

The Forever Stories

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Abstract

The Forever Stories is a collection of seven interconnected short fictions that explore, allegorically, the human ability to make, revise, and remove meaning across time, age, and social, political, religious, and cultural perspectives. Spanning more than a hundred and fifty years, the stories follow different characters interpreting and negotiating the ramifications of a mysterious phenomenon that has allowed sentient beings to live forever. By allowing each narrative to modify and re-contextualize the images, concepts, affects, and events of another, the collection seeks to satirize the idea of a concept, text, or reading as dominant, stable, or monolithic, demonstrate the adaptability and power of stories, and suggest both the fluidity and interconnectivity of experiences. The collection also aims to explore the human need for, vulnerability towards, and resilience against fictions and their harmful and restorative interpretations.

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David

2016, Age of Discovery

After parking the hatchback against the chalk-doodled sidewalk, David climbed out of the vehicle into the muggy evening air of suburban Surrey. His wife, Stella, was already out of the passenger's seat, skipping around the car hood, rushing past him, fuming about his slow driving. The fast clipping of her voice in the night was as shrill as that of her heels against the cobblestone driveway leading to their friend, Debra's, three-storey house. He made sure the car was locked, pressing the key five times—lock, unlock, lock, unlock, lock—before trudging along behind his wife.

The driveway ended with two garages and a short flight of stairs. Stella was already at the top, straightening her spring floral dress and puffing up her glossy black hair while making those sucking noises between the tip of her tongue and the back of her upper teeth. He knew she was feeling anxious about being late, but he was truly going as fast as he was able. When he reached the foot of the stairs, he felt and heard a muted crunch under his right shoe. He lifted his leg and gazed at the flattened dune of pastel-green powder, an echo of the piece of chalk that it had been.

“Oh, hurry up, old man, before I get arthritis,” Stella urged.

David looked up at her, pushed his glasses up his nose, and planted a heavy foot squarely on a step before doing the same with the next one, and the next one. He began to feel warm, short of breath, as if there wasn't enough air to go around. As the bottom of his shoes scraped against the cobblestone steps, he imagined tiny pieces of gravel flinging themselves from the crevices to topple down the steps into obscurity.

The smile that his wife gave him when he reached the top looked like one she reserved for sniffling, puffy-eyed freshmen students without their medical or identification cards at the university health clinic.

“Look at you!” She shook her head, flaring her nostrils. “You've become so unwell. One flight of stairs and you're covered in sweat!” Snatching the handkerchief that he had just unravelled from his pant pocket, she started wiping his forehead for him, grumbling that his greying sideburns were practically glistening under the entrance light.

“Thank you, dear,” he managed to say before she forced his mouth to close, wiping his upper lip.

“You should’ve worn the shirt I laid out for you.” Stella grimaced at the wrinkled ends of his dress shirt poking out of his pants. “That one was longer. Is this how you want to remember your Rising?”

He said nothing. Ever since Stella told him that a consensus had more or less been reached in their small Baptist church community about what happened a month ago in Dundas Square, Toronto, she had been busy co-organizing and persuading him to come to this party. She had used various tactics—she didn’t want to lose face, it would be good for him to go out and mingle with friends again, and what kind of conclusions would people draw from her going alone and him staying at home? He finally caved because he loved her, didn’t want her to go through it by herself, and because he was intrigued. Afraid, uncertain, despondent, but also intrigued, something he hadn’t felt in almost a year.

Undoing his belt, Stella took out his shirt, flattened the edges, tucked them neatly back into his pants, and refastened the belt, purposefully tighter than it had been earlier. David sucked in a big breath and lifted his hands to the sides like a marionette as she did it.

“There. Better.” She rang the doorbell. “Now, don’t forget what I told you in the car. Peter and Luke are both so excited to see you—make sure you talk to them. Smile, darling. Oh, and no sweets tonight, remember. Did I tell you that Kevin Patmos will be leading the whole thing? Or *Pastor* Patmos, I should say! That reminds me.” She gripped his shoulder. “None of your special questions tonight, okay, dear? Let’s keep those to ourselves.”

He half-nodded before she yelled, “*Aiya*, your dandruff!”, and proceeded to swipe across his shoulders with such violence he almost lost balance.

When the door opened, David felt as if he had been caught by the spotlight, unable to run. Stella stopped her swiping and threw the same arms out to Debra, who opened the door. The two women’s noisy, smacking embrace seemed to him to be even louder next to the silent, gentle fall of tiny, white flecks of scalp from his shoulders.

“Stella! You look marvellous!”

“Debra, darling! You’re too kind!”

“Oh my Lord, David, is that you?” Debra gasped, blinking her bright eyes at him.

He was about to try a smile when Stella interjected, “Yes, my sweet old husband has decided to rejoin the living. Although he still moves like a corpse!”

The two women tilted their heads back and laughed, baring their whitened teeth. He understood that the joke was extra funny today, considering the circumstances, but they had no knowledge of the current state of his problem, how far it had escalated beyond mere “special questions” in the last year. He could very well become a corpse by the end of the party, he thought.

“So sorry we’re late, Debra,” his wife said, when they recovered. “We really didn’t want to be late for this.”

“Oh, darling.” Debra waved away the apology. “Lateness won’t matter after tonight!” The two women chuckled some more.

