openly, contemptuously. “How the hell am I supposed to know?”

“Come on, I’m sure you read the pamphlet.”

“So?” My jaw tightened. “This is all just a – show trial. Scapegoating 101. You need to justify your world, so you attack mine – even though my world was the foundation for yours.” I stood up, feeling slightly nauseous from the silent sliding of scenery going past. “This is all total bull. A society that looks backward always crashes! Why are you so obsessed with – my decisions, in my world, with my standards, my laws, from 500 years ago? You brought me back to life, thank you – I suppose – but for what? To parade me around as a – a totem, a voodoo doll of past sins? You think I’m a slave owner, an evil man – then why resurrect me? Jesus died for your sins, I guess you brought me back to life so that I could be killed for mine. And I prayed, back in the day, I don’t know what you mean when you say that your society is more religious, but I did pray, on my knees, every night – mornings sometimes too – and the guidance I got – it seemed that I was on the right path, that I was – using my power for good, because sure as sunrise all the other assholes who were trying to grab the ring would’ve done terrible things to the world – I know you talk about these Cataclysms, and their relationship to – my son – but it’s not me, go and dig him up and run your magic electricity through his – heart, and throw him on the funeral pyre of your hatred, I don’t – I genuinely don’t care at this point. You seem like a good guy, don’t get me wrong, I’m glad to be here, though I hate the message – but what the hell am I supposed to do? I led a free nation, I didn’t shoot or jail my political opponents, we had free speech, gun ownership, private property, a relatively functional court system – what the hell would you do if you had resurrected some tinpot nose-ring dictator from Africa? For some reason I feel safe from being called a ‘racist’ right now... But I was the most benevolent leader of the freest country in the world, and you’re

going to just – throw me in some public cage and lash me with whips invented long after my death? This is beyond ridiculous! I'm not gonna say that I really thought about what it was going to be like to wake up – I was just – trying to twist and turn from the grim reaper in those final - weeks, get everything sorted out before he got me, things were pretty chaotic. And I guess I thought I would wake up in some Star Trek universe and give lectures about the past and be..." My voice caught, which I hated, because it betrayed self-pity. "...respected, valued – I mean, if George Washington had been shocked back to life, he would have been a miracle-man. Yeah, the crazies would've nagged him about slavery, but – he would've headlined every political conference from here to eternity..."

It's not fair!

I clamped down before the cowardly words escaped my throat.

Cornelius looked at me placidly.

"I don't want to interrupt," he said.

I tried to laugh. "I'm lost in time, standing sick on a floating church, confessing my sins to a – priest of the new world. If you don't interrupt, I'll speak until the goddamned sun goes dark!"

He paused delicately. "I find that when I am over-packed with words, bleeding them off helps."

I paced back and forth. The floor was as solid as granite. "What did I do wrong? By what standard? Render unto Caesar... Did I bear false witness? Yes. Jesus is perfect, I am mortal. Did I – kill?" I paused.

"You started a war."

"I gave the word, but the word was not mine." I paused – security was so ingrained within me that it felt impossible to go on. "You don't have clearance," I said finally.

"I don't want to remind you of Nuremberg, but when the government falls, so does its security. After slavery, slave contracts are invalid."

"I'm a Nazi *and* a slave owner!" I said with giddy despair. "I assume I can't just – jump off this damn thing."

Cornelius paused. "My wife is a psychologist; she would be better at this – but I am making these comparisons so that you understand the – magnitude of the moral changes. Think of how much became unacceptable in your own lifetime – how much the ethics changed. And what became acceptable. We are talking 500 *years*."

"Then how the hell can you judge me?"

"We do not judge you, that is the essence of the law."

I sat down heavily and put my head in my hands. "Please God, stop beating around the bush and tell me plain."

“We do not judge you,” said Cornelius evenly. “You judge yourself.”

“If you think you are making anything clear, you are fired.”

Cornelius stood over me and placed his hand gently on my shoulder. “We do not judge a man by any standard other than his own. The defense of insanity results from a man violating none of his own standards, because he has lost his mind. You presided over the judgements of history, in your country. Statues were torn down, past men – and women – castigated, cursed and condemned. You went back centuries, dug up reputations and eviscerated them in the public square. If you had been able to resurrect George Washington, as you say, he would have been chased through the streets with pitchforks. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin – all the Founding Fathers – were all judged by contemporary standards, and found to be evil. You presided over a culture that applied its current moral standards to people dead for centuries. You never opposed that!”

“Am I to be judged by the general culture? The tenor of your times strikes me as highly individualistic – what is all this collectivist judgement?”

“You made speeches in favour of this – reckoning, you called it. You opposed those who wanted to protect the historical statues – you lied about them, calling them ‘racists.’ You spoke favourably of restitutions for slavery...”

I laughed harshly. “You want to know the truth?” I pointed at his chest. “You don’t have these – jackals – running around in your society smashing up everyone who disagrees with them, the lunatics with barrels of ink and the biggest megaphones on the planet. I had to get elected – that was my job, and we’re only alive because this stupid floating pew-box is doing *its* job – and yes, there were things that you had to say in order to get elected, I guess in this Ken and Barbie perfect world you don’t have to make those kinds of compromises, but I did!” I jumped up, waving my hands in exasperation. “Someone is going to be in charge – yes, it was me, and I made – moral compromises to get there, if you like – but you are judging me while living on this – surreal floating cruise ship – while *I’m* trying to survive a storm in a schooner, having to throw things overboard – and you just call me wasteful and incompetent. Let’s try a little experiment, in our minds. Imagine you come back with me, reverse-time, 500 years – no, more, when I was campaigning – and you tell me what I should do. Are you going to tell me to tell the truth about everything? What does that even mean? And we had some of those people – God help them, they burrowed up to the stratosphere on social media – yeah, they told the truth. We told them to have honest conversations about controversial issues, and they took the bait and tried to, and they got nuked from the social landscape. They brought up the – science of sex differences, and got destroyed. Imagine trying to talk about the national debt – and the need to pay it off – in a debate! The topic was never even raised, it would be – unthinkable! You would just tell me to – what, speak the truth, get hounded out of public life, let the liars take over! Bring me to your world, I look – wrong, incompetent, immoral I suppose. But if you were to come to my world, you would be – ineffectual, ridiculous – suicidal.”

Cornelius said: “The war.”

My nausea grew. “Everybody looks at the President like he bestrides the world, a colossus. But I’m just a guy with people whispering in my ear. Everyone votes for me, but they’re not voting for *me* – they’re voting for my advisors – and yes, I can see it, you say I am responsible for choosing my advisors – but I’m not a God, I’m not omniscient – how the hell am I supposed to choose the right advisors? My science advisor – I’m not a scientist! I’m not an economist, not a doctor, not a – military man. I frankly had no idea – half the time – what the hell people were talking about, and by God you better never tell anyone this! I nodded a lot, and pretended to take notes – just doodles really, sometimes. ‘Oh, Mr. President, we need you in the situation room, Defcon three, sit-rep post-haste!’ And the military men say ‘fight,’ and the diplomats say ‘talk,’ and the economists say ‘spend,’ and the academics say, ‘fund’ – and no one, no man alive, no soul with a voice – can ever say what a *farce* it is! I was told there had been a chemical attack – what the hell was I supposed to do, go out with my Grade 9 science kit and scan the soil? ‘Oh, Mr. President, there are weapons of mass destruction, the leftist guerrillas are about to take over, the terrorists are at the wedding, he’s about to invade Kuwait, the Russians fired on the destroyer!’ And you nod, because everyone needs a – figurehead – to justify their own crap, their own greed, their own...” I covered my face with my hands, breathing deeply.

“It is not that you invaded a country,” said Cornelius gently. “That can be survived. The question is: did you accept that standard for other countries? Could other countries claim a chemical attack, and use it as a justification to invade? If not – if you opposed that – then you will be found guilty, by your own standards.”

“Where the hell am I?” I whispered.

Cornelius’s eyes were gentle and sad. “In the clouds, after your resurrection, in a pew, being judged I’m afraid.”

“I truly do not understand what is happening – it’s this strange brain magic voodoo you’ve got going on, I was subject to the law I imposed – I paid my taxes and did not speed and never strangled a hobo, why are you trying to trip me up with words? Is the afterlife a strange sadistic web of words, a maze that leads nowhere except to self-abuse?”

I truly hated those last two words, and scrambled for something else to say, to bury them, to cover them up, but nothing came into my mind. I closed my eyes, but the flowing clouds still blew past.

“The history of morality is both very complex, and very simple,” said Cornelius. “Simply put, morality was invented by the rulers to control the masses. If everyone is a thief, there is nothing to steal. The best thieves convince other people that stealing is wrong – not because the thief believes that stealing is wrong, of course, but because he wants to reduce his competition.”

“I never stole a thing in my life! And don’t get me started on elections, none of that was ever proven in a court of law.”

“Well, the courts in your day refused to hear the evidence, so I’m not sure how much that means – but I’m not here to litigate centuries-old elections, but rather to explain to you the moral standard that you will be judged by.”

I stood tall. “I am happy to be examined.”

Cornelius smiled, and I could see the thought scrolling across his eyes – *Everyone says that, at the beginning...*

“Is morality universal?”

I shrugged. “That depends how you define it. Obviously not, if it’s cultural beliefs.”

“But there are many cultural beliefs that have nothing to do with morality – dance and music, for instance. Are you a religious man?”

I nodded. “Even more so now that I am floating through the clouds talking about ethics.”

Cornelius smiled. “Charismatic...” Again, I felt I could read his thoughts – his unspoken words – *to the end...* “Jesus expanded tribal morality to universality – his rules applied to Christians and non-Christians alike. You are a Christian?”

“I am, although flawed of course.”

“*Thou shalt not steal* is a universal commandment. Also with murder. These are not mere – cultural beliefs, correct?”

I nodded. I was actually strangely enjoying this.

“Are rulers exempt from universal morality?”

I hesitated, feeling a wobble in the sure footing below me. “No.”

“But you were.”

“How so? Presidents have often been held to account.”

Cornelius paused delicately. “You understand that I am simply explaining the legal and moral framework you will be subjected to. These are not all necessarily my own opinions or arguments.”

“Devil’s advocate, of course.”

“One moment,” said Cornelius, as the sky-pews dipped – I could only tell from the surrounding scenery, since there was no sense of actual motion. A low brown building – constructed entirely of wood – rested impossibly on the very tips of the top branches of a giant tree.

“This place is great,” said Cornelius, stepping to the railing. “If you have to be resurrected for judgement day, at least you get a fantastic meal.”

“Not a last one, I hope,” I muttered.

We stepped off the taxi, onto a spiderweb of tiny twigs, a path leading to the entrance. Swallowing, I stepped forward – I knew I would not fall, but my senses screamed otherwise.

An old woman with high cheekbones and white hair greeted us.

“Cornelius!” she exclaimed warmly, before casting a curious glance at me. Her eyes chilled, and she nodded perfunctorily. “Mr. President,” she said.

Cornelius said: “This is Mavis, she used to be an engineer, she has retired, and graced the world with this place.”

Mavis smiled. “Running a restaurant is more work than engineering, so I wouldn’t exactly say that I have ‘retired.’”

Cornelius nodded energetically. “I stand corrected.”

She touched his cheek in a strangely intimate gesture. “You would say anything to get a meal.”

“I continue to stand corrected.”

“Well, come in,” said Mavis, leading us into the restaurant – the spiderweb of twigs continued, and the chairs and tables all seemed to have been grown from the tops of the branches of the tree below – it felt strangely like being a baby tree in the wood-veined womb of its mother.

“She uses human servers, I thought it would be more – recognizable to you.”

Mavis shook her head. “Not anymore, my daughter got married, my son got lost in VR. We are back to machines, I’m afraid.”

“Can you set them to human?”

“Of course.”

Mavis disappeared behind a thick hedge to our right. Cornelius and I sat on tree stumps on either end of a giant flat mottled grey mushroom.

“You won’t believe this,” said Cornelius.

Dazed, I once again wondered if I had gone mad, and all of this was my brain dying in mortal ecstasy.

“I’m not sure I believe – any of it.”

“Understandable.”

A young woman – who faintly reminded me of the bored attendant at the petting zoo - walked up to our mushroom table. She opened a silver case, and inside were two small pieces of paper.

“Please tell me this isn’t lunch,” I said. “Where’s the menu?”

“You are the menu,” replied Cornelius with a smile. He picked up one of the pieces of paper and touched it to his tongue. It chirped happily.

I did the same – there was a slight contraction on my tongue, and I suddenly remembered shrimp chips from a local Thai restaurant gripping my tongue, buried under centuries.

The woman said: “This analyzes your tongue, figures out which flavours would most please you, and that’s what we make!”

I snorted, putting the paper back in the silver box. “So – I just get perfectly-flavoured goo?”

The waitress cocked her head. “No – texture is an essential part of culinary enjoyment.” She glanced at the paper. “Shrimp chips to start.”

I blinked, then stared at Cornelius accusingly. “I thought you said I had privacy, are they reading my mind?”

“Oh no – it measures saliva, and you probably thought of shrimp chips – it’s all very specific, all very technical, but who cares? It’s divine!”

“Heavenly...” I muttered bitterly. “If this place is so – such paradise – why are we alone?”

“For privacy,” said Cornelius simply. “Hundreds of millions of people are rabidly curious to see you, I reserved the place.”

I laughed. “It’s still strange being in places without security, without the Secret Service.”

Cornelius nodded, saying nothing.

The belly of the waitress started to make a slight grinding sound, but Cornelius held up his hand.

“No, no - full human please.”

The grinding stopped, and she walked back behind the giant hedge.

A cloud of brightly-coloured birds suddenly blew up and sat in the maze of twigs overhead. They chirped with gentle musicality.

“When my daughter was young,” I said, staring around, “she would go on and on about the kind of restaurant she would – make, when she grew up. It had jungles and – playgrounds – and I remember that she would tell me all about the birds that would be in the restaurant – and I told her that she couldn’t have birds there, because they would just – poop all over the customers, and the food.”

He stared at me. “You’re wondering if these are real?”

I nodded slowly. "I think I'm having trouble knowing what the word means. What was that sound coming from the waitress?"

Cornelius smiled. "Oh, she can make the food in her belly, and it comes out on tiny jet packs – if you order spaghetti, it can spell out your name, kids love it – but I asked her to go 'full human,' which means that she pretends that the food is being prepared in the kitchen, and comes out with it on plates."

I scowled. "Oh my actual God, this is all so decadent!"

I was still continually disoriented by everyone's complete lack of offense. I was an expert at milking and mining human volatility, but no one here was volatile – I felt like an amateur troll on an advanced self-knowledge forum.

Cornelius said nothing.

I glanced up at the bright birds, preening and chirping and occasionally pecking each other. They had pooped, but some invisible shield kept it from falling.

I said: "This is the restaurant my daughter dreamed of, and I'm getting shrimp chips. Is this a simulation?"

Cornelius said: "Would that make me Morpheus?"

I remember my eldest son – the drip – demanding that I watch some movie about a bad actor who wakes up in some kind of simulated reality. I only remembered it because he almost never demanded anything. I think I fell asleep.

"It's not a simulation," said Cornelius. "We all have so much in common, what your daughter dreamed of is not unusual. The real simulation came from your world, from the media and what you called education – the fantasy that we were all so different, so opposed, that we must fight like dogs for the amusement of – whoever."

The waitress brought our food on wide steaming china plates. She looked apologetically at Cornelius.

"I can't go completely old-fashioned, we still needed the dividers."

I looked at my food – it was a mix of Indian and Mexican, with some spinach and cheese cubes and peas. Each flavour was divided by a tiny invisible space, as if a knife had slashed between them, and the gap had been frozen in time.

"I'm so sorry, do you want some wine?" asked Cornelius.

I paused.

Cornelius said: "I apologize, I don't drink, but you should feel free to if you want."

"You're just trying to take advantage of me," I replied.

Cornelius laughed. “Just water then.”

Using a golden fork, I took a bite from the spinach.

Oh

My

God!

It was like my tongue had come alive in all dimensions, with all flavours. Anticipating my reaction, Cornelius handed me a napkin, which I used to wipe the excess of saliva that greeted the incredible tastes.

“Don’t talk, just eat,” he said, as if I had any practical choice in the moment.

After the meal – which, needless to say, left me perfectly satisfied – Cornelius crossed his heavy legs.

“Normally, we’d go for a sunset sky-walk, but you’ve had quite a lot of – sensations today, and you should probably just sit.”

I nodded.

Cornelius said: “How is your sanity?” He tapped his temple. “Are you doing all right?”

I suddenly felt a sting of tears, deep in my brain. I took a harsh breath, willing them away. The desert sun of my dry self-regard burned them away immediately.

“Well, Professor, I’m well enough to return to our undergraduate philosophy 101 course, since I am apparently to be judged by academics who never held political power.”

I could see that he was about to correct me – something about being judged by myself – but restrained himself.

Eventually, he said: “You were not subject to the laws of your time.”

I snorted. “Why not?”

“Because you could create laws – effectively, through executive orders, or through Congress – which citizens of course were unable to do.”

“Citizens created laws by voting in politicians. I’m sure you’re aware of this, so I’m equally sure you have an answer.”

“Could citizens impose taxes? Could citizens start wars, draft soldiers, create currency, fix interest rates, sign intergenerational contracts, manage trade, force children to learn their own particular – ideology?”

“Yes,” I said evenly. “My God, how much knowledge was lost during the – disasters? Citizens could do all of these things, through their elected representatives.”

Cornelius nodded slowly.

I continued: “And it’s the same here. You have these – what, DROs, that act on behalf of their customers. You don’t have duels, you don’t have pistols at dawn, everyone calls up their representatives, who act on their behalf and resolve their disputes. It was the same with us, not much has changed, except I can now dine in my dead daughter’s dream.”

Again, Cornelius said nothing. I felt the usual impulse to jump up and pace – an old habit that gave me a height advantage – but I knew I would be too distracted by the uncertain spiderwebs of the floor twigs, and the plunging green canopy below.

“And maybe everyone here has become perfect, maybe you are all angels who never cross each other, but I had to work with very different – clay. I inherited – a mess, let’s be frank, it’s all behind us now. We couldn’t possibly pay our bills, we had like \$200 trillion in unfunded liabilities, we had four generations of poor people who had never known work, we had all these lunatics in the educational system who wanted to inflict creepy sex education on toddlers, but had no idea how a bill became a law! Broken people were flowing off the conveyor belt of a mad history faster than we could fix them, faster than we could even catch them. Everyone begged for instant solutions, looked to me to solve everything, they were like...” I gestured at the startled birds above me. “They were like baby birds, mouths always agape, screaming and cheeping for more and more and more! All we could do was aim them at the rich, pound the table and yell about ‘unfairness.’ They weren’t open to reason, they didn’t want the truth – they had been inoculated against it, they reacted to facts like a lion had been loosed in a nursery! They were children, they never wanted to grow up, they never wanted any limitations – and they never, *never* could be called on to sacrifice – anything, for anyone! My God, in the past men would volunteer to bleed to death in a jungle, but in my day you couldn’t get anyone to give up anything for any reason! You think I was in *charge*?” My voice was rising, despite myself. “We were all just being chased around by the headless!”

I was panting. I had so many words – so many more words – but I had to bite them back. My old habits stalled my tongue.