Ushering them into her house, Debra gave David two quick air kisses and asked how he was doing, as it had been a while since she’d seen him. Her tone was so sincere that he felt an impulsive urge to speak the truth, but the urge extinguished when he saw in a moment that her eyes had lost their focus on him. Stella’s voice, gushing about the end times and the Rising, had a stronger pull. Debra was always more his wife’s friend, not his. He watched as the two twined their arms together and strolled into the hallway, chattering at high velocity, past the looming black statues, the white marble staircase, across the waxy, tiled floor.

Momentarily alone, David thought he beheld a tidal wave of tar-black water surge and crash down the steps, swallow the tiles, and chew up the frail statues in its mighty maw. For almost a year, ever since that day at the grocery store, he’d been seeing or imagining such dreadful scenes and images. The day after his fiftieth birthday, he had witnessed a man stab a little girl to death at the local T&T. It was like watching someone puncture a doll with loose limbs, red stuffing, flailing pigtailed, and a small, round, unblinking face. Nothing could’ve prepared him for the experience. After being released from interrogation by the police, he’d returned home that day with the dead sitting on his shoulders, doubling his weight, steeping every move in entropy, in meaninglessness. Along with random scenes of destruction, he began seeing the little girl, her phantom or unascended soul, everywhere. He constructed and re-constructed the last day of her life: she might’ve sung while getting her hair braided in the morning, she might’ve been scolded by her father for leaving toys everywhere, doodled in her colouring book, eaten her vegetables with reluctance. No one but God would’ve known that the horror of life converging with its end would be immortalized on her small, round face.

A blink returned the hallway as it was. All that was different were the beads of cold sweat on the back of his neck. As he did every time he saw an illusion, he willed himself back to the present. He urged his legs to move and plodded along after the duo, straightening his tie three times and fidgeting helplessly with his belt, which was digging into his small, protruding stomach.

The hallway led to a spacious room illuminated by light fixtures that resembled candelabra. There were two long tables in off-white linen, teeming with plated foods, and a fountain of cherry-red fondue placed between them. There seemed to be about thirty guests, sectioned into small huddles here and there. Stella and Debra had already infiltrated one with ease. Feeling as rigid and distant as the walls of the room, David could only stand at the threshold of this party. He noticed that the fake candelabra light glinted off of the various textures and colours worn by bodies that swayed, hunched, or tilted backwards in nervous laughter, some buzzing low, glasses and voices clinking. It seemed to him that the light made everyone's necklaces and emblems of faith shine like elegant nooses.

“David!”

A sonorous voice to the right shook him to attention. Peter was coming towards him, with his hands outstretched, face split into a whitened grin that contrasted blindingly with the dark brick colour of his sun-scorched skin. On his way, Peter called for Luke, who seemed to hear him from the other side of the room and came bundling over with the same expression of delight. Ever since his parents had immigrated to Surrey from Shenzhen in the seventies, David had been playmates with Peter and Luke, the only boys his age in their small church community. As sometimes happened with acquaintances that one saw once a week, their friendships never escalated beyond church, games, sports, and the occasional birthday event. Even now, years later, David was not able to say what each of them studied at college or what their jobs entailed. Tonight he also realized that Peter and Luke had grown ever more similar throughout the years. The two men were of the same height, a head taller than him, and their suits hung straight and crisp against their long limbs, steamed, pressed, dandruff-free. They both had the same unnatural tan, as if they'd dipped themselves in copper paint since he last saw them. If the colour of their hair had not been different—Luke's silver-tinged brown vs. Peter's black monochrome—he would've thought that one was a reflection of the other as they moved simultaneously towards

him from opposite directions. As the two men neared, David swallowed, trying to activate his dry throat, briefly wondering if their tans had been acquired especially for tonight.

“What happened to you, old friend?” Peter slapped his shoulder, followed by Luke. “Haven’t seen you since your fiftieth birthday dinner! Heard you were sick or something?”

“Where you been?” Luke chimed in. Pointing at David’s stomach with eyebrows raised, he said, “Mid-life hit you hard, huh?”

The two opened their mouths in laughter, revealing spots of cherry-red stains on their teeth. David let out a weak laugh. In the last few months, Stella had been telling everyone that he was experiencing frequent bouts of sickness, that his immune system was catching up to his late middle age. When he’d first confessed to her about the crime he’d witnessed when she observed his drastic change of mood and behaviour, she had encouraged him to busy himself with more activities: play tennis with Peter and Luke, come out of semi-retirement to take up his Technical Advisor job full-time again, do more volunteering at the church. But nothing he did made anything better. He lacked the desire, the purpose. He could think of nothing but the questions that had been agitating and hammering against the sides of his head, the top, since the incident: how could God let the little girl suffer? Why hadn’t He saved her? How could He allow so much evil and suffering in the world? When Stella found out that he was leaving the house with his questions running loose in the community, she let him stay home, must’ve netted his questions back like stray dogs, and made up excuses for his absence. But the questions remained. Even now, at the party, they hung about his neck where his cross had been.

“Speaking of mid-life crises,” Peter said, play-punching his arm, “remember Abin, David? He used to play tennis with us. Look at him now.” Peter motioned with his head. “Over there, talking to the blonde in the green dress.”

David half-mimicked an attempt to search for the green dress, and found it by accident. Standing next to the elegant blonde, Abinaash, a friend of a friend, who’d played tennis with them every week one summer, looked strangely unkempt—his moustache was greyer and bushier than it had ever been, his beard longer and wilder, his belly rounder. His juttied chin seemed more exaggerated, with his lower lip extended out and upwards. Even his turban seemed uncharacteristically loose.

“He’s really let himself go.” Peter sighed, shaking his head.

David nodded, but in allegiance to Abinaash rather than in agreement with Peter. Abinaash's furrowed brows seemed far more sympathetic to his plight than the impersonal get-well cards with Bible quotes from the community. The listlessness with which Abinaash was bringing a cocktail shrimp up to his lips while nodding pensively at his speaker gave him a twinge of both pain and gratification. The gradual disappearance of the shrimp in Abinaash's mouth seemed to demonstrate the difficulty and tedium of the minutest task in a world full of wickedness and sorrow. Here was someone who seemed to reflect what he was feeling: if life, happiness, everything small and big, could be easily snatched away by a callous, unfathomable hand, what was the point of doing anything? This was what his special questions had amounted to, something he hid from everyone, including Stella: his suspicion that the hand that would allow a little, innocent girl to suffer and die before her life had even begun must be a callous one. If God could not eradicate evil, He could not be omnipotent; if God were omnipotent, He could not be benevolent. A non-omnipotent God was not a god, and a non-benevolent God was not a god he could love and worship.

"Remember how fit he was?" Peter lamented, blinking mournfully at Abinaash. "I told him to keep up with tennis. You slack off even a little and it'll show. Our bodies are not as forgiving as they used to be."

"Weight gain is like the gateway to a mid-life crisis," Luke said, in a solemn and regretful tone as if Abinaash had died.

"Calling it a mid-life crisis is fairly optimistic, isn't it?" David heard himself say, his thoughts shifting to the zero number of visits or calls from his childhood playmates while he had been "sick." He wondered how he could've lived for so long without feeling the need to have friends who could understand what he was going through. Feeling more connected to Abinaash, a stranger, than the two around him, he watched the man chew a carrot stick languidly, tasting his pain. "For all we know, we could die tonight."

Peter gave a laugh as light and easy as surrender. "Not me, certainly," he said, pointing upwards, "God knows where my heart's at."

Luke chuckled. "I'm not worried either. If He allowed zealous rednecks like the Qūm to rise for whatever mysterious reason, then He will surely do the same for us tonight."

"You think what happened was real?" David asked without thinking. The surprised looks on Peter and Luke's faces reminded him that his wife might not approve of his lack of discretion.

Searching for her floral dress around the room, he spotted her fully distracted by a conversation with someone young and lanky some distance away by the pastry table.

“Well, yeah, David. The proof cannot be denied. The community has settled on that. You saw their self-immolation, their dead, burnt bodies—how do you survive that without divine intervention?”

David recalled turning on the news that day a month ago and seeing the four members of the Chatham-based, Christian metal band, the Qūm, stand with their arms linked and raised to the skies in Dundas Square, Toronto. There had been flames running all over their bodies; their faces were swirls of orange and white, their mouths gaping black holes. Observing their dancing flesh on the screen, he could almost smell the sourness of burnt fat and gasoline. The whole thing was too dreadful to watch, and only convinced him even more of the ubiquity of suffering. When he next turned on the news, the four musicians were already ash-white corpses, lying side by side on the ground. Smoke had been circling upwards from their bodies, stripped like mannequins. Standing in front of the shrivelled carcasses, the reporter had stated what used to be their names, and read excerpts of their religious manifesto from their website. In a low, clear voice, she’d revealed a biblical passage that the Qūm had quoted in their creed: “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.” The sound of these words had brought David to tears. He was about to turn the news off when he spotted movement behind the reporter. In slow time, one of the carcasses had sat up, his shoulder breaking off into cinders. There had been silence as people in the square registered the creaky movements, the shrunken body, the facelessness. Then they all rose, one by one, and the silence gave way to screams. He had been unable to turn his gaze, the hairs on his neck and arms reaching upwards as if looking for a way out. It was the first time since the incident that he had felt so jarringly alive.

“It could’ve been illusionary magic, a prank, a circus performance,” he said to Peter and Luke, vocalizing a few of the theories that he had read up on since. Peter chuckled as if he had told an off-colour joke.

“Then how do you explain what happened in Moscow? Brazil?” Luke asked.