Cornelius nodded slowly. “You claim to be a victim.”

I sighed, my breath trembling. “No, of course not. But – try being a doctor in a world where everyone believes that bad thoughts cause disease. Or – try being a doctor in a time of plague where everyone believes that the cure is causing the illness. You’re coming at them with a pill that will make them well, they react like you are leaping at them with a knife!”

Cornelius waved his hand. “All of this is a narrative, which is impossible to verify.”

“What the hell do you mean? This is my experience!”

He shrugged. “How do I know? Everyone who is part of an immoral regime claims the best possible intentions, blames the environment, argues that they were – doing the best they could, that someone *else* would’ve been even worse. It’s very predictable, I’m afraid to say. Your individuality does not lie in your defenses. Noone’s does.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“You are aware of the crime of counterfeiting,” said Cornelius suddenly.

“Of course.”

“Define it.”

“I’m not a – you mean then, or now?”

His eyes had grown cold. “Don’t play dumb. Of course I’m not asking you to define counterfeiting in the present, you only got a damn pamphlet!”

I decided to remain silent about his ill temper, like it was beneath my notice. “Counterfeiting is when you – create money... Oh, this is some Federal Reserve thing. That was a private corporation, not the government.”

“Who gave them a monopoly?”

I let my temper slip slightly. “As I have told you,” I said with exaggerated patience, “the voters did.”

“Stop lying to me.”

“Is it too late to change lawyers?”

“You won’t get away with this stuff here, I’m not one of your media lapdogs! You have a fine mind, try using it for clarity.”

“You ask me questions, I answer them – I thought this was some big magical anti-abuse paradise!”

“Your government had the power to create money out of thin air, by typing whatever it wanted into its own bank accounts. You then handed out this valuable new money to your friends, your allies, those in the top tiers of the financial industry – and then, by the time it trickled down to the poor, it was worth much less. If anyone not in the government had tried such a scheme, they would’ve gone to jail for fraud. No, I’m not finished! You took massive chunks of people’s incomes, promising to pay it back in old age pensions – and then immediately spent all the money, putting empty IOUs in the vault, and taxing the next generation to pay for the retirements of the wealthiest generation the world had ever seen to date! You paid women to have children out of wedlock – knowing that those women would invite strange men into their houses, into their beds, who would abuse the children. You attacked truth-tellers, slandered your enemies – usually the friends of truth – and you dropped over hundred thousand bombs

in foreign countries – and started a war on false pretenses that killed over half a million people, and led to the genetic destruction of entire regions, through your depleted uranium weapons. You doubled the national debt, presided over a collapse in school standards and educational achievements, and milked a pandemic for mad power! And you say – wait – you say that you were a victim of the mindless masses, that you did the best you could with the knowledge you had, that someone else would’ve been even worse – and that the people *chose* this. Your government indoctrinated the children for twelve straight years, bribed half the population into abject dependence, presided over the collapse of the nuclear family – only granted interviews to friendly – subservient – media outlets – and you raised a son who started the end of the world as we knew it!”

My heart was pounding. I showed nothing.

Cornelius took a deep drink of clear water. His voice returned to normal. “Now those are some pretty bad accusations, probably the tip of the iceberg, but you’re going to need a little bit more than a victim narrative to overcome them. Your administration prosecuted counterfeiters, your administration prosecuted those running Ponzi schemes – yet your power relied on the money-printing of the Federal Reserve. Social Security – your retirement benefits – was an insult to Ponzi schemes, because at least Ponzi schemes are voluntary, while yours was enforced on hundreds of millions of people!”

I stared at him. I said nothing, felt nothing, showed nothing.

I exhaled slowly. “You – they – have nothing.”

Cornelius pursed his lips in surprise. “Do tell.”

“Let us say that I *personally* propagandized hundreds of millions of children, that I have that magical power – well, *I* was raised in the same system, I was told the same – lies, as you call them – I was infused with the same moral hypocrisy, as you say. If the voters are not responsible because they were in the system, they were raised by the system, they were lied to by the system – well you cannot extract *me* from the system, as if I were above it, or outside – I was as much a part of the system, and raised by the system, as everyone else! You might have a whole bunch of new words here – I’m sure you do, it would be impossible to be otherwise – but I can’t be blamed for not knowing these words, because they didn’t exist in my time, in the past.” I spread my palms wide. “It took – 500 years to arrive at the modern world, this world of deeper moral understanding! It took these unimaginable sufferings, these Cataclysms, for mankind to learn – better.” I leaned forward, lowering my voice. “Are you seriously going to sit there and castigate me, blame me, for failing to compress the deaths of billions and the suffering of half a millennia into my own harried and overworked lifespan? A few hundred years back from my day, doctors didn’t even know that human blood circulated around the body – would you throw a medieval physician in jail for failing to prescribe antibiotics?” My voice lowered to a whisper. “And, let us say, a few hundred years in the future, some moral – principles – you hold sacred and universal turn out to be – false. Let us say that these robots that – birth food from their bellies and keep you all alive – that they turn out to have free will and morality, and you are not wise, peaceful and gentle souls who preside over mere machines, but slaveowners whipping metal boxes with soft code? Will you smoke your cigarettes and go to the firing squads with the acceptance of justice in your hearts?”

Or will you ask for reasonable accommodation for the simple basic fact that you do not know what you do not know?”

Cornelius was leaning forward, his eyes wide. There was a frozen, timeless moment – and then he leaned his head back and laughed uproariously.

“Oh my heavens, you are fantastic!” he gasped. “Such language, such passion, such conviction! I have half a millennia’s worth of inoculation against this virus, but it is so powerful! This is why we cannot have governments, because you climb up the statues and change the world with words! But it’s all nonsense, what you say, though – maybe you believe it, I don’t know, doesn’t matter. You prosecuted people for doing what you did.” He raised his hand. “My turn now. Morality is not open to a vote, any more than physics is. Two rapists and a woman alone in the woods can hold a vote on rape, but the majority victory doesn’t make rape moral. You knew that counterfeiting was wrong, you knew that Ponzi schemes were wrong – and you would *never* have accepted the validity of another country’s invasion because they claimed some chemical attack on American soil! You did what you defined as evil – and yes, I get that there was a massive – structure, and edifice of justifications and lies and obfuscations – but that is exactly what we would expect from such an empire, from those who ruled it. You knew the history of slavery, and all the justifications for it, which all flew in the face of *all men are created equal*. Complication is a sure sign of a bad conscience. No private citizen could create a contract on behalf of another, but you could borrow endlessly against the hard work of the next generation!” His smile faded, but remained slightly. “Now I don’t know what they are going to charge you with, we will find out in a day or two – but we are going to have to work like hell on better responses, because ‘muh democracy’ and ‘muh victimhood’ are not gonna cut it, not even slightly.”

I nodded. “I have the right to confront my accusers.”

“That is certainly the case. That may be a limitation, everyone is dead as far as I know. But your primary accuser is your own actions.”

“I assume I cannot be compelled to testify against myself.”

“Your deeds will be the primary witnesses for the prosecution.”

I paused. “And my – the propaganda I was subjected to, what is the – exculpatory nature of that?”

“Was it enough at Nuremberg?”

The tree trembled in the wind, and the birds shot into the sky.

Chapter 39

I demanded to be moved from my hospital room, but Cornelius said we might as well wait, I would be either free or – punished – within ten days.

Ten days to judge a million crimes, a million years – a million defenses.

And if I were found not guilty, what – what would I do? Would I be accepted? Would I be praised? Would I be – revered? Would I be a hero to the low or an inspiration to the average?

I have a mind that races in the face of a problem. It is like a circling rat, chewing through ropes or chains – it doesn't rest until it breaks into the clear, frees me. I sometimes feel that I am merely along for the ride in my own mind – fingers larger than the world push me here and there, shield me from rain and flick back the lightning. Destiny is just humility in the face of forces larger than yourself, and I sometimes feel like the finger-puppet of the universe, pointing at a future, drawing mankind in a mad rush to...

I smile inwardly. If something guides me, it never lets me know the destination. I pay along the way, that's all.

I don't feel much anxiety about a judgement, or a trial, or the consequences. This is a soft universe of tender-hearted children, shielded from the claws of nature by soft blankets and fuzzy bears. They have turned the world into a womb, an amniotic sac of absent beasts. I don't begrudge them that, I suppose – we sharpen our claws for wet work, and they face a desert. I don't have much to fear from them, I think.

And I wonder – I read a short story when I was in my teens, a refutation of the cliché that 'in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.' The blind could hear everything, the one-eyed man had no chance.

This world woke a predator in me. I'm not sure how wise that was, not to let sleeping jackals lie. Morality is weakness, I think they have *that* right – they claimed to have bulked it up, but it's just gym-strength, not street-fighting might.

I am still getting the lay of the land, that much I know – I haven't yet matched wits and will with anyone here – there's no point showing your full strength until the boss battle.

Other than Cornelius's strange anger, I haven't seen anything here that would even give me pause. I have actually giggled in my mind, imagining the prosecution to come – how different it would be from my day, when we pointed cold-eyed ideologues at our enemies, shot them into prison and...

The abusers of children, the eugenicists, the 90%-reduction hyper-environmentalists, the Socialists and Communists, the gigglers and pointers at the body politic, the leather-bound Puritans and Bible-thumping fetishists – the whole grand crew of ghouls – how we *begged* to be discovered, how we yearned for our dark artistry to be unveiled, but how easy it was to evaporate those who closed in on the circles of power... "Conspiracy theory," what a grand phrase! Who could have *imagined* that people who loved power and control might *ever* collude with each other to gain and keep it?

No, they believed the slogans, we just had to say that someone or something "threatened democracy" and off they would scamper, baying and sharpening and hunting...

I did sometimes miss the old days, when we had to actually lift a finger, not just use the magic spells of programmed clichés and child-free hysteria.

*Maybe I was sent here to toughen them up – maybe it is **they** who need to be awakened...*

I waited for the strange voice, but it was silent. I wanted to goad it into speech, but felt so tired – so tired, and so full of strange new hope for the future.

If I am from the dueling past, and it is to be swords at dawn, who can beat me?

Also:

And what could their punishments be, these deeply silly people?

I would miss the food – that tree restaurant was incredible, I can still taste that meal, and it makes me wonder what the hell my wife had been serving me all those years...

I remember one of my advisors – after we launched the war – he was asked by a reporter how he was handling it, and he said: “Oh, I’m sleeping like a baby – I wake up every two hours screaming.”

It was funny because it was so untrue – it was a story to relate to the sheep, so they could imagine taking center stage in our play called ‘Conscience.’ We invaded for false pretenses – welcome to war, that’s the whole story. We get too many people, too many dummies, too many bills to pay, too many dependents, we have to bleed them off. I visited a farm, when I was fifteen, in South Africa, where we had to cull the deer because all the natural predators had been chased off by agriculture.

“If you don’t shoot the deer,” the farmer said, “they’ll just eat all the crops, and starve to death, which is much more cruel than being killed in an instant.”

We had lots of natural predators, in the past – illness, starvation, accidents, infection – but all that had been chased away by modernity – this world seems to have killed them completely, a mass murder of natural limits.

The great wars arose from the great peace – peace and plenty swell the population, everyone wants something for free – and genuinely believe those who make such mad promises – but the devil always gets paid. Everything you take that you have not earned will be paid for – the amazing thing about my generation was that we had inherited so much wealth that we could actually shift the burden to the next generation – which we promptly did!

I charge for what people demand – they want free things they *know* I take from others, and they genuinely seem to believe that there will never be a price – that’s the wild effect of the fall of religion. No one believes they have a soul anymore, so no one knows how much will be paid for greed.

I never take anything that is not willingly offered. Everyone knows there is no such thing as a free lunch – beg to have something for nothing, you become nothing.

I don’t empty people out, I just collect the bill.

I have no fear of this modern world.

They seem to know nothing of me.

They have forgotten I exist.

And so I will rule.

I fall asleep with a half-smile on my face – as has been my habit for many decades – now, many centuries – so that my dreams will be more pleasant. I long ago found that forcing my face into a particular expression pulls my mood behind it. At Jane’s funeral...

I’ve always been curious about the dreams of powerful men – what did Napoleon see, every night? It’s almost never recorded, you can never trust anyone, but I would dearly like to know.

I have simple dreams of dominance and fellowship. I practice climbing fiery trees, navigating rapids with churning water snakes, crooking elbows and drinking mead with the dwarves and elves of the Senate and Congress. Roasting right-wing journalists.

The usual.

And I always know that my dreams are my dreams, and I can almost always wake on command. You don’t love control like I do, and surrender to your own unconscious.

But this night I fell asleep in a hospital room, and woke up in a hospital room.

With my father.

I yawned in my dream, just as I did on that day.

It’s so boring, really, this entirely predictable ‘cycle of life’ garbage.

Yes, my father was a titan, and then he got old and frail and lost his bulk and shrank into a bundle of diapered sticks. And he fell into death because I rose into life, and I was there to replace him, just as my son was there to replace me, and I could never understand all this *depth and drama* about the fact that we live because our elders die.

The one time I saw the full-length Hamlet, I *itched* to march on stage and punch him square in his powdered jaw. *Stop shrieking and kill or run!*

I couldn’t wait for my father to die, because the chair was wicker and wicked uncomfortable. My mother was quite a bit younger than him – the typical ‘old politician and young beauty queen’ – and she was equally bored, though she covered it better with random sniffles, but I swear she played sad songs on the radio to help her mimic grief better.

Even my father was bored, and would've hit 'fast-forward' if he could. When you know someone is going to die, just 'making them comfortable' can feel like a slow boat ride to eternity.

My father and I only found value in mentorship – he had great instincts, and knew how to dominate a room with a smile and a stare. His will was like a glacier – cold, slow-moving and irresistible. There was an old cartoon when I was a kid – a caveman looking up at a huge wall of ice, saying to another caveman: "Say, is that wall of ice closer today?"

That was my father. He powdered gold and pulled it on the underside of his will, smearing it along the sewage-tracks of backroom politics. His grudges were legendary – he once waited forty-one years to pay back a woman who voted against him. "It's not about her, it's about everyone watching," he growled in low-rent satisfaction.

He taught me how to overcome odds, overcome obstacles, overcome wills and personalities – how to find weaknesses and chisel-widen hypocrisy, how to use the power of the intelligence agencies to gather information on enemies, secure in the certainty that everyone has a weakness, everyone has a flaw, everyone is desperate to keep something silent – find that, you own them.

He taught me how to be up-front with your weaknesses, to publicize your demons, to ask for forgiveness so you would never have to ask for permission. "The devil looks like the devil, son, that's why he can never be blackmailed."

People love a rogue, they love a sinner who redeems – the only thing they care about is confidence, which they mistake for competence. My God, he would laugh. "Most people live lives so petty that any greater man looks like a God to them. If you don't attack yourself, you are bulletproof. Critics who can't find purchase just find other targets – they are terrified of weakness, that's why they bully, so never appear weak, and they will leave you alone."

He taught me everything there was to know about climbing the backs of the broken – and I loved him for it, in my way. He found value in watching me rise, and I found value in his advice.

But I was young – still in my thirties – so death meant almost nothing to me.

And you can't overcome death anyway, so – what did he have to teach me about?

Watching him fade and fall – powerless to resist, let alone win – was terrible, because he had no utility for me anymore. This wasn't a foe he could teach me to beat, so what the hell did we have to talk about?

I was terrified that he would ramble about his past, dig up old scores, demand I fight some abstract battle, fall into his second childhood of early memories, and call me by the name of some pet raccoon he domesticated at the age of five.

I was terrified that he would be terrified, and that that might bleed the jugular of my heart-pounding ambitions.

“What was the point of it all, son? I wrestled and won and fought and bled and died a thousand deaths, and pushed well-armed words to create a maze of control in the nation – and here I am, just where I started, in a bed I can’t get out of, with a God damn diaper on! Don’t do what I’ve done son – don’t you live your life for power and control and others, don’t imagine that all the ink you stack on people’s necks will mean a damn thing at the end, or anywhere near it. Don’t marry an idiot for her beauty, don’t leave your children to cast the spells of law over a compliant population – all this I have learned too late – but not too late to save you!”

And then he would force a promise out of me to be a good father, a good friend – a good man – everything that he was not. Having pushed me off a cliff, he would now demand I flap my arms and reverse course.

Sorry, dad – patriarchal physics don’t flip for death...

But none of that happened. We played cards, he complained about the nurses, studiously avoided imaginary plans for *later*, and demanded every detail of my newly-minted political career. He was still determined to give me advice, and worked hard to break up my go-nowhere relationship.

I listened outside his door – unembarrassed by security – as he talked with my mother – wondering if he had any greater depth in his decay, but it was nothing, there was nothing – he told her about some secret accounts, a hidden laptop with bitcoin, recommended several boyfriends for “down the road,” and told her to play “Shine on You Crazy Diamond” at his funeral. He also told her exactly who *not* to invite.

“Ed will want to be there, screw him, he missed the shot that could’ve made me a pro tennis star. Dig up Maribel, she might still be alive, she was one helluva babysitter, taught me stuff I still use on you, that should be celebrated, often overlooked. And use my prom date picture at my reception, the one with the hot German girl, you can cut her out, but that was the last time I had great hair...”

He gave lists of reporters to ghost, and recommended his college roommate for his biography. His mind was sharp until the end, unlike his father, my grandfather, who foamed at the mouth and regularly believed that his pajamas were on fire.

“Hell, life has been so busy, we got the will done, so much still to do – I kept the papers from Panama, even though I wasn’t supposed to, have the lawyer look at them, burn them probably. I also wrote some of a stupid autobiography a few years ago, toast that... Don’t let any stupid secrets spill out...” *Cough, cough.*

He gave keys and locations for secret storage facilities, passwords to various accounts and lockboxes, and kept demanding that she remember everything, write down nothing.

“Nothing is encrypted, try to only speak to people at the beach or swimming pool, no phones...”

It was endless – it reminded me of when I hit an armadillo with my dirt bike once, as a kid, and as it died, its curled-up body opened up, its legs widening, like a slowly-yawning mouth.

As he died, his secrets flew free.

Because my father's wishes mostly involved grudges, my mother had no trouble remembering them.

But then...

In my dream, I opened up like an armadillo, because – it was like hearing a song on the radio that you used to love, and found you loved still...

In my dream, in a long-lost hospital room buried under five centuries of dust, age and catastrophe, my father gripped my arm. Five cards lay on his chest like red-patterned Moroccan tombstones.

"Son," he said. "I've lived a good life, it's all been worth it. And I know you hate this stuff, I've been avoiding it, but – I'm shutting down, I'm going to start singing 'Daisy, Daisy...' I had a good career, I made it more than halfway, but you – you can't remember the name of any Senators from Rome... You remember a few emperors, the military leaders, the philosophers and – and – no one else. I gave up a lot to get to the middle, and that – sucks. I'm not going to be remembered by many people – there will be a lot of folks at the funeral, but five minutes later... You'll tell stories about me to your kids, show them some pictures I guess, but it won't mean much, they'll have nothing to say about me to their – kids. I don't have any stories big enough to last the test of – time. I'm no Teddy Roosevelt, no Stalin..." He smiled painfully. "I lived in the middle, where the hole of the doughnut is. Not much competition... And I wish – I wish I had – pushed more, either way – either to the top, or to you and your siblings and – and your mom. I was like the space between the beat – you need it for the song, but no one remembers... I know it's embarrassing; I know it's ridiculous, but I'm going to actually be on my deathbed and you better promise me this, promise me this..." His hands gripped me with surprising strength. His monitors beeped, but I could now only feel the silence between the sounds. "You give it your all, you hold nothing back, whatever path you take, to the top or to – others. Get everything. Power pulls you away from people, and I ended up with neither... I'm just a slightly taller tree in the forest, nothing special. And it means going – invisible to people, while you build up your strength. I wanted prominence and effect, I didn't build enough of a base, make enough connections, frighten enough – good people. If you going to love people, leave power. If you're going to love power – but you can't leave people, because you need them – but you all have to swim like salmon in the current to serve power. Everything for the sake of the God we serve, capitals or not... And for God's sake, have them turn that morphine drip up, I can still feel my toes..."

And so he rambled into incoherence – strangely powerful words lighting up my consciousness like a falling strobe light, lost in deep water.

And he died, his mind like a city struck by a meteor, glowing and dark and dead all at once.

And I distinctly remember trying to pry his hand from my arm, almost giggling as I imagined sawing it from his wrist, and carrying it with me forever, fingernails bound to bone.

And I awoke, from the room in my mind to the room around my body – from the deathbed of the past to the living bed of the future.

And I could not, for the life of me, remember whether it was a dream of a memory, or a memory of a dream.

But I knew it was the reason I would never *ever* be forgotten.

Chapter 40

One deathbed inevitably breeds another, but I was the only one to get away.

When I got sick, I knew deep in my bones – because the sickness *was* deep in my bones – that I would not get away. I’ve always hated this idea that you can ‘bravely fight an illness’ – that’s all nonsense, you just cross your fingers and hope that somehow you can escape the collapsing masonry of mortality.

Doctors don’t care – even if you are famous, a President – you’re just another flesh suit on their conveyor belt to the grave. It’s the end of *your* life – it’s just another ten minutes on their rounds. I don’t blame them, you have to cauterize your nerves in the face of everyone else’s needs, it’s the only way to stay sane. Power is the ability to bestow gifts – when doctors lose to death, they can’t give you anything, so they run.

When I was little, I saved up to buy a double album of “War of the Worlds.” This was the only way you could hear music in those days, and I was thrilled to get it. I wanted to practice talking like Richard Burton. I was so excited, but the indifferent bland cashier at the record store didn’t care – even though it was expensive, even though I was just a kid, she just rung it up, snapped her gum and said: “Next.”

What you love, no one cares – they’re too busy loving their own stuff to notice yours. It was a good lesson.

My doctor, knowing his job was done, was brusque and indifferent – like when my wife went to the hospital with a miscarriage, it was a disaster for her, it was just triage for them, no one cared...

He handed me over to my family as quickly as possible. My middle son, the athlete, was a pious cliché, saying that death comes to everyone, that I was going to a better place, that we would meet again.

“But heaven would be hell for me,” I said.

“Why?”

“No elections – the top job is already filled.”

It was blasphemous, I always enjoyed shocking his delicate soulful sensibilities. My daughter, my youngest, was as useless as boobs on a bull, full of tears and unspecified regrets.

My colleagues – well, they sent notes, or at least their assistants did, but I wasn’t expecting anyone to show up, and I wasn’t disappointed – I had no more to offer them than the doctor had to offer me, they just wanted to move on to my replacement and start massaging his feet. Who is supposed to remember

you, when they can't profit from you? I have enough integrity to not blame everyone for exactly what I did.

My wife – well, her place in society was secure, her finances rock-solid, and she was young and pretty enough to take a second lap, and she kept reminding me that she had prepared for this day for decades, knowing how much older I was.

It's funny, because you desperately want to hang onto life when you are well, but after a certain span of sickness, you kind of get ready to go. It's like when I was a kid, I loved going to airports and flying on planes – but the excitement wore thin pretty quickly, and by the time I became an adult, I just took pills to knock myself out, I hated the discomfort and headaches and numb buttocks – even when I got my own plane, I still hated it, and breathed a prayer of relief when the wheels touched the ground again.

I had been flying high my whole life, I was uncomfortable – and comfort was not returning – so I was ready for – the end.

It was my eldest son who told me how to escape death.

He told me about Walt Disney, and others, who had frozen themselves before dying.

It was ridiculous, but it began to worm its way into my consciousness, an escape hatch, a *deus ex machina* that could sky-hook me out of my inevitable descent. It's fine to have acceptance when there is no hope, no option – but to give up when escape is possible is not a wise surrender to the inevitable, but a cowardly collapse in the face of the possible.

"It's not just for you dad," he whispered in the dark. "Imagine being able to talk to George Washington, King Arthur – it's almost a responsibility to the future, to the historians to come. And you would get a chance to actually shape your own legacy, to answer questions, to not be a piñata of future blame – you would be a window into the world that is, to the world that is to come. And who knows, it might not just be you, my brother might be right – maybe we all will meet again. And you are not so old, who knows how long people might live in the time to come? And old age might not be like it is now, it could be anything, youth reinforced! I think you owe it to yourself, to us, to the future – and our legacy, I will sleep easier at night knowing that we might have a chance to polish our name in the future. Why surrender, when you can escape?"

The whispers went on and on – even when I'm pretty sure he thought I was asleep – but they wore me down, or rather aroused my hopes. I felt a draw in my mind as I veered off the train tracks leading down to nothing. I left it in his hands – he proved a cunning offspring, as was fitting. It was all a secret, crypto currencies changed hands, decades-long conspiracy theories gained potent fuel, and I chose the time of my own demise.

I no longer tried to make my peace, but rather planned my resurrection. I was frozen with bitcoins and gold – I went to death with my disease, and only one of us would win in the long run.

And that last night, before the switch was thrown and I was dethroned from circulation, my eldest sat hunched beside my bed, constantly flipping back his annoying bangs.

I was totally bored at my annoyance toward him – it was an old and utterly predictable ache, like an old man’s arthritis before a storm. He had reformed himself under my blows – hardened like metal under fire, remade in the dented impressions of my infinite image, and he was doing well in the blood-oiled machinery of power. He had moved from grad student to software entrepreneur, and his future looked as bright as a nuclear sunrise. He had married just the right kind of woman – pretty and calculating, humble and dominant, benevolent and implacable – she was pregnant now, it was a race between the grave and grandfather, won now by the willed glacier of undeath...

I was – frightened, perhaps for the first time – that I would somehow feel the ice enveloping me, and feel chilled in a bloodless embrace for centuries, like my mother’s womb. I remember the first time I put my hand in snow, how unbelievably cold it was – and I had a recurring nightmare as a child that I was lying in a coffin, with concrete being poured over me, hardening me into trapped immobility forever...

But of course, I reasoned with myself, if I felt cold with no blood, it was equally probable that I would feel trapped in a coffin as well, feeling the maddening tickle of hungry worms and the buckle of the wooden walls as the spreading tree roots slowly pushed through. I might catch the occasional scent of flowers as my wife pursued the photo op of leaving roses on my headstone – and I might also be disinterred for some court case, some – trial. And then I would be like the seashells I collected as a boy, which smelled and rotted and were thrown out by my mother – I would dig up the shell from the sand – which was just broken shells really – and think of all the billions of shells deep underground, below the beach, below the ocean, below the land – and imagine how blinding it must be for a shell buried for a million years to be washed up into sunlight, and have life on its calcium again, my fingers instead of a crustacean...

And I remembered being far from my family, just smudges and shadows in the middle distance, isolated under the blue bowl of the sky and the crawling covers of the waves, and I remember yearning for solitude on a solitary planet – people overwhelmed me, that was the truth. I had to control them, because they overpowered me – one of us had to get lost, and it was never going to be me. And an old childhood joke flowed through my mind: “If you break your legs climbing those rocks, don’t come running to me!”

And I could’ve happily dissolved that day, broken into shards like the shells beneath my toes, and joined the cycled billion-year march of broken life from sunlight to seafloor, round and round, the useless bits of useless bodies, swirling like the scarves of a magician, beyond loss, beyond fear, beyond – desire.

And I wanted to walk into the ocean that morning, to join the cracks of crabs and the waste of the dolphins – and I played with it, nothing too serious – I walked up to my chest, and felt the thuds of the waves against my face that felt personal, like Poseidon was slapping me to turn me back. And I waited for – life to meet me, to erupt within me and turn me back to the land, because I suddenly wasn’t sure if I was going to enjoy my life – or even be good for the world, which struck me as an entirely different category, alien almost...

But it turns out it is not the dead relatives that beckon you forward, but the live ones who pull you back. I wasn't serious, I wasn't going to drown, I was just waiting for – something to turn me back, something to turn back for – I can't remember what happened that day, I only remember what happened next, though I have not thought of it in close to 600 years...

A hand grabbed my neck and yanked me up – not back, but *up*, like a savage hook-footed spider. I was pulled to shore faster than the waves could push me, and my father loomed over me, easily eclipsing the sun, and he punched me in the face, then slapped me side to side, and I remember the light getting brighter and darker through the orange kaleidoscope of my closed eyes, and I remember tasting blood and thanking him, in my way, because *he* was the life that brought me back, he was my reason for standing on land, he cared enough to...

“DON'T DO IT!” he kept repeating, and it was ambiguous, it was confusing – do what? I was being beaten by the sea, what was I supposed to stop doing in that moment? I wasn't resisting – I was praising, because he might've genuinely saved me from whatever hypnotic song was far out at sea – what was I *not* to do?

Embarrass him, of course – shame him, confront him with anything he might have done wrong. Kill his career by killing myself, perhaps. And maybe he did only care about the effects of... Not me myself – but you can't be overly picky in this life, and here was someone who cared about me enough to race into the salt and pull me from the undertow of a momentary weakness. And he would *not* let me dissolve into the tide, into stupid ideas, into anger and ridiculous protest – and for what?

I mean, everyone has these moments, where you think of turning into oncoming traffic, or taking one step too far off a cliff edge, or jamming a nose-trimmer into your eye – that is the devil of mortality at work, reminding you of your well-being through imaginary drive-bys.

It was nonsense, but I remember the pounding satisfaction as he hit me – that he had noticed me gone, somehow spied my black head among the waves, divined my devilry, and sprinted to save me.

The lesson went on too long – we both knew that, but the bloody intimacy of the instruction was hard to set free. My face was a mess, cleaning it with the bitter seawater was sweet agony, and my father held my hand as we walked back to the picnic. He explained that I had body-surfed into a rock – and I have always appreciated lies that tell the truth – and I was taken to the hospital, and I kept that secret forever.

I meant something, I *was* something, someone cared...

And my mother seemed to believe it, and I would occasionally wonder whether you could see one smudge trying to disassemble another smudge in the bright beach distance, but curiosity always leads to disaster in relationships, so she just skated on the frosting, and let the cake be, so to speak.

And I told my story with pride, at school, about surfing into an outcrop, and my scars and stitches were much admired, and I gained great status with the courage of my fortitude, and I realized that whatever

wounds you, elevates you – and I thanked my father again, in my mind, for the gift he had given me of caring – and superiority. Bravery is just a kind of gratitude, and I was deeply grateful.

I pitied the boys without fathers.

And as I was pulled from the sea by my father, so was I pulled from my dream by Cornelius.

He entered my hospital room with a piece of paper.

“Hardcopy, old-school,” he said. “Good morning. The charges are in.”

I sat up in my bed – I felt my face instinctively, to remind myself that my wounds were dead, my dream was done.

“It’s a shock,” said Cornelius. “But I don’t think a bad one. Do you need a moment?”

“No.”

“Okay – it is one count of child abuse.”

I waited.

“No, that’s it.”

I laughed. “What? What about all that trash-talk at the restaurant yesterday, my infinite crimes, Nuremberg, wars, debts, indoctrination – now I’m accused of – abusing – my son. My eldest?”

Cornelius nodded.

“Oh my God you absolute – wimps!” I cried. “What the *hell* does a man have to do around here to catch a war crime?”

Cornelius said: “I have trouble knowing when to take you seriously.”

“This is like dinging Hitler for kicking his dog!”

“Let’s keep that analogy private.”

“Sure, sure... So, I’m going to be – judged for parenting in a fairly typical manner, for the time, and that’s going to be – that’s the entire axe hanging over my neck? This little toothpick?”

Cornelius pursed his lips. “Well, it is the most serious crime in our society.”

“Discipline? I know I know, ‘hitting’ children – that’s the most serious crime?”

“Well, that’s how crime was eliminated, by not hitting children.”

I paused, my mind racing. “What are the punishments?”

“Restitution, or ostracism – no DRO will enforce any contract for an unrepentant child abuser.”

“I don’t know what – restitution means in this case.”

“That is – that depends on the circumstances – I’m sure you will gain some excuse for history, and the fact that there were no mandatory Scans for your children...”

“Give me an idea – it’s the most serious crime, what are the consequences?”

“It’s kind of unprecedented.”

“I know I’m paying you by the hour. Stop beating around the bush.”

“Well, in the past, child abusers often made apologies, made restitution – sometimes money, sometimes charity – and a few of them have been sentenced to spreading the message of peaceful parenting in statist societies.”

I blinked. “So no – hanging – you know this, and still made comparisons to Nuremberg! I’d fire you if I had a clue what the hell was going on! I’m not going to be locked up, no firing squads – just – what – I have to go do missionary work among the unwashed about not yelling at your children? Oh my God, I’m so glad I didn’t waste any anxiety on this – clown show of a society!”

“I’m – glad you’re taking this well.”

“This is a walk in the park.”

“Well good.”

I paused. “And – I don’t know the rules of – these laws of yours, in any great detail – but it’s all just – it’s going to be hearsay, isn’t it? Not even that. I never talked about – that. How does anyone know, other than the possible – effects?”

“Apparently your eldest son wrote an autobiography after your death – your freezing I mean.”

“So? I assume it ended up in the ‘Fiction’ section. He was always resentful, loved to trash me at every opportunity, although he always traded on my name, that was his leg up, the weasel!”

Cornelius said: “I know this is just between us, but you might want to drop that habit.”

“Oh, don’t worry – I can play the dutiful father.”

“Don’t do that either, that is a weakness of our defense, that you knew how to parent well in public.”

I waved my hand. “Okay, okay – the Aristotelian mean it is. But this is – great news. I do my time – which isn’t even time – and I’m free to – rejoin society, as I see fit.”

Cornelius nodded. “But it won’t be hearsay.”

“What, I get to interrogate his autobiography?”

“They have a witness.”

My face froze. The implications went scurrying in every direction, like cockroaches under a sudden searchlight.

“A witness... What do you mean? Like some – recording, some video – that might be evidence, but it’s not a witness! A witness would mean...”

And suddenly I knew.

My son, whispering to me about immortality...

Saying we would meet again...

That I would not be *alone*...

“My son...”

Cornelius looked surprised. He gestured at the piece of paper. “That’s what they claim. He was found shortly after you. He went through the same – procedure.”

“Oh my God,” I whispered.

And, as if no time at all had passed, I hated him all over again.

Chapter 41

I debated whether to let myself sleep the night before the trial – looking tired and haggard can be advantageous when being judged, but rested and refreshed has a good look too – it really depends on the mood of the jury, and the nature of the charges.

Cornelius had warned me that the trial was being broadcast around the world, with literally hundreds of millions of people watching. I glowed at the prospect – I always did my best work center stage.

I was fairly certain that my son was being kept in the same hospital, but of course we had no chance to meet or talk, since he was going to be used as a witness against me. I had little concern about his testimony, though – apparently he had pushed the world into these Cataclysms, so I didn’t imagine his moral authority carried much weight.

Again and again, I glowed with good fortune – that this silly and sentimental age cared more about me disciplining my son than invading a sovereign nation. Ha ha ha - feminism for the win!

The purpose of a parent is to train his children to thrive in the world that is, not to point them at some imaginary utopia. I didn't invent the world, I didn't invent the rules, but I would be damned if my children would not find their way to the top of the crap-heap known as 'society.' Trying to make your children *better* than the world guarantees their failure!

Cornelius tried to prepare me for my cross-examination, but I didn't care, and wouldn't take any coaching. I wasn't even sure I would be taking the stand – I said that to myself, but of course resisting the spotlight has never been my strong suit.

"You're going to be hit by arguments you've never even considered," he insisted.

"I do my best work on the fly!"

I had to sign a document specifying that I was rejecting the advice of counsel – no worries, I wanted to be the tail that wagged the dog of this ridiculous society. There were still a few sane statist countries left in the world; for them, if not for me, I had to make my case.

I demanded – and got – a human barber for a haircut and a close shave. I always had a secret love of being pampered – I pretended it was for *efficiency*, but it was all just making up for my lonely crib and the rotating rows of female heads that first greeted my resurrection – and the shadows on my legs...

Cornelius and I did agree on one thing – I needed clothes from even before my time. We pushed the timeframe back on sartorial splendor as far as possible – almost to my grandfather's wardrobe – since the further back in time I appeared, the less likely I was to be strictly held to modern standards. Hell, I would have shown up in a caveman's bearskin to beat these stupid charges...

On the night before the trial, I decided to only give myself a nap – being tired didn't make me fuzzy-headed, but it did slow me down, which I thought might be helpful in the coming trial. Answering too quickly was always a mistake.

My respect for Cornelius dipped somewhat when he showed up with a deeply serious mask of gravitas on his face. I can't even count how many times I've been investigated and cross-examined – my political enemies were always dragging me up the shredder on one pretext or another. When you don't have good policy rebuttals, you just launch legal attacks. Part of the game, no worries.

"Are you ready?" he said in a low voice.

I shrugged. "Would it matter if I wasn't?"

He didn't laugh.

In the taxi, Cornelius pointed at the foreboding clouds ahead and asked: "Over, or under?"

I grinned. "Always through, always!"

He nodded, and within a few minutes we were sailing in perfect serenity through the heart of a thundercloud. Birds and the occasional butterfly flashed past the force field keeping the elements at

bay, and I laughed in delight, remembering the view from an airplane window when I was a child, watching the lightning arc through the clouds, far below, and wishing I could stand in the midst of that storm – and now, my childhood dream had come true!

Maybe this new world isn't so bad after all...

There were thousands of taxis floating outside the massive white building that served as the courthouse. I half-expected it to have classical architecture and Doric columns, as a nod to past culture – but then of course I remembered that this world had cut the past out of its heart completely, and viewed everything that went before as corrupt and evil.

So much for conservatism...

Everything was annoyingly clean – I suppose robots scoured every surface at night – and it reminded me once more of a simulation. My grandson had explained to me once that putting dirt on virtual surfaces consumed computing power, so everything looked like it'd been constructed from unblemished eggshells.

Wouldn't it be wild if all of this turned out to be just my dying thoughts, my brain scrambling for redemption as I slid into the great good night...

So what if it did? Life had been little more than a game, perhaps death was as well...

Everyone was hooked up with tiny cameras, and I suppose various divine favours had been handed out for the few thousand seats in the enormous white amphitheater inside.

I had thought long and hard about my entrance – you don't want to stride in too confident, because that looks arrogant – I wasn't entirely sure of this society's relationship to arrogance. My political opponents generally had to win the votes of those who screamed at pretend wrestling, so they could be as arrogant as hell – but I had to feign feminine humility, because I knew my base very well. They were arrogant, of course, but you could never say that out loud, it would've taken away all their power.