Before he could answer, Peter drawled, “Eleeeeena Kiselyooooova,” stretching the name of the famous Olympic gold-medalist as if he were pouring syrup. As soon as the name left his mouth, it seemed to pick up speed around the party, enlivening it with punctuated gasps and

expressions of delight and horror. David had caught the aftermath of her grisly act on television last week. After slicing her own stomach, lying prostrate on a large Russian flag with her strong limbs outstretched, and bleeding herself dry for twenty-four hours, the young swimmer had gotten up, ecstatic, alive, beaming through her tears, crushing the flowers in her hand in passion, and kissing the silver cross around her neck in overwhelming gratitude. She'd told the reporters that what the Qūm had said inspired her to prove her own virtue and show the world that she could rise triumphant over death, sin, and hell. The constant flow of blood from the vertical smile on her stomach while she spoke had haunted David for days. He could hardly bring himself to find out what happened in Brazil a few days ago, although Stella had since talked of nothing else. These Risings, as they came to be called, began soon after a Qūm member—the one with most of his cheek muscles left—was hooked up to a speech-generating device, following the incident at Dundas Square. Amidst the media frenzy, the world quieted down to catch his every word. He rasped that contrary to initial beliefs, none of them had actually died from the burning. It seemed as if they'd entered an intermediate state of sorts in which they were conscious throughout and even after the burning but could not speak or move because of the physical pain. They rose only when they had regained control of their bodies. The Qūm member, peeled and charred into something non-human, said God had given them the gift of forever because He judged them to be just and righteous.

Since then, David had been grappling with this revelation, while seeing the phrase, “the gift of forever,” used more and more in the media. The *Vancouver Sun* had stated that the term was now as powerful, real, and infectious a term as the idea of immortality had once been fantastic. He recalled witnessing such an infection in Stella. Moments before the Qūm member's proclamation, she had been talking up a storm about what a mistake it was for them to ship the heirloom chairs on which they were sitting from Shenzhen. The costs, the upkeep, the headache—not worth it, she said, when they weren't even good for their backs. When the news came on, the implications of the words released from withered flesh seemed to pierce Stella, doubling her up with emotion. With her head bowed, she'd clenched her hands together in front of her murmuring lips, shaking in reverence. This infection was later manifest on Elena Kiselyova, that old man in Brazil, and now almost everyone in his community.

“I-I can't explain it,” he said to Luke now, feeling a tightening around his throat. He loosened his tie, catching the illusion as his eyes glanced across the room. There was the little

girl again, this time lying on the waxy floor in a space between the party guests. The centre of her phantom body had turned itself out like a bouquet, uneven, blood-red, with her small, round face stricken with horror drooping like a discoloured petal. Against his better judgement, he entertained the notion that she was alive but could not speak or move because of the pain.

“Only God can,” he heard Luke say, his voice low and emphatic.

The withered body of the little girl seemed so out of place at a bright and lively party. Suddenly he couldn't remember why he bottled up the questions in his mind, fraught with the implications of the Risings. He let them unravel: “But how does He measure righteousness? If it's all real—if one could not die, if one could be resurrected because one was righteous, then how do we know what qualifies as righteousness? How is it measured?”

If he had let his eyes stray, he would've seen the effect of his questions on the duo: they opened and closed their mouths like the fish flung from tanks onto Styrofoam displays in the seafood section at T&T. The sight of the little spirit seemed to give him strength, or was it anger, frustration, disappointment? He felt a throbbing in his head. “How does God determine who lives and who dies? What about people who might be righteous but aren't devoted to the Christian faith? Or were born into other religions, like Abinaash?” He pointed to the slow-moving man, who looked up in response. “Does he not deserve to have the gift?”

“Hey, buddy—”

“How does God decide who suffers and who doesn't, for how long, how much? Does He really have a say in all this? How do we know if He does? How do we know He exists? Or cares?”

“David!” he heard his wife call from the other side of the room. Her heels told him she had sensed something was wrong and was flying towards him. All he could see was the little girl, whose wide-eyed shock he imagined had shifted into a playful expression, whose bloodied, crumpled body he imagined had become a clean, strong one that pushed itself up, skipped towards the cherry-red fondue, and hid itself under the folds of the table. It made his eyes sting with tears.

In that moment he accepted what he had already known to be true, that he could not believe in a god who was elitist and heartless, and that if he did not believe in God anymore, he could not believe that he would rise tonight, along with his church community, along with Stella. However different they'd become in the last year, not only in their faith but in the importance

placed on appearances, she was still his wife, his partner through life. They'd been through a lot together—isolation, discrimination, unemployment, deaths in the family, a miscarriage—and each made sacrifices and compromises along the way.

When Stella reached them, her eyebrows raised with concern, hair slightly deflated from the exertion of rushing in heels, lips ready to defuse the situation and praise the flabbergasted Peter and Luke's physiques or tans or suits, David reached for her, so he could rest his heated, troubled head against her shoulder, sturdy, strong, familiar, for the last time.

The large study in Debra and her husband's house had many bookshelves and ivy plants against moss-green walls surrounding the long desks and chairs in the centre of the room. It was like a garden library. Away from the party, David sat on one of these chairs, wiping his face with his handkerchief, feeling sheepish at having wept freely in front of Kevin Patmos, the young and lanky man with whom Stella was having a conversation before she crossed the room to him. After his wife had set him in this study and flown off to do damage control, Kevin had wandered in and carried out his best shepherd kind of active listening. Before long, David had given him an entire overview of his trauma, his turmoil, his ebbing faith.

The moment of confession having passed, he noticed that Kevin seemed to have had a recent growth spurt, as his suit had become an inch too small for him. Remembering how he used to drive by a spotty-faced Kevin strolling home from school with a video game console in his hands, David put on his glasses and straightened up in his chair. There was still a blemish or two on the young pastor's open face, a little flushed at the excitement but otherwise calm.

"Mr. Chen," Kevin said, and then he smiled, shaking his head. "David. May I tell you a story?"

Sheltered by bookshelves, plants, and comforting silence, he nodded. The throbbing in his head had numbed, but now his nose was stuffed and his eyes felt foreign and swollen from crying. The young pastor sat down across from him. He cleared his throat and began in a lower, more authoritative tone:

"Past mountainous terrain, out in the clearing of the woods, there is a wide, frozen lake. Throughout centuries, many have walked along its glass-like surface, marvelling at the beauty and danger of the winding cracks and the dark, unfathomable depths under the ice. Although the lake seems to stretch to infinity, no one has traversed its surface to the edge. The ice always

breaks at different points, at different times, swallowing anything on top of it into the deep. All who have walked on the lake have been lost in this way.

“One day, the temperature drops like it has never done before. The winds are colder, the ice solidifies. The surface of the lake remains hard and strong, and the darkness underneath becomes no longer perceptible. People are free to roam across the length of the infinite lake without the fear of falling. Without this fear, they lose the need to look down. They lift their heads and look upwards instead. They walk on, forever contemplating the heavens.”

Kevin beamed at him. “God knows our fears, David. He knows, and He understands. He has hardened the ice for us, so that we may never have to look down.”

Fidgeting with the wet handkerchief in his hands, he imagined floating, pasty limbs and slow-billowing hair under the ice. “W-what about those who fell before the ice was hardened? What about them?”

The young pastor lifted a palm upwards. “They’re with God. No longer suffering. They also have nothing to fear anymore.”

He nodded, shutting his eyes forcibly. There was an irredeemable gulf between what the young pastor said and what he knew in his heart, but he could not deny how tired he was from carrying the weight of the dead with him everywhere. He would like to let go, he thought, to unwind the unanswerable questions from his neck, and feel lighter as he did so. He would like to raise his head upwards and never have to look down again.

He heard the door open. Expecting his wife, he was startled to see the little girl instead. Smiling at him, she crawled under one of the desks, the ends of her mouth red and splotchy. He watched the illusion for a while, comforted by the thought that he would soon join her.

The young pastor stood up and placed a hand on his shoulder. “It’s time to look upwards, David. It’s time to rise. The end times are here. At midnight, those of us who are ready will be celebrating the abolition of death with our own Rising. Will you join us?”

He drew in a long breath before surrendering entirely to the exhalation. “I will.”

Kevin smiled, pulling him up by the armpit. He let the young pastor walk him to the door. Before they left the study, Kevin seemed to remember something. He turned, crouched to his knees, and called lightly, “Come, Elora. Your grandmother will be looking for you.”

Feeling the hairs on his neck and arms rise, David watched, speechless, as Kevin helped the little girl, the phantom, the unascended spirit, straighten up from under the desk. She giggled

at having been caught, her fingers powdered with pastel-green chalk, her face dirtied by cherry-red fondue. There was life in her laughter; her small, round face was no longer frozen in horror.

“You can see her?” he blurted, suddenly unsure of who or where any of them were.

Kevin laughed. “I’m *very* good at hide and seek.” The pastor gently bopped the little girl’s nose as if it were a button.

“Is her name Elora Hayes?”

“Hey, that’s *my* name,” the little girl chirped. David had never heard her voice before. The sound jarred with the visuals as if there were problems with the transmission.

“Yes, it is. David, I didn’t know you were acquainted with Mrs. Hayes.”

“I-I’m not.”

“How do you know Elora?”

“I-I met her...her parents last year.” David remembered reading in the paper that the little girl had been American, that she had been visiting the country with her parents, Jairus and Ruth Hayes, that they had cried, hidden their faces, murmured regrets and what-ifs. He couldn’t figure out how she was alive, whether she *was* alive, whether she had risen.

“What a small world. Her grandmother, Mrs. Hayes, just moved here recently, and Elora is visiting from the states. Elora, do you remember meeting Mr. Chen?”

She shook her head.

He crouched so that he was eye-level with her. She had the same hair, features, and height as the little girl who was killed in the store. In fact, save for her clothing, nothing was different, as if a year had not passed. Her eyes were wide and curious. Anyone could intuit her innocence and the goodness of her heart from the way she observed him observing her. God could not forsake her; He was both benevolent and omnipotent. As he saw himself reflected in her eyes, he understood that the end times were here, that the end of suffering was upon them.

“Do you remember the grocery store, last year?”

Her eyes narrowed, as if they were seeing the ugly man, his spitting mouth, the fluorescent ceiling lights as she’d lain there, suffering. “It hurt.”

“Does it still hurt?”

“David?” Kevin sounded concerned.

“Not really. But now I have a lot of stitches, but I can’t show you. Mommy said not to.”

David thought about how the parents must've been both terrified and grateful to find their daughter alive, and suppressed any news about her survival, lest it attracted hostile attention.

"It's okay. I believe you," he said. Wiping a fresh tear away, he smiled at her, and stood up, without any help, any hesitation. In that moment he felt his love for God return twofold, familiar and yet strange; he loved Him for his mercy, his benevolence, for placing him on the winding path through which he could learn the significance of suffering, of death, of human connection. The edges of his body burned as if he were ignited. For the first time in a long while, he felt as weightless as cinder.

"Shall we?"