I found it interesting that the white-haired judge was not seated at a higher level than the accused – than me. I always found that old trick of the old world to be quite annoying, mostly because it was so effective at making people feel small.

The judge leaned forward - quite unnecessary, since his voice was amplified in some invisible matter – and addressed the waiting masses, the world, and the cloud of tiny cameras.

“Good morning everyone, my name is Judge Sky Peters, and I welcome you to the trial of a truly remarkable and singular individual. His name is Louis Staytin, and he stands before you in clothes that must look quite old-fashioned to you, but which are both comfortable and appropriate to him.

“Of course, we are not here to judge his choice of attire, but rather his treatment of his children – or child, in particular, his eldest son Jake. In the same way that Mr. Staytin's clothes are comfortable and

appropriate to him, and his time, in some ways his parenting style was also both comfortable and appropriate to him, in his time.

“The questions of justice, integrity and consistency have puzzled and confounded our species since our inception. Justice requires the punishment of those who harm others by deviating from universal moral standards. Integrity requires that we either follow our own stated moral principles, or inform others of a coming deviation. Consistency requires that our universal moral standards be followed independent of time and place.

“Morality is that standard which allows us to claim a universal right to forcefully impose our will upon others. Criminals regularly forcefully impose their will on others, but they do not claim a moral right to do so – in this they are in the category of animal predation.

“Any standard which claims universality must be logically consistent – since logic is universal – and achievable independent of time and location. Mathematics and science claim universality, and thus propositions and conjectures in these fields must be logically consistent, and hold true independent of time and place.

“Morality is often perceived – outside the Civ - as a cultural standard which holds true only to those who believe in local customs. The hypocrisy of the outside world is easily revealed by the fact that parents teach their children moral absolutes, but when those children grow up to question moral contradictions on the part of their parents, those same parents take refuge in moral relativism.

“Our standard for morality – universally preferable behaviour – holds true for all people, in all locations, at all times. It is the exact same standard that parents have always imposed on their children. Throughout history, parents have always instructed their children not to hit others – and this commandment has always been universal and absolute. They do not tell their children that it is immoral to hit another child on a Monday, but perfectly moral to hit on a Tuesday. They do not say that violence is wrong in the kitchen, but perfectly permissible in the living room.

“No, they instruct their children on the absolute morality of the two moral pillars of universally preferable behaviour: thou shalt not initiate violence, and thou shalt respect property.

“In other words, don’t hit, don’t steal.”

“We would not expect people from the old world to understand the science behind our modern technology, for obvious reasons. We cannot expect Mr. Staytin to wake up among us and understand every nuance and complexity of our modern voluntary social structures.

“However, ignorance of the law is no excuse *when you have imposed that law*.

“A judge who has punished criminals for corruption can have no possible excuse if he himself is found to be corrupt.

“A parent who has imposed the rules of the nonaggression principle and a respect for property rights on his children has no right to claim that he has no knowledge of these rules, or no capacity to follow them. Parents cannot claim that they cannot possibly follow rules which they violently inflict upon a two-year-old. This would be like a mother punishing a toddler for failing to lift a weight which she herself cannot budge.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you have been charged with determining the moral guilt of Louis Staytin - the former President of this landmass.

“For reasons which I’m sure the prosecution will explain, his potential political and military crimes have remained outside the scope of this trial. Perhaps it is possible that a man from the Old World might gain some forgiveness for failing to apply the ethics he inflicted on his children on his society as a whole. However, we cannot claim ignorance of that which we teach. A woman who teaches Japanese cannot claim to be ignorant of the Japanese language.

“A father cannot claim to be ignorant of the nonaggression principle if he has enforced said principal on his child.

“Child abuse in the Civ is virtually nonexistent, but it still remains the habit and norm in the rest of the world. It is an important question to ask: why are we prosecuting potential evils from almost 600 years ago? This question is common to all jurisprudence, since we cannot ever change the past. But justice is not about the past – but the future. We punish horse thieves so that horses are less likely to be stolen in the future.

“Those of us, the hundreds of millions of parents across the Civ - we all love, protect and treasure our own children, but I daresay that scarcely a day goes by when we do not spare an agonized thought to the countless children across the rest of the world still being verbally abused, beaten, assaulted and bullied on a daily basis.

“This trial is not about the past, but the future. As a middle-aged man – though old by the standards of his time – Louis Staytin may still have children. Even over the course of this trial, millions of children will be born to parents who will be following the course and content of these arguments.

“Whatever moral arguments apply to Mr. Staytin more than half a millennia ago – certainly apply to parents in the present.”

Judge Peters paused for a long moment, his face unutterably sad.

God they were so even-handed, my heart soared! So careful to be right, to be accurate, to be *moral* that they were like conscientious boxers warming up against an opponent happy to call in an airstrike.

Back in the day, we fed lies to the leftist press – the press, really – and they just bumbled and published without question. My opponents couldn’t do the same, because everyone else in the media had to *fact check* and *get it right* and *be responsible*.

So they lost.

Judge Peters said:

“I now call for opening statements from the prosecution.”

A woman who looked – like a girl, impossibly young – rose and smoothed her skirt. I recognized the sandy-haired man sitting in a front row – they just *loved* these white pews, didn’t they? – whose eyes glowed with the pride of a father. David, his name was.

The woman said: “My name is Alice Bartholemew, and I will be leading the prosecution against Louis Staytin, formerly president of the United States of America. Since the modern world no longer recognizes his title, I will simply be referring to him as Mr. Staytin.

“Good morning. This is an unprecedented case in the history of jurisprudence, although the legal theories are well-established. We have constantly gathered together as a society to sit in judgement of the past – indeed, if we never judge the past, we can never build a better future. Whether I judge my own actions from yesterday, or Mr. Staytin’s actions from half a millennia ago does not matter, with regards to universal morality.

“Of course, the question first arises as to whether we can hold Mr. Staytin to modern moral standards. Morality is a form of technology, and we cannot condemn people without access to that technology for failing to use it. We might as well call a man foolish for not using a sky-taxi before it was invented.

“However, the philosophical quandary at the crux of this prosecution is this: morality has always been claimed to be universal – that is how it is judged to be enforceable. Mere aesthetics are not enforceable on others – morality – most specifically and emphatically – is.

Alice gestured at me. “Mr. Staytin enforced moral standards not only within his own country, the United States of America, but also around the world. He threatened Old Russia for the international war crime of aggression, but he himself invaded...”

Cornelius jumped up. “These arguments are unrelated to the central charge.”

The Judge nodded.

“Withdrawn,” said Alice. “The question remains as to whether we can justly judge a man for his primitive morality, when he lived in a primitive time.

“Another question must be resolved before we can start, which is whether we can prosecute a man in the absence of any available witnesses. I will confess that my office was preparing to charge Mr. Staytin with various war crimes – and I apologize for allowing an earlier draft of my opening statement to bleed into the present – when we discovered another person from his time who had elected to undergo cryogenic freezing. It was really quite remarkable – the facility that housed these people had been placed underground in an extraordinarily remote location. It was solar-powered, but many of the panels had been wrecked over the centuries. Only two people remained intact, out of many hundreds. One of

course was Mr. Staytin; the other turned out to be his son – his eldest son, Jake. It took quite a while to trace the wiring and find him alive.

“With our new access to Jake Staytin, we were able to pierce the fog of time, and resurrect an eyewitness to the crimes for which we have charged Mr. Staytin.

Alice smiled sadly. “Now I do try to avoid endless feedback from the world, because my relationship is to universally preferable behaviour and justice itself – but of course I could not help but notice how rabidly fascinated the world is by this case as a whole. I feel the pressure of – hundreds of millions of eyes upon us – and also feel the pressure of knowing that everything I say, every statement I make and piece of evidence I bring to bear – will be examined and turned over in endless detail for endless years. This is like the trial of Socrates – but with more details – and hopefully, more justice.

“For those who are watching this who live in statist societies, I am aware that you find this all quite ridiculous. For those of you who live in the geographical region once decimated by Mr. Staytin’s invasions, I apologize for not bringing him to account on your behalf.”

The judge warned her, and Alice paused.

“I do need to address the perceived foolishness of the charges against Mr. Staytin. With all that he did, and all that led to the Cataclysms, charging him with child abuse seems an insult to the billions who suffered and died...”

I could see everyone finishing the silent end to her sentence: *as a result of his actions...*

I laughed inwardly. It reminded me of Jane’s funeral, and everything that was hinted at, that brute power restrained from being simply spoken...

Alice opened her mouth to continue. *So earnest.*

“For those who do not know the foundation of the modern free world, a brief explanation is in order.

“All societies before the modern Civ were built on the backs of broken children. I hope you will forgive my - poetry, but there is no clearer or cleaner way to put it. The – democracy, or Republic – that Mr. Staytin presided over specifically ignored the voices and perspectives and preferences of children in the formulation of its public policies. Adults were free to choose their own occupations; children were forced into government – indoctrination facilities, the closest most of them came to prison in their lives. Adults could not hit other adults, but were allowed to hit children. Children were not allowed to vote, which meant that no politician had to focus on what was best for children.”

Alice raised her hand. “Of course, I am not saying that the solution would’ve been to have children vote, because that would’ve just given the parents extra votes, so to speak, since they would’ve just bullied their children into voting for whoever the parents preferred. But a society that fails to focus on what is best for its children cannot survive, will not survive, and historically, has never survived. Politicians such as Mr. Staytin had no problem pillaging the future tax revenues of the young in order to pay for...”

Cornelius jumped up again, and I actually appreciated his agility. “She cannot testify as to my client’s state of mind.”

Judge Peters agreed, and Alice apologized again.

“I speak not so much to the past, as to the various scattered places in the present where governments still hold sway. To those societies, I say: the children in your world have no voice, no rights, no respect. You have built a system that exploits them, beats them, indoctrinates them, keeps them silent – and all who mistreat children will be destroyed by moral decay. Society can only expect the allegiance of children if it provides those children security and opportunity. Governments do not add value to the economy – the only way they can pretend to provide anything is to take, print or borrow. Borrowing against children creates resentment when they grow up. That resentment is generally leveraged by hostile actors – both foreign and domestic – into undermining and eventually destroying the society that exploits them.”

Cornelius said: “The prosecutor is making speeches.”

Alice said: “I am setting the stage for the charges.”

The judge nodded, but asked her to hurry it along.

“The most foundational question – the most foundational *moral* question, which is the only question that matters – for any society to ask is this: *Why are adults excluded from the moral rules they impose on children?*”

Alice turned to Cornelius. “I assume this is on target enough for you.”

The judge admonished her, and she continued.

Alice waved her hand. “There are still – countless millions of parents around the world who still hit their children, while commanding their children not to hit people. There are still millions of you who take objects from your children, while commanding those children not to steal. Even those of you who consider yourself ‘enlightened’ still confine your children to ‘timeouts’ – which you would never imagine doing at work, or with your wife, or your friends, or your adult relations.

“Child abuse – violations of the nonaggression principle and property rights – take an average of twenty years away from a person’s lifespan. Stress, cancer, ischemic heart disease, addiction, promiscuity – these all result from the toxins that are released in the body through the stress of child abuse. If a man were to administer a poison to a child that caused endless anxiety and health issues – and killed that child twenty years before her time – we would punish him as a slow-motion murderer. It doesn’t matter if your poison takes decades to kill, you are still a killer.

“These facts were all known in Mr. Staytin’s day, in his time. The scientific experiments had been run decades before, the results were clear. Child abuse literally poisons minds and bodies.

“Mr. Staytin may claim to be ignorant of the studies, of these basic medical facts – but that doesn’t matter at all, by his own admission and standards. His government presided over the prosecution of people who claimed to be ignorant of the law, but ignorance of the law was no excuse, by the cliché and rule of his time. Mr. Staytin voluntarily chose to become a parent, chose to keep his child – his children – which means that he was responsible for raising them well. I don’t have to learn how to fly a plane, unless I plan to get behind the controls of a plane. Mr. Staytin doubtless decided to have children sometime before they were conceived – and therefore had at least nine months from the time of conception to educate himself on the science and ethics of parenting. Given what we will hear from his son, his parenting was abusive even by the standards of his day. And Jake will further testify that his father never attacked him publicly. All the abuse happened in private, which begs the question: *if he thought his behaviour was acceptable, why did he hide it?*”

“We do not judge Mr. Staytin by our modern standards. We do not judge him even by the standards of his day. We judge him by his *own* standards. We shall establish that he assaulted his son on many occasions, and swore his son to secrecy – and we also show that he never once assaulted his son in public. Mr. Staytin knew that what he was doing was illegal by the standards of his day – and he also knew that he would be roundly condemned, should his assault against his child come to light.

“Now, it might be argued – and it doubtless will be – that Mr. Staytin was himself abused a child, and therefore had no capacity – no practical ability – to restrain his aggression. However, the basic fact that he never once assaulted his child in public shows that he was *completely* able to restrain his aggression. If his aggression were a form of involuntary epilepsy, then he would not be able to control it. The fact that Mr. Staytin would threaten his child to ‘wait until we get home’ clearly shows that he was able to postpone his own violence. Since he could restrain himself in public, he was equally responsible for failing to restrain himself in private.

“Now, we can all agree that Mr. Staytin himself was doubtless abused as a child. And while that gives us some sympathy for his suffering, justice demands that we universalize his *own* morality, and apply it back to him. Historical records clearly demonstrate that Mr. Staytin regularly demonized his own political opponents – or supported the media doing the same – without ever once acknowledging that they were doubtless raised by parents who indoctrinated their children in those beliefs. If a man had bigoted beliefs because he was raised by racists, he gained no sympathy in the society that Mr. Staytin presided over – he was simply called a racist and destroyed. Mr. Staytin himself showed no sympathy for the victims of childhood indoctrination, but rather judged adults as if everyone chose their own beliefs without compulsion.

“Removing a man from his history, and judging him in the present as a completely independent moral actor, was Mr. Staytin’s consistent habit. Again, we cannot judge him according to modern morality – we cannot even judge him according to the morality of his day, but we can judge him according to his *own* moral standards. Since he inflicted his own morality on others, it is entirely just to inflict it on him.

“If a doctor prescribes a treatment for a certain illness – but then rails against that treatment for himself, should he get that illness, we know he is a bad doctor, regardless of technology or circumstances.”

I stifled a yawn. God it was so *boring*. Everyone knows that losers cite facts and logic because they lack *power*. Arguments are a death warrant to getting what you want...

Alice went on.

“Mr. Staytin always treated his children gently while in public. He never sought help for his violence against his children. He treated other people’s children with thoughtful consideration.

“And, if the court will allow me to wax philosophical for just a moment or two, I will tell you *why* we are prosecuting him for child abuse.

“It is my belief that violence against children is a test of morality, and empathy. If a man commits violence against his children, and society lets him get away with it, then the path is clear for him to commit violence against others, adults, both domestically and overseas. Violence against children is a kind of test run for violence against adults. A society that fails to protect its children is fundamentally failing to protect itself as well.

“In other words, the reason that Mr. Staytin – when he was President – was able to commit such egregious acts of violence against others – again, both domestically and internationally – was because society let him get away with beating his children – his child, as far as we can determine.

“All the most abstract levels of violence arise from the most personal aggressions. War results from child abuse. Dictatorship results from child abuse. The Cataclysms resulted from child abuse. Every member of every society in the Old World made a decision every day – every moment of every day – to let child abusers continue their dark deeds. People did not intervene, they did not ask children about their experiences – or did not listen to their answers – and they let this continue, in most households, on most streets, in most cities and countries. They failed to confront the abusers – they failed to confront their own capacity for abuse – and as a result, the children grew up to hate their own societies, and failed to respect any of the rules those societies wished to impose. ‘Why should I obey the laws of a society that failed to protect me as a child? Why should I listen to your prohibitions on violence when you let me be beaten and neglected as a child? Why should I listen to your ‘respect for property’ when you let the government – you voted for the government – that plunged me into debt to buy your vote? Why should I respect any moral commandments you wish to inflict on me, when you preferred social ease and the companionship of evildoers rather than confronting my abusers, and saving my life?’

“And even those who tried to help the children, who promoted peaceful parenting – those people were torn apart by society. Society not only failed to protect its own offspring – as anti-natural a situation as could be conceived of – but it also attacked anyone who tried to help the children.

“The children saw all of this – after the rise of the old Internet, for the first time in human history, children could *see* the undoing of their protectors in real-time – and they grew up with nothing but

contempt for their elders. Since their elders were moral hypocrites of the first order, most of the children gave up on morality as a whole.

“A feral age was thus born, where modern technology fueled the spread of ancient hedonism. ‘Live for today, live for power, live for status, live for sex and food – but never live for morality, because morality is hypocrisy, and is only ever used to control you!’ Morality is a mechanism of confinement and subjugation – and it is the mark of a slave to be moral, because morality never applies to the rulers, to the slaveowners, to the fat farmers of the tax cattle!

“Morality became humiliation – morality became subjugation – and the natural animal desire for success and control and power was channeled away from self-mastery and compassion for suffering, and instead flowed into the State, into power, into violent control over others – and who could blame these children – in general, not specific to this case – because they were taught that morality is a mere convenient justification for abuses of power – and all who are moral are slaves.

“This was the tipping point into the Cataclysms – the failure of morality to restrain greed. The death of morality is the birth of tyranny – if citizens refuse to restrain themselves, they will be restrained by those in power. Society was divided into those desperately clinging to the remnants of the good, and those who used that desperation to subjugate, humiliate and control them. Greed swelled debt, the economies collapsed; government power grew until the inevitable chaotic rebellion or abject subjugation. Nature reimposed restraint through disaster, since it had been abandoned through immorality.”

Alice turned and pointed at me. “And while this man cannot be justly held up as a scapegoat for the disasters that consumed the lives of billions, we can learn – we can still teach the statist regions of the world – that how you treat your children is how your future will treat you. Control them with false morality, and they will grow to abandon morality, and control you with brute force.

“We cannot resurrect the billions who died in the Cataclysms. We cannot go back in time and change the endless moral cowardice of every moment – but history, circumstance and coincidence has resurrected one man for us to judge.”

Alice’s voice softened.

“Like most of you, I have a family tree on my wall, as a reminder. And I gazed at my family tree every night, as I prepared for this case – and wondered what they would want me to say, what would give them some peace. Billions of people – perhaps unconsciously, I doubt it though – earned their own deaths by failing to protect children. We have one of them here, before us. The fact that he was a President is irrelevant – the fact that he was a *parent* – still is a parent, as we shall see – is everything.

“Because Mr. Staytin failed to protect his son – beat his own son – and participated in the endless coverups of crimes against children in his environment, in his family, in his community and his country – that is why his invasions were possible, why his predations and exploitations and indebtedness were possible.

“If you will not protect your own children, will you stand up for the children of unknown foreigners?”

Alice let the question hang for a long moment. To me, it had a silly noose around its neck. However, I could see the effects of her words on the people leaning forward in their white pews. Her syllables were striking hearts most solidly, and I began to feel some real unease.

Dear God alive, what if she really is convincing?

Alice continued, her voice changing to reflect the power of generalities – and an explanation for the suffering that billions had gone through – that I had apparently set in motion and slept through...