"Let's. Come, Elora."

*

It was midnight. Most of the guests had left. Only twelve had stayed, only twelve were ready, kneeling on the carpet of the living room facing the East. David had kneeled next to Stella on one side, and Pastor Patmos, who was finishing a prayer, on the other. Across from him, Peter and Luke had folded their strong legs under them, bowing their heads with their eyes closed. One hand clutched a glass of clear liquid and the other the free hand of their respective wives. Apart from Debra and her husband, as well as two others from their community, Mrs. Hayes was within the circle as well, sitting on a chair because her knees could not take the pressure. One of her rings made slight reverberating sounds whenever it brushed against the glass she was holding. Her granddaughter had fallen asleep on a sofa upstairs. David had his eyes closed as well, gripping the glass in his hand, nodding to every word of the pastor's prayer. Stella swayed from side to side, unable to keep her balance. Eyes on her glass to keep the liquid from spilling, she breathed noisily, like a child waiting impatiently for chocolate treats during Easter.

Pastor Patmos completed his praise of God, opened his eyes, and raised his glass. "Let us drink as a symbol of our virtue and devotion," he said.

Everyone in the circle opened their eyes and raised their glasses, some above nervous smiles and shifty glances, others above calm and humble features. David looked ready.

"To our saviour," the pastor pronounced.

"To our saviour," they all repeated. Then they drank.

As soon as the liquid touched their tongues, its pungency—a revolting, bitter sourness—almost compelled them to spit it back out. Pastor Patmos had warned each of them not to do so, and to suppress the impulse to vomit with every ounce of their love for God. As the liquid passed through their throats, they all doubled over, dropping their glasses onto the carpet with dull thuds. Some collapsed, face-down, from the dizziness. Some curled into a ball, trying to make the nausea as small as possible. Heartbeats pounded fast like honeybee wings.

Then the beats slowed to a halt, as if they had forgotten their purpose to continue. If Abinaash had succeeded in convincing himself to double-back and retrieve the umbrella that he'd left at the party, he might've chanced upon twelve prostrate bodies fanned out like petals in the living room facing the East. He wouldn't have been able to guess that they were all conscious, momentary prisoners in their unresponsive shells. In the quiet of the expansive house, he might even have heard the resuscitation of their internal organs to a moment in time, the level drumming of their heartbeats, as if nothing had been interrupted, as if nothing would ever interrupt them again.

And then he would've seen the bodies rise in tandem to the call of consciousness, one by one.

And he would've seen a late-middle-aged man, with his pious head tilted backwards, shoulders peppered with dandruff, belt clipping into his belly, laugh an eternal farewell to the concept of mid-life.

Zoë

2024, Age of Discovery

In the women's washroom, Zoë applied a fresh coat of dark lipstick. She had been awake, made up, and flitting in and out of the function rooms at the Fairmont Chateau Laurier in her black jumpsuit, vintage blazer, and heels since four this morning. Her bun was still intact, her eye shadow and mascara un-smudged. Though her fingers trembled from too much coffee and her contacts were a little dry, she felt good.

Everything had gone according to plan: the ballroom and the Adam Room had been set up the day before, along with banners and posters throughout the hotel; company representatives who were exhibiting had arrived a day early to register and prepare their stands and displays in the evening; the sound and visuals were hooked up overnight; and she'd verified last-minute changes to the reception lunch menu with the catering manager this morning while breakfast was being laid out. Before the expo began, her assistants, Eli and Michelle, had fixed the order of the name tags and lanyards and fanned out the brochures on the tables without her having to repeat her request. At seven, early-risers had begun trickling into the function room, drawn by the smell of coffee, eyes squinting from sleep, daylight, or the magnificence of the sculpted ceiling. By eight, the luminous ballroom was filled with smartly-dressed people—smiling exhibitors at their stands, trade-only professionals roaming with tablets and loose business cards. When she noticed a shine on a few foreheads, she made the call and felt the cold increase of the air conditioning.

Lunch could not have gone better. All gluten-free, nut-free, vegan, lacto-ovo, (semi-) vegetarian, Pescatarian, halal, no-pork, no-mammal, no-red-meat, only-red-meat, and all-meat restrictions were satisfied. She darted from table to table, smiling hellos, regurgitating small talk with people she'd met at previous smaller conventions, making sure everyone had a seat and a plate, doing more than her job entailed, her heels clicking to the clink of utensils. If Michelle had not slipped a full plate in her hands at one point, she would've forgotten to eat. Her appetite reduced to more than half, she fed off of adrenaline, excited chatter about the exhibited products and new research trends, and that wink her boss, Rashid, gave her across two banquet tables.

Straightening her name tag in front of the washroom mirror, it occurred to her now that she wasn't sure what she just ate. Was that arugula in her teeth? She picked the green muck out, carefully avoiding touching her lipstick. Something else, something very small, was bothering her, but she couldn't quite place what amidst the flurry of handshakes, the script of banal

questions about the weather or where people were when they rose, and the myriad of twinkles from the ballroom's crystal chandeliers.

She smiled, sure it would come to her later, and tucked down her beloved blazer, ready for round two.

At the Sunthetic stand, Zoë thanked one of the hotel technicians whom she'd summoned to fix an unexpected issue with the monitor. Making sure that the exhibitors could resume their presentation on the necessity of solar fuel, she turned away to call her assistants. She stopped dialling when Michelle's soft blonde locks at the booth across from her caught her eye. The young woman was standing at the outskirts of a small crowd, listening intently to the researcher's hypotheses about the impact of the Everlast, most specifically the changes to cell regeneration in sentient beings, on edibles, including animals, insects, plants, and their by-products, and taking frequent notes on her tablet.

Zoë recognized the researcher, Darren, who was now explaining the chart behind him that showed estimated percentages of food scarcity in fifty-year increments. He had represented ProSen at another Everlast fair half a year ago. They had chatted briefly, bonded over the fact that they both rose in Toronto. Since she last saw his presentation, his data and conclusions seemed to have grown in size and complexity: they even included the predicted effects of the food conservation policies implemented by the government a week ago, the result of a long debate between animal, insect, and plant rights activists and everybody else on the parameters of sentience, after the discovery in 2017 that humans were not the only recipients of the gift of forever. You could be Catholic or agnostic, criminal or virtuous, human or plant. God was merciful, generous, and not at all fastidious, it turned out.

"In sum, no death, but no more cell regeneration either for all sentient beings, so food production levels have collapsed since the year of the Rising. And yet the lunches at the expo get more extravagant every year!" Darren joked, seeing Zoë in the crowd and nodding his head at her.

"No one forced you to get that third plate, Darren," she called from the back, instigating more chuckles.

The researcher laughed good-naturedly, fake-rubbing his belly, before launching right back into recommendations for future research, policy implications, and what he was probably

sponsored to promote: the development of chemical foods, liquids, and drugs. She anticipated the growing predominance of using these innovations for the meals of future events.

Noticing that Michelle had missed the bantering in her fervent note-taking, Zoë slid next to the young woman and asked, “Are you enjoying yourself?”

Her new assistant jumped at Zoë’s voice, giggled nervously, and nodded. Michelle had been hired a few months ago in preparation for this expo, the largest-to-date trade fair on the Everlast in the country. Unlike Eli, who had been with the company before Zoë and resisted her management as long as she could, Michelle was a shy, dutiful sweetie who had never been to a convention before. When she rose in 2016, she was twenty-five and hating her job at a law firm, her framed economics diploma collecting dust on the wall of her tiny studio. Maybe it was the blonde curls that caught the light through the window or the fearful, round eyes that softened with every mention of the Everlast, Zoë decided to hire her, despite her lack of experience and study in communications. Her boss supported her choice completely, a sign of the trust and excellent rapport she’d built up within the last two years.

“Good. You’re doing well.” She was pleased to see Michelle’s cheeks turn rosy at her words. “Darren’s notes about alternative foodstuffs will be especially useful for us.”

“Yes, I’m learning so much.”

“Don’t forget to get a signed package of space ice cream from Elena Kiselyova. She’s just arrived. At the CSA booth.”

Michelle gasped, her round eyes catching up to where Zoë was pointing. Next to the stand showcasing the latest sporting apparel and equipment from the company that lent its name to the gift of forever, the Olympic swimmer-turned-CSA-mascot was seated under a canopy of stars with the image of Neptune behind her, fingers blackened by Sharpie, shifting her chin coyly for pictures. She had on her signature crop top and low-waist skirt in the colours of the Russian flag, framing the stretch of sutures down her belly that called attention to itself like a greeting. When media outlets leaked her private decision to renounce her faith in 2018, her circles in Russia excommunicated her. Canada had embraced her fame with open arms. In the queue of people waiting for autographs, some had taken off their dress shirts and suit jackets to reveal an outfit similar to the celebrity’s, down to the belly wound.

“Adorable. The industry’s full of nerds.”

“She’s even more beautiful in person! I can see her Rising mark from here.”

“You should put your name down, before the scandalous air ban takes effect,” Zoë said.
“Take a trip to Neptune.”

Michelle’s clear-blue eyes widened even more in shock.

“Why not? Three-to-five years of training at least, twelve years there, a few months on the planet, twelve years back. Once you’re back, this job would still be here. You would’ve seen space, all the while looking twenty-five.”

“Do *you* want to go to space?”

“Hell, yes. I consulted Lifetime Planning—they’re here too, don’t forget to take a look—back in 2017, so I have it all mapped out for the next hundred years. After a solid stint here, I’ll roam in Europe, and then take up another undergraduate degree, this time in the sciences, plus a master’s. Maybe find work in something exciting like nuclear or wind energy. Some more travelling, probably the Bahamas with my folks, learn about my roots. I plan to make some films too. Documentaries. And then, before the air ban ever goes through, space.”

Michelle sighed, her gaze distant, as if picturing it all laid out before her, trying to smile through it. Zoë recognized that feeling of exhilaration and overwhelming uncertainty reflected on her assistant’s face.

“Hey. You have time.” She squeezed Michelle’s shoulders. “Stay with us for now.”

The young woman nodded, her eyes softening.

Zoë winked at her. “Take notes.”