“In the past, everyone believed that heroism was charging up a beach with a gun in your hand, or pulling a man from a burning building – this allowed them to reserve their courage for situations they would never face. The courage of the everyday – the courage to ask children how they are doing, and really *listen* to the answers – the courage to protect children, to build a secure future by securing the vulnerable in the here and now – that courage was never discussed, never encouraged. What passed for art was all superhero movies and cartoon villainy – the everyday heroism necessary to confront the very real villains in your environment, in your family – in your own heart – was always avoided. Evil ran the world – and everyone cried out at their perceived helplessness, while studiously avoiding the very real actions they could take to save themselves, save the future, save the world.

“Well, that is not how we live now. Now, we protect the children. Many of you were surprised to hear that child abuse is the most serious crime in our society – for the simple reason that child abuse is the source of all other crimes, and we are far more focused on prevention than cure. Millions upon millions of children are still being abused in the world today, as I speak – as you listen. Hundreds of millions of you are tuning in here to watch this trial – which is one of the reasons...” Alice changed her mind. “And defense of the children in the world is defense of our society, our freedoms, our civilization. Children who are beaten, assaulted and abused – and neglected – will often grow up to hate our free societies, as a utopia they are barred from – and they may attack us, undermine us, just as they were attacked and undermined. The defense of children is the self-defense of civilization itself. Through our collective judgement of Mr. Staytin, we invite everyone, across the entire world, to judge themselves by their own moral standards, by how they behave in public, by the sentimentality of the soft stories they tell their children – and ask yourself: are you a good parent? Are you teaching your children morality, reason, negotiation and peace? Are you hitting your children, yelling at your children, infecting them with the mind-virus of verbal abuse? Are you neglecting your children, in pursuit of money and glory and fame – all empty vessels to stuff into the hollow heart of your own past suffering?”

“I remind you – as all moralists have throughout history – that the moral *is* the practical. Defending children is the same as defending yourself. Violence against children will destroy your society. Failing to protect children will raise the beasts who will consume you – and us too, if we are not careful.”

Alice finished, almost panting.

“Do you want to continue?” asked the judge.

Alice shook her head.

My heart was pounding. I could see the tears in the eyes of the audience, the crackling electric charge of her words flowing across the world.

I almost shot an apologetic look at Cornelius, for failing to take his advice to prepare – but my pride closed my eyes.

I felt nothing. To me, her words were like tiny ripples on the bow of a great battleship, parting without a tremor.

To be fair, I wanted to behead her – but mostly for entertainment purposes.

My face ached, and I tasted salt.

God, my father would've known how to deal with her...

Cornelius rose.

Chapter 42

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Cornelius said easily – and I was reminded how amazing it was to watch people go from their private personality to their public persona. *There is always at least two people in there...*

“Whenever there is a calamity, we have an urge to find scapegoats – to relieve our fear and anger, and to imagine that we can magically prevent a recurrence without addressing – root causes. Superstitious societies – which we claim to have outgrown – end up tyrannical because random bad things are always happening in the world, and if we associate random actions with those bad things, we end up controlling actions to the point of immobility, of paralysis, of dictatorship. Lightning strikes a king while a man is dancing, so no more dancing! A prince dies while his servant hums – no more humming!

“There have been endless disasters throughout human history – very few have legitimate scapegoats, even to those in the moment, who can assess the facts and evidence in the present time. Yet we, who claim to have outgrown historical superstition, are looking for a scapegoat for the Cataclysms. Through fortune, fate or chance, we have been delivered two people who are relatively easy to blame. The President, who sits before you, and his son.

“However, we have a system of justice precisely because it is so easy to blame people. Disasters bring fear, fear brings helplessness, and we strive to overcome helplessness by blaming others.

“The root causes of the Cataclysms are well understood, but not definitive. One thing we have learned in the modern world is to not place our faith in any coercive institutions. If the majority of us are good, the existence of government means that we will be ruled by evil. If the majority of us are evil, then a democracy ensures that evildoers will rule. If a minority of us are good, we still end up ruled by the

immoral. If a minority of us are evil, those evildoers will rule us through the State. There is no circumstance under which the existence of institutionalized coercion leads to a more moral society.

“We know all this, this is what we teach our children.

“I am aware that my client is not on trial for his political actions, but rather his parenting. However, we have to ask ourselves: would we wish to dig up crimes 500 years past if it weren’t for our collective trauma of the Cataclysms?

“All who lack self-knowledge are enslaved to their emotions. I submit to you that this – prosecution is fundamentally *psychological*. The stories of the Cataclysms, handed down by our ancestors, and made vivid through the records that were kept, call out for justice, for vengeance, for punishment!

“Just because we have only two men to punish does not mean that we should punish those two men. If we were to go back in time and change the behaviours – or lifespans – of these two men, do you seriously believe that the Cataclysms would never have come to pass?

“It took centuries to sow the demon seeds that resulted in the world-wide disasters. The opposition to rationality, the destruction of universal morality, the substitution of hysteria for reason, the general psychosis provoked by the illusion of infinite resources – itself a result of State counterfeiting of currency – the collapse of the family, the absence of fathers, the understandable inability of single mothers to raise strong sons – we could list the causes all day, and still have room for more.”

Alice raised her hand. “Judge Peters, my colleague is literally creating a strawman out of thin air. We are not charging Mr. Staytin with causing the Cataclysms.”

Judge Peters looked at Cornelius inquisitively.

Cornelius said: “I appreciate my colleague reminding me of the charges I’m sworn to defend my client against. I am seeking to explain to the audience – to those who will judge – the psychological causality behind these charges.”

Judge Peters asked him to focus on the charges.

“It is a universal principle of justice that we examine here: how much is a man responsible for his moral decisions? It used to be said that morality is a social construct – we have outgrown that, thank heavens – but there is truth in the statement. Don’t gasp, give me some room – visitors to your society have insights that you may lack.

“Imagine if we had thawed out some caveman from 50,000 years ago, and found scraps of human flesh in his belly. Now cannibalism is a monstrous crime, so – would we charge him for taking a bite out of his fellow man? Imagine we thawed out a father and child from the same time, and the child had marks of abuse on his body – would we charge the caveman father with child abuse?

Alice started to say something, but Cornelius raised his hand. “I understand the charges – my colleague was about to say that we would not charge the caveman, because the caveman would never have tried

to hide his abuse, or been hypocritical in its application. And I understand that, as the root of the charges against my client – but an essential moral element is missing from the case, which I believe exonerates my client completely.

“My client is charged with child abuse because – according to his son, and other evidence – he beat his son, neglected his son, and verbally abused him as well. The hypocritical element is that he hid all of this from public view, and claimed to be a loving father.

“To our eyes this appears monstrous, and truly damning. However, the essential element I referred to earlier is this: *this hypocrisy was ubiquitous within his society*. It takes a mere moment of logical examination to unravel this hypocrisy in the present – and arguably, in the past – but almost no parents were able to achieve this rational feat 500 years ago. Hypocrisy was the norm – the near-universal norm. To hit in private and be peaceful in public was the *modus operandi* of almost every parent, the entire world over. All parents praised peace in public, and waged war against their children in private.

“It took the entire length and breadth of the Cataclysms for this obvious contradiction to be finally unraveled – giving birth to the modern peaceful world. The deaths of billions, continents in flames, starvation, disease, war and literal hell on earth – this is what it took for humanity to wake up from the dogmatic slumber of justifying violence against our children.

“We all – humanity as a whole had to fall into to hell – and burn there for generations – in order to finally declare peace against our own children. Yet we stand here in judgement over one single solitary man, for failing to discover what it took humanity centuries of destruction to learn!

“In order to prove her case, my colleague has to first establish that these beatings occurred, and then that my client had the moral knowledge and responsibility to prevent them – and that his behaviour differed markedly from those around him, in his time.

“This is an insurmountable task. We can regret these alleged beatings, we can be horrified at the standards of the past – which I applaud, it is that horror which has built the present – but they *were* the standards, all over the world, for almost every parent. We can say that my client should have been aware of the tiny fringe ‘extremist’ movement of peaceful parenting, but the proponents of such a radical philosophy were expelled from society by the abusers long before they became mainstream – it is really *those* censors that we should thaw and blame for the Cataclysms, because if peaceful parenting had been allowed to flourish, we would’ve avoided that endless span of hell altogether.”

Cornelius paused. My eyes widened. He was either thinking deeply on the fly, or giving an incredible simulation of it.

“We praise ourselves as a just and empathetic society. But empathy is a real challenge – it is not just divining the needs and emotions of others, but instead putting ourselves directly in their shoes.

“So let me take you on a brief journey, and then I will sit down.

“I want you to come back with me in time 500 years. Your parents are stressed, workaholics, facing a society coming apart at the seams – massive debt, escalating taxes, foreign attacks, increasing censorship and growing political violence. If you are raised at home, your mother spends her days panicking over bad news on her phone rather than loving you. More likely, you are dumped in a government-controlled daycare within a few weeks or months of being born, where you struggle to survive in a dangerous and chaotic clan of disturbed children.

“When you are sent to what was historically called a ‘school,’ you are taught to hate your culture, your history, your country, your civilization. You are exposed to sexual content at a very early age, the most disturbed children rule your social landscape, and your parents very likely get divorced.

“You are neglected, an afterthought to the fear and vanity of those around you. You are spanked according to religious misinterpretation or simple frustration. Your property is taken away, you are left unattended for hours at a time, and you struggle to learn how to negotiate with the crazy children around you.

“You are distracted by videogames, which at least provide a semblance of stability, predictability and achievement. You have no idea how you are going to grow up, find a spouse and start a family. You don’t want the lives your parents have, but don’t know how to create any other options.

“Your only potential path to security is political power. Your father is a politician – he was violent towards you, just as your mother was. He opens the door to power for you. If you don’t walk through it, you have no future.

“So you do – you take political power, you find a wife and have children. The anti-rational mob whose votes you rely on constantly demand that you cater to *them*, to *their* every whim and need, rather than spending time with your own family.

“You have a son who turns out to be quite - different. You don’t understand him, you have no time to learn how to understand him – and his rebellion is something you would never have imagined inflicting on your own father, for fear of his violence.

“Your entire society is drenched in violence. The State commands and controls and subjugates with the power of force. Reputations are casually destroyed through lies, friends are separated into blind opposing camps, families and marriages splinter under the pressure of an uncontrollable world.

“In this violence, chaos and disintegration – what decisions would *you* make?

“With no better examples before your eyes, how would *you* parent?

Cornelius’s eyes grew steely. “Most importantly: *how much free will do you have?*”

“We accept that a man who commits a crime under direct coercion is not responsible for his actions. If I force you to rob a bank, it is *I* who am charged, not you. 500 years ago, the whole world was breaking and cracking apart under compulsion. The reason we allow *no* exceptions to the nonaggression principle

is that the historical world is the clearest example of a 'slippery slope' that could possibly be imagined – a slope slippery with blood. Once the State has the power to tax – the definition of the State really – it has the power to create schools that indoctrinate the young. After that, it is just a matter of time before the end. Do we blame citizens for having allegiance to the State that raised them? Do we blame citizens for failing to see that the State is coercion, when to understand that would be to know for certain that their parents voluntarily put them under the control of a coercive organization?

“My client was raised with violence, in a violent society, by violent people. That was the language he spoke, the world that he had to survive in.

“We can condemn him for what he did to survive in a world he never made – or we can be grateful at the lessons learned from his actions, from the actions of almost every parent in his world.

“This would be like condemning the reptile for not being a mammal, or the monkey for not being a human.”

There was a slight murmur of laughter. I bristled with anger.

Cornelius said: “It is unjust to blame a man for circumstances – and it is unjust to the point of immorality to blame a man for failing to learn what took the rupture of the entire planet to discover. We can mourn the life he had, sympathize with the world he was raised in – but to condemn him will be utterly unjust.”

Chapter 43

Judge Peters looked up from his sandwich as the door to his chambers opened.

Alice and Cornelius came in.

Cornelius said: “Judge Peters, I have a concern – more than one, actually. My client, Mr. Staytin, is not taking any advice or instruction from me.”

Judge Peters nodded. “Does he want another representative?”

“No, he seems happy with me, but – he won't prepare, he won't take any advice. I'm concerned that he might be aiming for a mistrial.”

“I assume his – position is well-documented.”

“Oh, I make him sign every morning. I've gone over all the consequences, he knows that his refusal to take advice won't affect the legitimacy of the trial. I've told him that he can be cross-examined by his own son, but he doesn't seem to care...”

The judge shrugged, turning to Alice. “Comments?”

She shook her head.

The judge said: “Everyone has the right to refuse good advice. Must be one hell of a shock, to go from the top of the world to the bottom of the heap, in the blink of an eye. Nothing like this would ever have happened in his world. I’ve always been curious how... No, nevermind, inappropriate.” He sighed. “If your colleague has no objection, and I have no objection, I suppose I appreciate you bringing it to my attention, but we must plow on.”

Cornelius nodded, a pained expression on his face.

After lunch, Alice stood up in the courtroom.

“For my first witness – my only eyewitness of course – I am calling Jake Staytin.”

The two wide white double doors opened, and an elderly man strode into the courtroom – he had an air of newly-minted vitality, as if his knees had just been replaced.

Mr. Staytin cried: “Good God, you’re so old!”

Jake nodded, his eyes wide. “Dad...” he murmured.

Cornelius leaned over and whispered something to his client.

Mr. Staytin stood up and strode over to the stand. He sat, comfortable and erect, surveying the crowd.

Alice rose and wished him good afternoon.

“Good afternoon,” he replied coldly.

“It must be quite a shock, meeting your son, who is twenty years older than you.”

For all his bravado, a ripple of vulnerable shock ran across Mr. Staytin’s face. “Yes. You have no idea.”

Alice said: “I once played with a VR simulation of my father as a boy, since he said he wanted me to know him before I came along, but I don’t imagine it’s anything close.”

Mr. Staytin stared at her. As if by a gravity well, his eyes were drawn to his son. He murmured something.

“Excuse me?”

He cleared his throat. “It is strange when your eldest son becomes your *eldest* son...”

There was an exquisite vulnerability in his demeanour, but it vanished immediately.

“Do you need a moment?”

“I do not.”

Alice nodded. “Could you tell us your philosophy of parenting please?”

Mr. Staytin paused. “That is a big question.”

Cornelius said: “Too open-ended.”

Alice shook her head. “We are separated by centuries, Judge Peters. Not many people here would know the parenting practices of 500 years ago, and you should never judge what you don’t understand.”

Judge Peters allowed the question to stand.

Mr. Staytin smiled. “Is there no statute of limitations for inconvenient memories?”

Alice did not reply.

He said: “My general goal was to – prepare my children for the world, the world that *was*, I suppose. A different world... I knew an – idealist, when I was younger. Two, in fact. Life did not end well for – either of them. Those who want to improve the world are usually the first to go.” He smiled self-deprecatingly. “I never had that kind of courage. Managing things, I was good at that... I’m getting to my parenting, be patient young lady. How can I fit everything that – was, through the eye of this needle?” He gestured at his mouth, then spread his hands. “There were two – poles, I suppose, in my day – listen to me, like an old man on a porch with short suspenders. On the one side were parents who wanted to be buddies to their children, like friends or – like siblings I think. They never wanted to displease their children - my wife was a little bit that way, I think a lot of mothers are... But that gives way too much power to the children, they end up ruling the roost, wagging the dog, if that makes sense, and I remember reading somewhere that if you don’t give any limits to your children, and keep making excuses, that’s the best way to turn them into criminals...” He smiled wryly. “I know how precious that sounds, I am on trial for a crime, and talking about how to prevent criminality. But that was the way we were, the best information we could go on. And I had the example of my – friends, and relatives, when I was a boy, and I was not a very – young father, so I got to see how some of that played out before I put my shoulder to the wheel, so to speak. The kids with no discipline – well, they just wasted their lives. Everything was an imposition, every speedbump a brick wall, they never wanted to do any paperwork or meet with any lawyers or do anything difficult or unpleasant – they lived their easy lives, and just – faded into the woodwork, got nowhere – or died, that wasn’t as rare as it should have been. Drugs were a big issue, we all hung over that – canyon to nowhere... And my father was – well, one hell of a disciplinarian, you almost had to – salute when he walked by. *We’re not here for pleasure*, he made that clear. To be of use, to be of service – well, that requires discipline. You can’t be a coach unless you know how to play, and you’ll never learn how to play by lazing around. Get up early, make the bed so tight you can bounce a coin on it, shave even on a Sunday, do your push-ups, plan your day – and stick to it – say your prayers, go to bed early, don’t waste time. ‘Plenty of time for laziness after you’re dead,’ he used to say. And he did it, he made everything for us, pulled us up out of – nothing, 40 acres and a mule, and put us right at the center of

American life. Overalls to tuxedo's, two generations. And we were supposed to stay there forever, but I guess we – didn't..."

His voice faltered slightly. The entire audience was fascinated by this voice from the past, this warped window to a dead world.

He continued: "You seem to have a very pleasant life here, all of you – maybe our sacrifices were not entirely in vain. To be honest, with all respect and gratitude for you – awakening me – it is a little too – soft, for my tastes, but I suppose that is the point. My great-grandfather's life – well, I suppose my life would've seemed pretty soft to him, I suppose that is the point, to make things easier for your kids, then nag them for being – soft!"

Mr. Staytin chuckled. Alice started to rise.

"I know, my parenting... Here I have been silent for 500 years, and now I am nagged to get to the point! But that's all right, this is a – formal place, a place of justice I am told. I have spent so much time flying around the sky that I'm surprised I'm not being judged in the clouds!" He smiled at the judge. "Although I suppose it is fitting that your name is 'Peters.'" He took a deep breath. "As to parenting, well I was tough – you call this 'abuse' now, which I suppose could be understood – how my father was raised was much harsher than how I raised my son, perhaps it is supposed to diminish until we get to this – heaven, this utopia." He sighed. "I wanted to – I wanted my approval to be something that my children strove for, or after. I suppose I was obsessed with approval ratings myself, but you do have to get the – approval of other people in this life, in order to succeed. People have to *want* to eat at your restaurant – and have you guys tried this one at the top of the tree, run by – Mavis was it?" He laughed. "Okay, okay – I'll withdraw that myself. But it really is amazing, believe me. So – I withheld my approval for my children – particularly my eldest, hello again stranger – because he in fact had the most potential of all of my children. My middle child was like a horse – strong, fast, but not much between the ears. My daughter – well, that's a whole other situation... Unless you dig her up as well... Sorry, poor taste. And I did that – yes, I did spank my children, on occasion. But I wasn't about to teach them discipline while being undisciplined myself – there were a series of steps, each one had to be followed, it wasn't some random blow from the sky! You give a warning, then another warning, and then you explain why the spanking is about to happen, and then you administer the spanking – through clothing – it was really designed to shock rather than hurt – and then you check with the child whether he – or she – understands why the punishment has occurred. You never did it out of anger, you didn't do it out of hatred, and you didn't do it because of some silly disagreement." Mr. Staytin held up a finger. "And you certainly made sure that the child understood the rules before applying the punishment." He craned his head, looking around the gallery. "I'm with you – all. I *hated* the parents who just – beat the hell out of their children, they were just creating monsters we would all have to deal with for the rest of our lives!" He spread his hands again. "The kids with no discipline just kind of – dissolved. The kids who were – beaten – just rebelled, they just – dissolved in opposition instead, same outcome. Me, I've always been for the Aristotelian mean."

Alice stood. "How often did you spank your children?"

Mr. Staytin's eyes widened. "Gosh... I know this sounds like a copout, but I am actually having some trouble accessing – middle memories. I guess the cryogenic technology was kind of – primitive. I can remember a few instances – one when my middle son was running towards a busy road, and another when my daughter knocked over a propane lamp while we were camping, could've set us all ablaze." He wagged his finger towards his son. "And this one, always hungry, grabbing at things on the stove. A woman I dated when I was a teenager had terrible burns all down her back, that really stuck with me. She couldn't get anywhere in life, she was afraid of the – beach..." His voice seemed to grow unconsciously aggrieved. "And yes, we turned the handles of the pans to the back, but he just kept grabbing at them, and it's tough with three kids – they also would do whatever he did, so it spread..." He turned to his son with a smile. "You got to stay up later, you got more allowance, but you were also a template for your siblings – and with great power comes great responsibility... There was also a rule about the phone... He was a needy kid, always wanted me around, so I would try to stay home on occasion, and sometimes there would be – very important phone calls, which is funny, because nothing seems important now, but then... And he would constantly want to show me something while I was on the phone, and I confess it created a kind of – static – in my brain, oh man, *really* frustrating – it was a real high-wire act, my life. You can only explain – those kinds of interruptions so many times before you sound like some emasculated house husband. Couldn't have that. And there wasn't much reasoning, that is the young-puppy phase of childhood, you just have to – train them. But it's a phase, and it ends, like everything – except my life I suppose!" He laughed, apparently self-consciously.

There was a strange silence in the amphitheater after his words. He turned around, scanning the audience.

Alice said: "You never – spanked your children in public."

"I also do not – defecate in public either. Or have sex. Does that make me a hypocrite?"

"Analogies are not arguments."

Mr. Staytin sighed. "I suppose it comes from my management experience. Praise in public, chastise in private. I cheered my middle son during his endless – football games. I wasn't screaming from the stands at him though, when he did something wrong – I would talk about that with him in private. You wanted to be instructional, not humiliating, so you don't do it in front of his friends, or strangers, or photographers, or the media – *that* to me would be utterly abusive!"

Alice paused. "You said that your children were like puppies..."

Mr. Staytin's voice sharpened. "No."

"You didn't?"

"Don't – reduce it to that. With regards to self-discipline, I said that they were in a puppy-like phase."

"And how long did that phase last?"

Mr. Staytin shrugged. "It was different for each kid. My eldest son fought me, my middle obeyed – and my daughter just – avoided me, clung to her mother, I guess. Are you asking when the last time was I spanked my children? For each of them?"

"Let's just – stick to your eldest."

Mr. Staytin's eyes narrowed. "That's a tough one. You're going to ask me, then you're going to ask him – or maybe he will ask me, apparently it works that way now. And if there is a discrepancy, then one of us is lying – or both of us. The fact is that it was not a central or important part of my parenting, so – it's like asking exactly how old your children were when they lost their last baby tooth. It's just part of – parenting, part of the general flow, not important enough to mark in your brain, like a birthday. My wife would remember – she could recite all our illnesses in her sleep..."

Alice said: "Just – give me a rough age range."

He took a deep breath. "Whooo." He tried to catch his son's eye, but Jake was looking down. "I'm going to guess – and remember, some of my memories didn't survive the deep-freeze – before puberty for sure, maybe nine or ten? No, it must've been younger than that..."

Alice waited.

Mr. Staytin looked at her helplessly. "I – I couldn't honestly tell you."

"Was he over five?"

"I think so."

"And did you try – reasoning with him, before hitting him?"

Cornelius said: "Asked and answered. He already said that he explained the rules before spanking."

Alice replied: "Explaining rules is not reasoning."

Judge Peters pursed his lips. "I think we could all – use more detail."

Mr. Staytin paused, glancing at the Judge. "So I'm – to answer?"

"Yes."

He blew through his lips. "Reasoning... That was pretty much the same as pleading, in my day – and I don't think I ever saw a different example. Life is busy – everyone here has enough leisure to come and lounge around - and I don't think I've seen one genuine emergency since I – came back to life. You're all like a bunch of Roman..." He laughed softly. "Well, you have time, but that wasn't how it was – for us. I guess this is a special case of historical pleading, but you have no idea how busy we were... I would get up at 5:30 in the morning – before dawn usually – exercise, do emails, social media, breakfast, calls – endless, endless calls – and usually head off to the office before the kids were even up. Sometimes I wouldn't get home until after they'd gone to bed – which I hated, I always wanted to read them a story,

when they were young..." His eyes grew distant. "Everything was mad, looking back – it was a mad life, but I loved it at the time. I frankly don't know how you all – fill up your days. And even the weekends – there was always some family function or donor dinner, someone was always having an anniversary or a christening or a birthday, it was just a – mad treadmill, as I said. There was no time for reason..." He smiled sadly. "Although I suppose you will say that there was no time *because* we weren't reasoning. But you *get* the world, you try to improve it, but you can't remake it from scratch..."

"Unless it burns to the ground..." said Alice softly, then lifted up her left hand. "Withdrawn."

Mr. Staytin stared at her for a long moment, then shrugged. "So of course you do try to reason with your kids, but you can't spend your entire life trying to reason with your kids, you have to get things done as well. And I – I love the leisure that you have now... This world without emergencies – makes my world look like a madhouse, and maybe it was..."

Alice said: "Of course, you never hit – another adult, correct?"

Mr. Staytin shrugged. "Maybe some drunken stuff in my teens – but no, not really."

"Why did you hit children, but not adults?"

"Well – I don't know how to say this without sounding – insulting, but children's brains are – immature. Deficient in reason, just like they are – deficient in height, relative to adulthood."

Alice checked her notes. "What was your grandfather's name?"

Mr. Staytin blinked. "John."

"And – he spent years with – diminished capacity, is that right?"

"I don't remember how long it was, but it was a while, yeah."

"And would you say that – John – was deficient in reason? Relative to his adulthood?"

"He had dementia."

Alice nodded. "So – he had a – physical deficiency, in his brain, which reduced his capacity to reason."

Mr. Staytin stared at her.

Cornelius said: "We need a question."

Mr. Staytin said: "I'm not a doctor, and I was a kid, I don't know what was wrong with him."

"But you said he had dementia."

He shrugged. "That's what I was told, that was the common word, but I didn't – diagnose him like a doctor would."

“But it wasn’t – some – moral failing, right? Something was wrong with his brain, which reduced his capacity to reason.”

“That would be my assumption.”

“Would it have been appropriate for your father to – hit his father, if his father did not – act rationally?”

Mr. Staytin turned with oddly pleading eyes to Cornelius. His representative walked over to him, and they conferred quietly.

Cornelius said: “Judge Peters, my client cannot reasonably answer what he thought his father should’ve done about his grandfather’s illness.”

Alice snorted. “I am asking – I do apologize for the unclear wording – I am asking if Mr. Staytin believes it would be morally right – or acceptable – for his father to have hit his grandfather for failing to act rationally.”

Instantly, Mr. Staytin said: “That would be elder...”

He stopped immediately.

Alice turned to him with laser focus. “What was the next word? What were you about to say?”

Mr. Staytin looked at Cornelius, who looked at Judge Peters.

“Please answer,” said the judge, leaning forward.

Mr. Staytin sat silently.

Everyone waited, for an endless thirty seconds.

“Cornelius, please inform your client of the penalties for failing to answer honestly.”

Another huddled conference, much gesticulation.

A recess.

Eventually, Mr. Staytin returned to the stand.

Judge Peters asked: “Are you ready to answer the question?”

“I am.”

“Please repeat the question.”

Alice said: “Would it be morally acceptable for his father to have hit his grandfather for failing to act rationally?”

“No, because that would be elder – abuse.”

A ripple of breathy sound flew through the amphitheater.

Alice said: “Why would that be abuse?”

Mr. Staytin said: “Well, it’s not his fault that he has – dementia.”

“Is it your children’s fault that they had – childhood?”

“I don’t understand the question.”

“Is it a child’s fault that his brain is – immature, relative to his adulthood?”

“Of course not.”

“So – if we cannot punish the elderly for their diminished mental capacity, how is it moral to punish children for *their* diminished mental capacity?”

“Because – children are going to grow into adulthood, they have potential that my grandfather did not.”

“So you are changing your answer.”

“Excuse me? I am doing no such thing.”

“You certainly are.”

Mr. Staytin stared at Alice stonily.

“Would you like me to tell you how your answer has changed?” asked Alice.

Silence.

She leaned forward over her white desk. “Your answer has changed because earlier, you said that you punished your children because of their diminished capacity. When I pointed out that you did not punish your grandfather – or you would not approve of him being punished – because of *his* diminished capacity, you now say that your children can be punished because they have potential – intellectual potential. In other words, it is not diminished capacity that is the cause of punishment, but rather diminished capacity plus intellectual potential. Diminished capacity alone is not enough.”

“Hair-splitting 101.”

“I don’t understand,” said Alice.

“An introductory course is called ‘101’,” said Mr. Staytin coldly. “My children are not my grandfather, different rules apply. Sure, they both wore diapers I suppose, but only one of them breast-fed – at least I hope so!”

The expected laughter did not manifest.

Alice slowly began walking towards Mr. Staytin. “Let us suppose that there was a course of treatment that helped your grandfather regain his intellectual capacity. Every day, he got a little bit better, although it would take years to recover completely. Would it be acceptable to strike him then, if he failed to obey the rules?”

“I get where you’re coming from, but please let’s not waste time and insult our intelligence. My grandfather had had his life, he knew all the rules, and they had been taken away from him by bad luck, by nature, whatever. My children were born blank slates, *tabula rasa*, the rules had to be – imprinted on them. The wax steams on impact, doesn’t make the king evil...”

“So you are changing your answer again.”

“What the hell?”

Alice paused after his outburst, then slowly ticked off her fingers. “First, it was hitting based on diminished capacity – then it was diminished capacity plus intellectual potential – now, it is diminished capacity plus intellectual potential *plus* a lack of prior knowledge about the rules. Does it trouble you that you are continually changing your story? Do you know what the word ‘defensive’ means?”

Cornelius jumped up: “Rhetorical questions.”

Judge Peters signaled for Alice to move on.

She nodded. “Earlier, you said that you could not remember when you stopped hitting your children, do you remember that?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think that we should judge you more harshly, or less harshly, based on your lack of knowledge, your forgetfulness?”

“My brain was frozen!”

“Agreed – you have an intellectual deficiency outside of your control, at least we have to take your word on that. Do you think we should judge you more harshly, or less harshly, because you no longer remember when you stopped hitting your children?”

“I don’t know. This world is new to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you come across some – pygmy tribe in the middle of nowhere, and they ask you how they should feel or think about something, you wouldn’t have a clue, because you don’t know them at all – well you are even more foreign than that to me – I have no idea how you should or should not judge me, I’m just – telling the truth!”

“All right – let us say you have a personal assistant, and she does not schedule an appointment. Two scenarios – one, you told her about the appointment, and she forgot – and two, you never told her about the appointment at all. Would you judge her more negatively if you had told her about that appointment, and she just forgot it?”

“I would judge her more negatively, yes.”

“What if it turned out that she had some brain disease, which *caused* her to forget the appointment?”

Mr. Staytin rolled his eyes. “Well, then of course I wouldn’t judge her – negatively.”

“And of course, if you had never told her of the appointment, you wouldn’t judge her negatively at all for failing to forget that which she had never learned.”

“Yes.”

“So now you are changing your answer once more.”

Mr. Staytin jumped up. “Oh come on!”

The Judge gestured for him to sit again.

“You have, you are,” said Alice, walking slowly closer. “Now we have another standard excusing – or justifying – you hitting your children. You said that you could hit them – but not your grandfather – because they had diminished capacity, with the potential for maturity – and because your grandfather had prior knowledge of the rules, while your children did not. Now, you claim that you would not judge your personal assistant negatively for having no knowledge of an appointment – in other words, if she didn’t know something, you would not judge her negatively for the inevitable result.”

Cornelius raised his hand. “Judge Peters, I’m getting confused.”

“Try again,” said the judge.

“No need,” said Mr. Staytin briskly. “I did say that my grandfather should not be hit because he used to know the rules, and has forgotten them – but that was not the case with my children, because I explicitly told them the rules *before* spanking them – gave them many *many* warnings in fact! So the two situations are *not* analogous!”

“Was there a time – early in your grandfather’s disease – when you, or your father – or anyone really – reminded him of the rules, but he failed to follow them, because of his reduced intellectual capacity?”

“I’m sure there was.”

“So reduced intellectual capacity can lead one to not follow the rules, even if they have been made explicit recently.”

Pause.

“Mr. Staytin?”

Silence. Cornelius’s lower lip trembled.

“Mr. Staytin?”

“Why the hell are we talking about my grandfather’s dying mind from centuries ago? He’s not here, my father isn’t here, you are all just – obsessed with the past, with railroading me and cornering me and – twisting my words!”

The judge raised his hand. “Mr. Staytin.”

He took a deep breath.

“You must answer the question.”

Mr. Staytin stared at Alice for a moment. “Repeat.”

Alice said: “Is it possible for a person with diminished intellectual capacity to fail to follow rules that have been explained shortly before?”

“Yes.”

“So this justification, too, for hitting children – fails, falls flat, is invalid.”

Silence.

“Every characteristic that you claim justifies hitting children applies only to children, even though those characteristics also apply to adults with mental deficiencies. This means that – do you know what *ex post facto* reasoning is?”

“Of course, although I know you will explain it again.”

“Reasoning after the fact. You act, and then you justify. You hit children because they are smaller and weaker, and dependent upon you. You hit children because you were hit as a child, you have not processed that pain, that fear and anger, and so you re-inflict it upon your own children, which was a cycle of history that led to the horrors of the Cataclysms. You have no moral justification for hitting children. If, in your old age, you had diminished mental capacity – as we all do – and your adult children hit you – as you had hit them, you would have screamed that it was ‘elder abuse’ and called the police! You complain that I insult your intelligence – do not insult this entire assembly, the entire world, by pretending that your violence towards your children was anything *other* than the brute exercise of power over them!” She turned and pointed at Jake. “One of them is still here, against all odds, and I would bet a Bitcoin that this is the first time he has heard all of these excuses and justifications for your brutality towards him! We will get an apology out of you, Mr. Staytin – even if it is 500 years too late! We are here for justice!”

Chapter 44

Cornelius rose, and his unusual bulk seemed to amplify his presence. It seemed as if a wave of admiration and mild resentment washed over the watching crowd – perhaps they felt it was unfair to pit such an imposing man against such a slender youth.

Cornelius said: “Well of course we are here for justice – I don’t find it necessary to announce to my dentist that I have come for dentistry. People repeat that they wish to be just when they secretly fear – or know perhaps – that they’re being unjust...”

Alice raised her hand to object, but then shook her head.

Cornelius said: “I had – I have – prepared a big speech, but I am throwing it all aside, for the moment, because I cannot help but notice one essential fact in my colleague’s – presentation.

“She took great pains at the beginning to remind us – to inform us – that Mr. Staytin – the ex-President of the United States of America – has lost his title, and we were no longer to refer to him as a President, or afford him any respect or deference due to his office.

“Fair enough. I doubt anyone here – with the exception of Mr. Staytin himself – believes that his office deserves much respect or deference, given what we know happened over the last few centuries.

“However, this raises perhaps the most important point of these entire proceedings. Thousands are gathered here, hundreds of millions around the world – no pressure, just noticing – and why? Well, obviously, there is the strange novelty of a mind being shot forward half a millennia through time – but observing and examining his thoughts could have as easily been achieved through interviews and talk shows. He could have asked and answered questions live or in VR, for the next few decades, and I doubt we would have run out of things to talk about. So we are not gathered here out of mere curiosity about this window into history.”

Cornelius stared at the crowd, past the tiny cameras. “Why are we here? I distill that ancient philosophical question into something more pointed – why am I standing here, why are you sitting there, why are you watching this?

“I believe it is because we are trying to live a contradiction. Let us take my colleague’s lead and strip Mr. Staytin of all of his – power and historical grandeur and – his presidency. Very well. Let us imagine that he was a plumber, or a computer programmer, or a house painter. Mr. Staytin, who paints houses. Mr. Staytin, who was never President, never a public figure, never held high office – was unknown even in his day.

“Through some accident of science or circumstances, Mr. Staytin, the obscure house painter, arrives on our shores, in our time. How would we treat him?

“I cannot say with certainty, of course – but I imagine we would interview him, we would ask him questions and get his insights. We would criticize him, of course, for his primitive thoughts – but would we do...” He gestured at the enormous white amphitheater. “Would we do – this?

“Would we haul him in front of an audience of hundreds of millions and charge him with the most serious crimes in our legal vocabulary?”

“Would we make a spectacle out of him, an example?”

Cornelius pointed at Mr. Staytin. “Look at me honestly and tell me that we would be treating this man in exactly the same manner if he were an unknown house painter from the distant past.

“No, it is impossible, it would not happen.”

Alice jumped up. “Speculation.”

Judge Peters paused. “Cornelius?”

“I think it is fair to say that we would not treat an unknown person exactly the same way that we would treat one of the most famous men in all of history.”

“Alice?”

“It is still speculation. We cannot tell *how* things would be different, even if we accept there *would* be a difference.”

Cornelius said: “But I have not stated *how* things would be different, merely that they would be.”

“It is not proven.”

Cornelius said: “The interest from the residents of the geographical region invaded by President Staytin in the distant past has been extraordinarily high. More people per capita are watching from there than anywhere else. Now come on, let us be reasonable – you cannot possibly argue that this vast number of people would be watching an unknown house painter, as opposed to a political leader who harmed their ancestors.”

Alice paused. “You are correct.”

“Furthermore...”

Judge Peters waved his hand. “You only need one instance, Cornelius.”

Cornelius nodded. “All right, we have established that things are different because he was the President. Now, we are all troubled by the continued existence of States across the globe. We also know that their power is derived from the abuse of children in their – countries. I post this as a theoretical, since it cannot be proved – but I ask everyone watching and listening to think of this: the level of worldwide interest in this case is unprecedented in history. We have the capacity to instruct – and remind – the entire world of the relationship between the abuse of children and the power of the State. Using the interest generated by the fact that Mr. Staytin used to be *President* Staytin, the most powerful man in the world, we have the capacity to cast – to project – this most essential information into the hearts and minds of virtually the entire planet.”

Alice said: “None of this is proven.”

Cornelius shrugged. “The level of interest is higher, that is proven. The relationship between child abuse and State power is proven, and has been for centuries. I have not made any assertions about the *intent* of my colleague, because I cannot read minds of course.”

Judge Peters raised his eyebrows. “I appreciate the audacity of winging it, Cornelius, and have some idea where you are going, but I would appreciate it if you would get there - more rapidly.”

Cornelius nodded. “Now I know that my colleague was abused as a child – this is common knowledge, I am not speaking out of turn. I also strongly suspect – though cannot prove directly – that she was chosen to prosecute this case *because* of her intimate and emotional knowledge – experience – of being abused as a child – for which of course she has my fullest and deepest sympathies. She is one of the very few people in our society who has something in common with Jake Staytin, the accused’s son...”

Alice stood. “I do not appreciate being dragged into this case.”

Judge Peters agreed.

“My apologies to both of you – to all of you. My point is this: if my colleague is using Mr. Staytin’s past life as the President as leverage to gain interest, and so transfer the knowledge of how to become free to the remaining dark spots in the world – in other words, if he is being treated as an ex-President, rather than an unknown house painter – then he is political leverage – or moral leverage perhaps – which means that his trial is innately unjust!”

Alice jumped up. “I would like to say that this is outrageous – because it is – but of course I need to formulate a more specific argument. The idea that my office would act unjustly towards Mr. Staytin in order to achieve some abstract political goal – or anti-political goal – is appalling! It is true that I suffered briefly as a child, but I have a wonderful family, my Scans are all clear – I was not abused to the point where I would end up as an amoral consequence-calculator. The idea that I would’ve been traumatized to the point where I would end up saying that the end justifies the means – there is no evidence for that, and if we are going to go down that road, I am more than happy to have a team of psychologists and doctors testify as to my mental health.”

Cornelius said: “I am talking about general motivations – I cannot speak to your specific motivations of course. The decision to prosecute Mr. Staytin did not rest solely on your young shoulders. And we have already admitted that the current circumstances would be different if he had *not* been the President.”

Alice’s eyes flashed. “Different? That is what you are hanging your rebuttal on? Yes, things would’ve been different if he had not been a President. Granted. Also, things would have been different if it had been raining today. Some audience members might have pocketed umbrellas. Things would’ve been different if there had been a power failure, or if Mr. Staytin had awoken with a sore throat, or if my client had fainted five minutes ago. We can all construct alternative realities with infinite differences – which would mean that every single prosecution is unjust – is that your argument?”

Cornelius narrowed his eyes. “The extra millions of eyes on these proceedings originating from the land President Staytin previously invaded – do these constitute the equivalent of a few extra umbrellas to you?”

“That is a difference of degree, not of kind. Your argument that *any* difference implies unjust treatment is invalid.”

“Stating it does not make it so.”

“And even if we accept that more people are watching because Mr. Staytin used to be the President – a President – that does not mean that any injustice is occurring here. That’s like saying that if a few more people are watching a tennis game, that means the players are cheating!”

“Athletes play differently when a scout is watching!”

Judge Peters held up a hand. “Cornelius – you may finish your argument, but please leave your colleague out of it.”

“I appreciate that, and I apologize – I will.” Cornelius took a deep breath. “We accept that these proceedings are different because my client was the President – the most famous and powerful man in the world. If I were considering prosecuting this case, I would be tempted by two things – and I do speak only of myself here. First, I would be tempted to – leverage – Mr. Staytin’s fame and notoriety to send a message to the world. Second, I would be tempted to – strike a *blow* for the billions who died over the course of the Cataclysms. While I would never put my colleague in the same category as prior Statist prosecutors, we know that the desire for vengeance after conflict runs strong throughout the human heart, throughout human history. The hammer-blow of revenge is not something we have outgrown – nor should we.

“I merely put these forward as possibilities. And I turn to everyone in this amphitheater, since it is you who will decide my client’s fate. Why are you here? How many of the reasons why you are here are wrapped up in my client’s prior – occupation? Would you be here if he was an unknown house painter? Is my client to pay for the Cataclysms? Is my client a proxy for sending the message of peaceful parenting to the Statist societies? Are they watching because of who he was? Are you?”

“It is a central principle of justice that a man be tried for his crimes alone, and for no other reason. Using a man to send a message, to be a scapegoat – these are great wrongs. If my client would not be here if he were an unknown house painter, then he should not be here at all. We all know that, and we should act accordingly.”

After a long pause, Cornelius nodded at the audience and took his seat.

Alice scribbled furiously.

Chapter 45

Jake Staytin was called in the afternoon, and he strode uncertainly to the stand. He was a tall man, with cropped white hair and a slender build – short of muscles, of course, despite the electrical stimulation.

He had a woeful air; his eyes were cavernous, full of sights that had to be kept silent.

Alice said: “Good afternoon, Jake.” She turned to the audience. “I don’t mean to sound over-familiar, but we have an unusual father-and-son series of witnesses.” She turned back to him. “You are aware of how these proceedings will go?”

Jake nodded.

“In your day, witnesses were not allowed to cross-examine each other, but things have changed since then. You are allowed – even encouraged – to have a direct conversation with your father.”

Jake said: “I have a question, but I’m not sure if it’s for you or the judge.”

“Ask, and we shall see.”

“Well, we have these – you have these – Scans and whatnot – why not just hook everyone up to machines and make sure they are telling the truth?”

“Judge?” offered Alice.

Judge Peters nodded. “A few reasons, great question. This was tried in the past, but crimes tend to be committed by people with very – strange brains. They don’t tend to feel guilt, or shame – sociopaths, you used to call them – we call them ‘unicorns’ now, they are so rare. But they can pass any truth-scans easily. Of course, we can scan them and find out that they *are* sociopaths – which makes them far more likely to commit a crime, but not certain to. Another reason is that the pursuit of justice is a particularly – human endeavour. We program all our machines with morality – with universally preferable behaviour – but that does not make them *moral*. Programming a robot to flip a burger does not make it a chef, just metal following instructions. So we wanted to reserve the most human pursuit for – humanity, for us. And finally, the examination of immorality is not exactly a – skill that we, as a society, wish to abandon, to let atrophy, to forget. Philosophy – moral philosophy – is like the immune system of the body – if it doesn’t get any exercise, it tends to – self-destruct, and the body politic can then be infected by any rogue virus. We saw the effects on your society of the decay of moral philosophy – which concerns itself with the promotion of virtue and the examination and conquest of evil, just as a doctor concerns himself with the promotion of health and the examination and conquest of illness. Does that answer your question?”

Jake said: “That does not speak well for my upcoming defense.”

The Judge nodded. “I am aware that charges are being prepared for you with regards to your role in the Cataclysms – and they are of course serious charges, the second-most serious in our society – and it

would be inhuman for me to ask you to forget those charges, but I will ask you to do your best to focus on the current – case, the current circumstances.”

Jake nodded morosely.

Judge Peters gestured for Alice to proceed.

“Now, Jake – would you rather *me* question your father, or would you prefer to question your father directly?”

Something deep in Jake’s eyes flashed. Everyone knew that the question had been asked and answered ahead of time, during preparation, but the moment still sparked something deep within him. His back straightened, and he pulled at his long grey beard.

“I will ask him,” he said with resolution.

Mr. Staytin and Cornelius exchanged glances. Cornelius shrugged and pointed at a piece of paper between them. Mr. Staytin stood up and walked to the second stand. He raised his head and stared at Jake.

“Good to see you, son. It’s been a while.”

“It has.”

They stared at each other, the weight of centuries hanging between them.

Mr. Staytin said: “Judge?”

“Yes?”

“I have a couple questions.”

“Go ahead.”

“What is my son being charged with?”

“Censorship.”

Mr. Staytin blinked. “What? That’s the second most serious crime here?”

“After child abuse, it is the greatest source of criminality.”

Mr. Staytin took a deep breath. “Man, I really *did* fall down the rabbit hole, didn’t I?”

He glanced around, but there was no laughter.

He turned to his son. “What did you do?”

Jake cleared his throat. “Well, dad, I ran a social media company – the biggest one in fact.”

Mr. Staytin whistled. “Well...” He turned to the audience. “And you all think that I was the most powerful person?”

Again, no laughter.

“What happened?”

Jake turned to the judge. “I don’t know if I’m supposed to answer, because I don’t know – the – end of the story.”

Judge Peters said: “Why do you want to know, Louis?”

He shrugged. “Well, if I understand how this – rabbit hole – works, then my son here is charged with a serious crime, and one of his defenses will be that I was a terrible mean father, and that’s why he did – whatever terrible things he did. What that means is that he has a massive incentive to portray me as negatively as possible, which does not speak to his objectivity at all – or rather it does, in that he has *none*.”

There was a pause. The Judge gestured for Alice and Cornelius to approach him. There was a rapid conference, out of earshot.

Eventually, the Judge said: “You raise a valid point, thank you. We don’t have any magical solutions, other than to say that any falsehood from either of you will automatically procure your guilt. We do not generally accept childhood maltreatment as an excuse for moral wrongdoing as an adult. It may have a mitigating factor in extremes, but moral hypocrisy – which is really the root of all criminality – can be unraveled by every sovereign consciousness. If a thief is stolen from, he is upset and angry – he recognizes that he steals from other human beings, who face the same upset and anger – and this can all be unraveled with a moment’s thought, which people are always responsible for avoiding.”

Mr. Staytin said: “I still need to know something about what happened to my son, what he did.”

“Why?”

“Because he knows what he did after I – died. I don’t. He has at least *some* idea as to why he is being charged – or might be – I have no idea. He is working from a greater knowledge set than I can possibly have access to, at the moment. It’s – unequal.”

Jake snorted. His father’s eyes flashed.

Another conference, then the Judge said: “Very well, I can give you a brief summary. Your son Jake ended up as the – leader of a social media company called Mindbank, which had several billion users at its peak, I think. He promoted the company as a haven for free speech, but then began banning people. Most disasters in the world – social disasters, political disasters – arise from restrictions on free speech. The existing political classes – this is the allegation, not proven as yet – put a lot of pressure on your son to silence particular perspectives, particular arguments, particular data, that opposed the expansion of their power. These arguments, if more widely known, would almost certainly have prevented the

Cataclysms – suppressing these arguments arguably resulted in the deaths of billions of people. People, as you know, always have to have a way to resolve their differences – if they cannot debate and argue, they end up fighting and killing. Reason or war, these are the only alternatives – there is nothing else. Now your son claims brain damage, based upon your alleged abuse of him as an infant – but the potential prosecution rests on the fact that those – politically favoured people on his platform who directly advocated violence were still permitted accounts, while those who rejected violence and promoted unpopular arguments and data were banned. Promoting violence while banning reason set the world on its inevitable path to the Cataclysms. Also it was fraud, clear and simple, as far as I can see, because he provided a variety of reasons for banning people, but never revealed the political pressure that he was under to remove them. Furthermore, his organization was treated as a neutral platform by the existing laws, but he clearly exercised editorial control over who was allowed to have an account. Exercising editorial control opened him up to lawsuits for the content of his platform, so he always denied exercising such control – but his deplatformings had a strong pattern consistent with ideological preferences. Finally, he engaged a variety of other organizations to perform what he called ‘fact checking’ – but, when challenged in court, his lawyers responded with the argument that these ‘fact checkers’ were merely expressing subjective opinions, which were protected by the speech laws of the time.

“These falsehoods and manipulations resulted in a society utterly blinded to oncoming disasters. In the same way that corporate malfeasance was enabled by nondisclosure agreements – incredible restrictions on free speech – State malfeasance was enabled by de-platforming.”

Jake said: “Everything I did was legal at the time!”

The Judge shrugged. “That is debatable, but irrelevant. Would you be content with us lobbing charges at you, without the right of defense?”

Jake was silent.

“So – you appreciate having a platform here, to respond to allegations. And if we were to charge you with various crimes, but deny you your right to respond – to deplatform you from this court – would you not consider that grossly and monstrously unjust?”

Silence.

The Judge said: “You will be tried according to your own standards, your own values. If you had been prevented from responding to any of the many lawsuits launched against you – if a summary judgement had been entered against you, with no right of reply on your part, you would have cried ‘injustice’ and railed against it until the end of time – but you offered no such justice to your victims!”

Alice started to speak, but the Judge waved his hand. “I know, I just recused myself from all of this – next phase, and I’m not going to adjudicate anything here, but I’m just trying to answer the questions from both the elder and the younger Staytins.”

Mr. Staytin said: “So, the more – morally hypocritical I appear in *my* trial, the greater defense my son has for *his*.”

The Judge turned to him slowly. “Are you saying that you oppose any apparent conflict of interest?”

Cornelius jumped up and said: “I’m not sure he’s saying *that*.”

“I think he is. Please answer.”

Mr. Staytin said scornfully “Oh, I get the game – if I complain about any conflict of interest, you will bring up conflicts of interest I had in the past – or in the present I suppose – which I supposedly benefited from. And if you find even *one*, then my requests for justice are denied?”

Judge Peters said: “Mr. Staytin – Louis – our world is founded on the premise that morality is universal. You cannot benefit from conflicts of interest – the foundation of your entire political career, to my understanding – and then rail against them when they inconvenience you.” He smiled. “Well you can, of course – you can do anything you want – but it won’t work here, not in this day, not in my courtroom, not in this - age. Your son is guilty of deplatforming others, because he would rail against being deplatformed himself. He denied the right of reply to others, while demanding the right of reply for himself. Will you look me in the eyes and say that you *never* benefitted from conflicts of interest throughout your political career?”

Mr. Staytin cocked his head. He said nothing.

Judge Peters leaned back, apparently satisfied. “Then let us leave the question of conflict of interest in the dust, and proceed with the examination. Jake?”

Jake took a deep breath, and glanced around at the court, the Judge, the representatives – and the audience, both seen and unseen.

He cleared his throat.

“Dad...”

Mr. Staytin looked at him placidly.

“I feel like I’m – airing family grievances in this – incredibly public place, but this is what history has – pointed us towards, so here it is.” He coughed. “I get some of the obvious stuff – we were never supposed to embarrass you, we had to stay silent, never oppose you – and of course I appreciate now, with the wisdom of this – place – that that had something to do with my – with the deplatforming stuff they talked about before. Why it was so easy for me to believe that words could lead to danger, and I was keeping the world safe by – silencing people... I’m not confessing to anything, just letting my thoughts – flow, as I was advised.

“They told me to start with my first memory – which is always hard, impossible I guess – but when I was – waking up, or being woken – my life did flow before me, I don’t know if you had the same experience – did you?”

There was an almost imperceptible nod.

“And I had a – like vision, hah, they just said to say everything, it’s not even possible, let alone provable – but these – women, their heads, were rotating like on a wheel on the outside of my crib, round and round, smiling and trying to play with me, but it was like some sped-up version of the sun’s path, they never had any time – and my crib stayed the same, but the room changed a lot – the pictures, no, but the windows and the colours – I guess I had some nannies, and we moved around... I remember finding my fingers, like little worms I could play with – and not exactly counting, but noticing the blades on the fan, how they drifted a little when the window was open – and sounds from the street, play-sounds, kids yelling and laughing – and feeling like I was kind of in prison – I didn’t have the word of course, but feeling – trapped, isolated, abandoned...”

There was an authenticity to the memories that seemed to dissolve his self-consciousness.

“I do remember there being a lot of – impatience. You came in, and I remember shrinking from you - strange smell, like a bear. And I was always dressed up to be with mom – as if it were a date. She was always dolled up, holding me for photographs. And I wanted stuff, as babies do, but it seemed like it was a different person every time, a different woman...”

He laughed, and some of the self-consciousness returned.

“I remember being afraid of going to the washroom at night – one time, I just peed in the corner rather than leave my room. I was older I guess of course. And another time, I told myself I would be a giant if I could hold my poop in until I got to the toilet – but I didn’t make it, which – well, there was more impatience and annoyance.

“I remember wanting to grow up as quickly as possible – that’s why I ate so much. Kids were boring, adults were interesting and – self-contained. They didn’t need anyone... I wanted to climb out of my childhood like it was a sinking submarine. Huh, wow, I’ve never thought I was poetic. And I remember thinking that you were a commander in the Army, stationed far away – and I respected you, or feared you, or something. I wanted to be like you, but that seemed – impossible, it was way too much of a journey between me and – you. And you scowled...”

The elder Mr. Staytin raised his hand.

The Judge gestured for him to speak.

“Is this how it – works?”

“Can you be more specific?”

“This unverifiable – stream of consciousness. I was in the Army, he was a submarine or something. I don’t see any facts, nothing I can respond to.”

“The stream of consciousness is essential to understanding his mind, his experience.”

“I thought you were judge, not a – therapist.”

Judge Peters was unoffended. “Does it trouble you to – listen to your son?”

Mr. Staytin smiled, waving his hand carelessly. “Not at all. It’s a cosmic miracle we are able to speak at all!”

“Then he shall continue.”

Mr. Staytin shrugged.

Jake took a sip of water. “I don’t know if we need a pattern, or just one thing, but I do remember running away. Something terrible happened, that day, that I cannot remember – some yelling, or something frightening, and I really felt that I was going to – die, in that house. I had – I don’t know, a thought, a feeling, maybe a dream – where someone asked me if I would want to live if my life were to just – continue, as it was, unchanged...” His voice caught. “And I didn’t, I didn’t want to... And I suppose I thought I would die if I stayed, and any chance was better – than...” A tear escaped. “And I supposed that the wilderness, or whatever was outside, would be more friendly than... I don’t know if you’ve ever felt like you were – unwanted, or a burden, or an annoyance, or an interruption to a – better time – but I felt that, that my use to you, dad, was just – years and years in the future... That I sat between you – and something better. And you were angry at me for being – in the way, somehow. Maybe I thought it was a kindness to you as well... And I wasn’t doing it for attention, I wasn’t trying to make some point, I didn’t want to be *caught* – I genuinely wanted to get away, get out of the way...” He ground the heels of his hands into his eyes. “And I really couldn’t sleep, in that house. I was scared, a lot. Not... During the day, it wasn’t so bad, but at night it was like a haunted – place. Shadows on the ceiling and tree branches scraping the window... One time I woke up – maybe it was that night – and I thought you were sitting by my bed, with no head – just shoulders and a neck – but no blood – and my heart turned into – an icicle. I was so scared. I lay there for – oh God, a while, trying to talk myself out of going insane, and eventually my brain fixed my eyes, and I realized that it was just my jacket on the back of a chair, by my bed – the shoulders, the arms, but no head. And I thought – I don’t know what I thought then, or what I think now, thinking back – but the thought is – I can’t stay in a place where I genuinely believe – for quite a while – that a headless body is leaning over my bed in the night. It wasn’t – better that I had solved it, it was terrible that it *had* to be solved, that I thought something like that could – be, or happen. Dad, don’t look like that...”

“Like what?”

“Like – this is irrelevant, or stupid, or crazy...”

“You want to control how I look?”

Jake leaned forward. “This isn’t the easiest – situation, looking at you, knowing that you are – younger than me, that it looks like a father complaining to his son - it’s all quite mad... I lived for fifty years past your death, ruled the world in my own way... Saw everything terrible that was – coming, tried to get away, tried to hide, we all did – in New Zealand... But I never could get away - you know how it is, no matter where you go, there you are... You never got to real – old age, but it is a second childhood, they are *not* kidding. I ended up where I began, in a crib with – rotating nurses – a burden, an inconvenience, unable to clean myself. And I didn’t think about you – much, after your – exit, your freezing. But you came back to me, in my old age... And everything I said I would never become – happened. Because I controlled so much, everyone wanted to – control me. I was a prisoner of – managing everyone. Just like I managed people in the family – you. You are terrifying, dad, and that’s the truth. And that fear led me to – control the world, so that nothing bad would ever happen, people would never be in danger – but now they are telling me that everything I did to save the world damned it, set it on fire, and somehow the bodies of billions of people are – laid before me... And it’s a hell of a burden, not going to lie...”

Jake trailed off, his thoughts obviously racing in a million different directions.

Judge Peters asked if he wanted a break, but he shook his head, and gulped more water.

He stared around the amphitheater with teary eyes. “I’ve been talking for like – what, fifteen minutes – and maybe that’s all it takes to – make connections, that mean something... I lived for 83 years – my father for 68 – we had *decades* together, but we couldn’t find – fifteen minutes to tell the truth! They say that the world went to hell, and I... Billions of lives versus – fifteen minutes of honesty.” Jake openly wept at this point. “What the hell was stopping us, dad? Why did we need 500 years on ice and resolute strangers forcing us together to be even – remotely honest? Why did we need this – science fiction scenario to open our mouths?”

Louis turned to the Judge and said: “I don’t know if I’m supposed to respond, or just keep listening.”

Judge Peters said: “What do you want to do?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“Jake, it would be helpful if you talked about the night you tried to escape.”

Jake exhaled mightily. “Okay, okay... That night – if it was the night I had the – headless vision, thinking it was my dad – then that would explain why I wanted to – just bolt, take my chances with the – night air. Trying to preserve... I’m really trying to remember how it was for me, back then, that night, but it’s hard because – I didn’t have the words for what I’m saying now, but there was that – truth in my experience. I’ll do my best.

“The thought that comes to my mind – the image, is of those – games, in arcades, I don’t know if you still have them – there’s this claw that you position which comes down and picks up a toy, and drops it in a – slot that you can retrieve it from. And it was like – my free will wasn’t there, it was like a claw that was picking me up to take me outside. Not exactly, I’m just trying to explain how it was – irresistible, this next – step in my life, outside... And I was a good creeper, I crept silently down to the kitchen – it was a

big deal I think that I took some cookies, but that was the only food I could reach which wasn't in some box or bag that would make noise, it was a big wide cookie jar with a kind of half-suction – lid, on the top, which I could open silently, if I was patient... And I had my pillowcase, and I filled it up with some cookies – I wanted bread, but that was in a plastic wrapper... And I knew that people would be upset, but I seemed to cause more – upset than happiness, so I thought that would pass – all right. Like when you scrape your knee and cry, but forget about it the next day, until you stand up... And I was trying to listen, as I crept to the door, to the way out, but I *so much* remember my heart pounding in my ears, and trying to calm myself down so that I could hear something beyond my own – circulation..." Jake turgid agonized eyes to the Judge. "And I never heard him come, I was so – focused, on – what was ahead, but I felt this – hand, like a claw, like a giant spider, grab me from behind and just – yank me *up* into the air..."

"Stop!" cried Mr. Staytin.

The Judge gestured for Jake to continue.

"It's okay, I can wait, if he..."

"Continue. There is no need for secrets here."

Jake nodded slowly and wiped his eyes. "But it didn't hurt – I felt pressure, but not pain. And he turned me around, and I could see into his eyes – it was dark, so not really his eyes, but his eye sockets – and he screamed at me, he was totally – panicking..."

Mr. Staytin cried out.

Jake stared at him. "I'm sorry dad. You – beat my head against the door, or the doorframe – I tried to figure it out, which it was, later, by feeling the – injuries, I think it was the doorframe. And you were – otherworldly, like an alien, or maybe that's what is at the bottom – of you. And it was – top of the lungs stuff – I just was *not* allowed to get away – and you kept hammering my head against the doorframe, screaming – *DON'T DO IT!* – over and over, and I went limp – totally limp, trying to appease I suppose – but I clearly remember thinking – *what am I supposed to stop doing? You are beating my head against the door, totally in control of my body, my brain – what am I supposed to stop doing? I can't do anything other than – submit...*" Jake's voice broke completely, and he lowered his head.

His father's jaw muscles flexed, then sagged.

Judge Peters asked him, very gently: "Louis, do you have a similar memory? From your childhood?"

Everyone, close and far, within the amphitheater and across the world, could see the chasm of choice open up in the ex-President's mind. Billions of eyes – living and dead – seemed to hang over the choice before him, to submit or to fight. The world is made – and remade – in every instance of decision, in every choice we make to tell the truth, or avoid ourselves.

And parents – across the world – the good and the bad – were reminded of the patterns of the generations – and how close we always are to freedom, if we are willing to stand up and break those patterns, to bless the present by honestly damning the past. To become better parents by judging those who came before. To judge without hatred, but with relentless *consistency*. To expose and accept the raw animal fear of having been hurt, bullied, abused. To expose the most terrifying predator to those who hurt us – the honest truth of our pain. The predator that claws our way to Paradise through the bloody guilt of those who prey on children.

Everyone saw that long, long moment – and those good parents the world over felt a tidal wave of joy, gratitude and relief for the love they showed to their children – while the bad parents felt a splintering guilt and bottomless fear at the inevitable backlash of moral honesty and exposure. Some vowed to reform – and some kept their word – while others made the terrible choice they saw coming in the old and broken king.

Louis Staytin said: “I will no longer participate in this – abuse.”

“Louis,” said Judge Peters softly. “This is a lot to – absorb, in one moment. We can take a break, until tomorrow, and you can confer with your representative...”

“Shut the hell up!” roared Louis suddenly, rising to his full height. “You – this entire – sadistic congregation of excavating – this place is just for – torturing – people! You think you have *outgrown* me? You think you have outgrown humanity’s capacity for – cruelty? What the hell do you think you are up to here? I went to sleep in the world, and woke up in – hell... Maybe we are all in the afterlife, and you are the devils – maybe I am still asleep and being punished for – some crimes... But don’t for a *moment* think that you are – better than me in any way! Your children will be plowed *under* by people like me! Some – government – some – military will, just – walk through your lands like you were a – fog! Maybe they come from beyond the moon, beyond... But they *will* come! I am a window to a more martial world, and without me – or people like me – you would just *pick* at these old wounds, pretend to be better, and lose the capacity to name – to name –”

“Evil,” said Alice.

Cornelius raised his hand, then slowly lowered it again.

Judge Peters said: “If you – let me speak! If you refuse to participate in these proceedings, a judgement will be entered against you. Did you beat your son?”

“Oh, now you ask pointed questions – of me, for discipline – but not for him, who you say caused the deaths of billions of people! One kid’s head against a doorframe, didn’t even need to go to the hospital, he played – baseball the next day, did you tell them that? Huh kid? Such terrible injuries that you hit a homerun the next day, first time in your life! Bet you weren’t going to tell them *that!*”

He whirled to the audience, to the world.

“And you can all hear this self-pitying crap about how he was so sad that he had so many nannies – like we, my wife and I, had nothing better to do than interview a new nanny every month – it was because he – bit them, hit them. And you say, okay, he was a kid, it’s just a quirk...” He turned to his son savagely. “But why don’t you tell them, Jake the Rake – yes, that was his nickname, do you know how much – abuse – I had to cover up for him, when he was a teenager – and this went right on into his corporate career, his predatory harem of underlings, the women – and men – that he harassed and pillaged.”

Jake screamed, spittle flying from his mouth: “YOU’RE THE REASON THE WORLD DIED, DAD!”

Louis sneered at him. “I’d tell you to grow up, but you lived fifty years beyond me, and you’re still a god damned child!”

“I was abused by the nannies, abused by you, forgotten about by ‘mom’ – who had about as much maternal instinct as a shark! And I couldn’t tell anyone anything about anything – when I was a kid, I called someone a ‘jammy bastard,’ and you just about took my knee off kicking me under the table!”

“Well don’t call people ‘bastards’ when you are ten years old! It’s not that complicated! If it even happened!”

“‘Children are to be seen and not heard.’ ‘I know you are a pain, but you are not a window pane!’ Do you remember telling me that, all the time? And when I came to visit you in Albuquerque, on that campaign trail, and you had no time at all, you propped me up on the bed with soda cans, pointing me at some ridiculous movie preview channel which looped everything, over and over!”

“Men are busy, son - what can I say?”

“You took my childhood, but I took your soul!”

This ferocious statement hung in the air, and seemed like such a *non sequitur* that it even stopped Louis in his tracks.

“Do you know why I insisted you get frozen, dad? I’ll tell you – I’ll tell you why you are here at *all*.” Louis’s lower lip jutted out. “You are here because I wanted to damn your soul. You are here because you were heading towards some kind of – mealy-mouthed reconciliation, some kind of half-apology that I was supposed to nod and smile at. You were facing the great beyond, and it made you feel small, and it humbled you, and I would be *god damned* if I would let you try to make amends to me because of death, because of your own fear and smallness, rather than because I meant anything to you at all! I wasn’t going to be some emotional tampon for you. So I – diverted you, gave you an out, an opening, so your greed for life and dominance would flow uninterrupted, and you wouldn’t puke your guilt and fear all over *me*! And – and death would set you free – you would never be judged – except for goddamned *politics*! You would *never* have to look in the mirror, and see who you really are! *Welcome to judgement day, dad!*”

Louis’s eyes narrowed. “And then you followed me, you followed me here, through that doorway...”

Jake laughed harshly. "I did! I did." He smiled painfully. "Death is terrifying, right dad? Maybe I wanted to wake up older than you, like I was *your* father, and boss *you* the hell around!"

Louis gestured at the massive white amphitheater. "I'm actually glad you finally found some – friends."

Jake shivered. "Yeah. Who will judge *me* in turn..."

A bitter humour seemed to be passing between the two men, a strange - alliance... The audience struggled to follow the emotional complexities like a child tries to follow Shakespeare. A certain - reconciliation seemed to have occurred.

"I'm still not continuing," said Louis loudly, to the Judge.

"I will not take your statement before advice with counsel."

Louis shook his head. "I waive my right to advice – I will say no more."

Judge Peters said: "That is your right. Sentencing will occur tomorrow. Within a few days after that – assuming the prosecution is ready – the trial of your son will commence. You will be called as a witness, and you will return."

"I will not."

"You do not have to defend yourself, but you do have to be here as a witness."

"You see, this is where your society fails. I don't have to do a god damn thing!"

Judge Peters nodded slowly. "That is true. Do you have anything else to say?"

Silence.

"Cornelius, do you have anything to say?"

Louis said: "He's fired."

Cornelius shrugged. "Well, then I guess not."

"Well then," said Judge Peters, "Mr. Staytin, your punishment will be to appear as a witness at your son's trial. Please note that is not the totality of your punishment, but it is the first requirement."

"I will not come. Drag me here, I will not speak. Lock me up, I hold my tongue. I'm not lifting a damn finger to help him."

Jake's body sagged. "Dad, we are the only people left from the – old world. We are family. What are you doing?"

Louis turned to him scornfully. "Oh, *now* we are family. Come on, why on earth would you want to hang around with someone who you say beat your tender little head against a doorframe? Who abandoned

you, who neglected you – who abused you, left you with your little *ducks*? No, sonny, you don't get to have it both ways. Don't pretend you didn't know this was coming - that's probably why you held your tongue all these years..." He laughed bitterly. "All these – centuries. The universe could have wound to its demise without any of this crap coming out, but you had to break silence. Okay, you had your say, now *get the hell out of my life!*"

"Dad!" Jake's voice was agonized.

"This is why there was silence between them, all those decades..." said Alice.

The Judge did not admonish her, it was clear that the formal proceedings had long concluded.

He said: "So, Louis, you are determined to avoid your punishment?"

"I am. You do not recognize my Presidency, I don't recognize this court."

The Judge paused. "Very well. Cornelius, please instruct the DROs that Louis Staytin is now ostracized. Just so you know what this means – I'm sure it has been explained to you – you will no longer be able to enter into any contracts in our society. You will not be able to rent accommodations, buy food, use roads, get energy, access transportation – until you fulfil the requirements of your sentence. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Louis ignored him, and turned to the floating cameras. He spread his arms wide.

"My fellow politicians, my brothers in statism – you see the ridiculous injustice I'm being subjected to, condemned for the ravings of an old man about an imaginary childhood 600 years in the past. I am a scapegoat, I am the whipping boy, the Socrates and Jesus of this kangaroo court! In my day, in my country – as may be the case in yours – we accepted those being unjustly persecuted as political refugees, and I cast myself to the wind in this way. Rescue me from this abomination, and we shall see what we can do..."

He did not finish his rather sinister sentence.

"We have extradition treaties," said the Judge. "Also – not sure how you get to another country without any access to transportation."

"So – where the hell do I go?" demanded Louis.

"Out into the night," said his elderly son in a sudden, powerful whisper. "You bastard!"

Louis turned to him. "Oh, this is the poetic justice, the tidy little ending to our sordid tale – 'Oh, look at my dad, going out into the night, like I tried to when I was a little boy.' Well, fine! I came into this world naked, I don't care if I go out the same way! I can go into the woods, into the mountains – I was a Boy Scout – hell, I can go walk into the ocean as far as..." His voice wobbled slightly. "I will be fine. I would rather live in a hole than in this sanctimonious – cathedral of pompous self-worship!"

Chapter 46

I have lived with mental muttering my whole life. I chafed at everything, from the very beginning – I was probably a tumbleweed of spikes in my mother’s porcupine womb.

I was sent from the city at dawn, out into the wasteland. I almost imagined that they would provide a damn pillowcase full of cookies, but they were generous enough to give me a backpack full of rations, a walking stick, and a flask of water. And a map – paper, if you can believe it.

They did something miraculous to my joints and muscles – the slow claustrophobic aching of old age was gone – completely – my knees felt as springy as a trampoline, and my back – well, I didn’t even notice it, for the first time in – I don’t know how long. Literally, I actually don’t know how long, no one actually told me in any great detail how long I was frozen – 500 years is too rough an estimate, too convenient a number.

I refused to look back at the shining slender spires of the city behind me. I had spent the last few days scouring digital resources on how best to survive in the wild. I couldn’t buy a damn thing, but Cornelius was able to get me a few resources, some matches, and wires for traps. He only did me this kindness in order to try and talk me out of my decision. I told him it was better to rule in hell than serve in heaven, and I would literally be damned if I would take – if I would let Peters control me through ridiculous judgements.

I was not allowed to see my son – unless it was to testify against him in his upcoming trial – but I didn’t really care. He had brought my worst nightmare to life – accused me, humiliated me – in front of the whole world, for all time. The mixture of contempt, horror and pity in people’s eyes – well that was *my* weapon, not to be handed to strangers against the well-being of the family!

Break *those* bonds, they stay broken...

And the idea that I would go and lecture foreigners about – peaceful parenting – you might as well demand that I go and instruct their military leaders on ‘huggy wars’! I would spend the rest of my days trying to lecture my resurrected father on seaside peace – no thank you, not at *all*.

I’m glad to be back – I’m glad to be alive. The vitality I feel, the adventures ahead – and the blessed absence of others – all fills my heart with shiny singsong joy.

I know I am repeating myself, but I never liked people. I had affection for their utility – I suppose a farmer has some affection for his livestock – but their constant neediness and lying repulsed me. Ahead, there is only wilderness, and animals, and a star-pierced night sky – and others, perhaps, like me. People who don’t need others, who I won’t have to control, and who might give me my first taste of actual human companionship.

I am damn cold my first night. I find a cave, at the base of a range of mountains that slope gently up to a white-capped sky-piercing summit. Going in, I am reminded – the words from *The Hobbit*, the

description of the cave, pop into my mind for the first time in – almost forever, and I feel an ancient Celtic thrill of exploration, of rawness, of cold and nature and rock and the absence of excuses.

I go to sleep so early – and so deeply – that it feels only a moment before I am awakened by angels...

The faint light could be sunset – but then I realize it is coming from the wrong horizon, and that it is dawn, and smiling floating pink cherubs swirl all around me.

I am gripped with strange fevered exultation – the confirmation that I am in heaven, I have been judged, and I have won! I have not been cast down, I have been set free – the wilderness is paradise, and hell is the city!

“Who are you?” asks a gruff voice. A gray-haired man with a sun-creased face enters the cave.

“A refugee,” I say, struggling to my feet.

“Holy hell,” says the man, holding out his hand.

Two young men come into the cave – one of them carrying a little blonde boy. “Who’s this, dad?” the older one asks.

“One of us, sounds like,” says the old man. “My name is Roman.”

“Louis,” I reply, shaking his hand. “When did you die?”

He stares at me, goggle-eyed. “Where – where do you think you are?”

I laugh. “Well, I know I died, a long time ago – and then I was judged, and then – and now – I wake up in a glorious sunrise, surrounded by angels!”

The two young men look at me uneasily, and take a step back.

Roman said: “You’re not dead.”

“I understand that, I went to – Sunday school, when I was little. Eternal life, new life, born-again. We can never perish.”

“Boys, wait outside.”

The two young men back out of the cave. A pink angel follows the one holding the little blonde boy, its white wings *thrumming* faintly.

Roman looks at me sympathetically. “When did you last eat?”

“Last night. I’m not hungry.”

He nods slowly. “You – ate.”

“Yes, as I said.”

He looks at me for a long moment. I smile back.

“Nice boys,” I say pleasantly. “You’ve clearly got *them* under control.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well – obedient. You say go, they go.” I raise one hand, make a fist, and pound it into an open palm.

Roman’s eyes narrow. He takes a deep breath. “You were convicted of – child abuse.”

“No!” I cry. “No, absolutely not! I was not convicted, I was never convicted. I pled the Fifth. Held my tongue. Kept my secrets.”

“But that’s what you were charged with.”

“Yes. Yes.”

Roman nods slowly. Gears are grinding, he is making a decision.

“Did you abuse your child?” he asks finally.

“I wouldn’t have, if the world hadn’t changed...” I lean forward conspiratorially. “Come on, you’re a strong hearty old soul – there must be a lot like you, many out here I think. Let’s get overseas, tunnel if we have to – I’m joking – they are all so soft here, ripe for the pickings, we can come right out of the ocean, yank them up out of their seats of power. I was a military commander, you know, in my day. Why should we – eat acorns in the wild, while they grow soft and fat with their virtual helmets. We are men, they are children...”

While I am speaking – I cannot read his face, this curse of the future has escaped the city with me – I see his eldest boy at the mouth of the cave – to the left of his father’s sturdy shoulder – and the blonde boy is rolling his eyes at me, and rotating his finger around his temple in the universal signal: *he is insane!*

The alliance is shattered, the angelic peace splinters, and I stride forward, raising my fist.

“DON’T DO IT!” I scream at the terrified boy.

The gathered angels turn on me as one. Electric light burns my eyes, and...

And I awaken, again.

Cold...

There is a dead rabbit on the ground beside me, a dying fire flickering. My eyes fill with tears at the kindness. I roll on my back. It is a sunset this time, and the red light highlights the tiny mountains above me, the rough wall of the cave roof. It is like frozen lava, hanging over me.

The angels are gone.

I sit up on my elbows, wincing at the electric ache.

I turn to look out the cave – the path stretches away down to the low lands, the height of the trees scaling up as the earth lowers. I see many footprints outside the cave – empty now, unless ghosts stand there still.

I get up.

I'm not hungry.

I walk outside the cave.

In the blue horizon depths of the evening, the wail of an animal startles nothing, moves nothing.

I feel that I shall never sleep again.

I have never felt more alive.

I am free of people.

A chill breeze flows down from the uplands, rolling down from the blinding white of the sky-piercing peak.

"DON'T DO IT!" screams my father's voice.

I laugh. This is the *opposite* of an ocean.

They say 'from dust to dust' – not with me though. I came from ice, I can return...

They are not tears, just my eyes reacting to the ice.

I pick up a walking stick, turn to the dizzying white height of the mountain, and start to climb – getting colder, it seems, with every step.

I've always loved being at the top.

Thank you for reading my latest novel – 40 years in the making!

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