After projecting greetings to familiar and unfamiliar faces, leaning in to contribute a joke or a thought about the latest discoveries, pocketing more business cards, and making sure all was set for the concluding speech of day one, Zoë met Eli next to the Nectar stand, sipping drink demos. Eli stood, tall and gangly, with a slight slouch in her back and a pierced, permanent frown on her face, her glasses trendily circular, her hair fashionably short and flipped over her head. Zoë could see that her canvas bag was full of the latest Qūm albums, jutting out angularly like pyramids on a tortoise shell. A few steps from her, the exhibitor doled out pairs of mini plastic cups to people while explaining, through the mike on his head piece, how each chem drink was made. Those that had drunk the demos appeared a bit dazed, but no one seemed upset.

“I don’t see a problem here.” She looked at Eli questioningly.

“It’s over there.”

Zoë turned. Two stands away, there was a group of people gathered around a booth made of what seemed like marble. The exhibitor was dressed in a crisp, white dress shirt and taupe pants, his skin strangely aglow. In his hands was a tube of what looked like cream or lotion.

“Miller Technology,” she read the sign on the booth. “It’s their first expo, I think. What happened?”

“Two complaints. People feeling personally attacked. Body-shaming stuff.”

Zoë frowned, biting her lip. Live disagreements about certain research methods or conclusions sometimes came up during these events, but nothing as incendiary as personal attacks. Seeing a woman who looked like she rose in her fifties volunteer herself and sit on the chair next to the exhibitor, she advanced toward the booth without a moment’s hesitation, with Eli echoing her footsteps.

“Look at this ghastly bruise!” the exhibitor exclaimed into the mike, gesturing to the woman’s neck, where a permanent bruise sat like a black hole with swirly, distorted edges. The crowd made some pitying noises. Eli made a half-disgusted, half-amused sound beside her that she ignored for now. She focused her attention on the exhibitor squeezing a dollop of sienna-coloured cream onto the neck of the woman giggling in embarrassment. While he gently spread the substance on her skin, he explained that even though the Everlast had frozen their bodies in time and eliminated aging, there was also no more healing, so bodies could still wear and tear, gathering wounds and discolouration like a palimpsest. The long-term solution was the lacquer concoction that Miller Technology was currently perfecting. It could remove the darkest contusions and seal up the most prominent sutures and cuts. As he spoke, the lacquer seemed to harden and pale in colour. Before long, the bruise was replaced by a smooth, butterscotch patch of paint, a shade lighter than the skin around it. It seemed to Zoë that the substance merely lightened or camouflaged the colour of the bruise rather than erased it completely. The people around her, Eli included, must have been impressed, for they were clapping.

“The same can be done for these cuts on your wrists.” The exhibitor turned the woman’s palms upward. Although she seemed pleased about her now-glowing neck, the woman retracted her hands protectively at his words. Several spectators laughed.

“Those are my Rising marks, dear. I’d like to keep them,” she said, to more applause and encouragement.

Zoë was about to clap herself when she noticed that the exhibitor's face had darkened. He suddenly looked up at someone standing close by, who shook his head at him. If her eyes had not lingered on this man dressed in an elegant, navy suit and pearl-white tie, she would've seen the rapid return of a smile on the exhibitor's face and heard him thank the woman for volunteering.

The man was from the evening before. Zoë recognized his waxy face, handsome, but only commonly so, with his broad forehead, dark eyebrows, and high cheekbones. He had said the thing, the small thing that she just now realized was bothering her.

He had arrived at the registration table last night with the exhibitor to sign in for his company and find out where they were exhibiting. Eli and Michelle had been taking care of registration while she spoke with her boss, reconfirmed set-up, and handled multiple calls on the side. She had a feeling she was being watched when the man came up to her and asked her if she was lost.

"Um." She'd laughed, thinking he had meant to say that *he* was lost. His cologne had smelled strongly of lilac and orange leaves. "No. Are you?"

"Where are your parents?" he'd asked. In that second, she'd sensed his condescension underneath that look of false concern and begun to feel a prickling of anger down her back.

"I'm sorry?"

"What are you doing here all alone, little girl?"

It felt as if he had stabbed her in the face. Before he could say anything more, she had drawn herself up, stated that he'd mistaken her for someone else, and marched away. She'd briefly wondered if her assistants caught the interaction before pushing the thought to the back of her mind and resuming the plethora of tasks at hand.

She pulled her gaze away now, lest she made eye contact with the man, and walked quickly from the crowd, motioning for Eli to follow her.

"So?"

"I'll talk to Rashid. Send me the names of the people who complained, if you haven't already."

"Okay, boss," Eli said.

She stopped and glared at Eli. Suddenly she felt transported to two years ago, when she first got hired as an event coordinator, responsible for multiple tasks, including managing Eli, a Methodist-turned-atheist risen at thirty-four who had been working for the company for some

eight years without any ambition of climbing upward but with plentiful attitude over who could oversee her work. For several weeks, Eli made sure she knew that there was no chance she'd let some skinny young thing fresh out of university boss her around. Apart from ignoring her calls and requests, Eli also took long cigarette breaks, misplaced her messages, sabotaged her print jobs, and called her "boss" in that lacklustre tone. On the first day of the second month, she decided to disable Eli's phone, bar her from logging into the system, nullify her access cards, and prove that she could do a day's work without the help of an assistant. At the end of that day, she gave Eli two options: she could continue working and succeeding without an assistant until someone higher-up noticed, or Eli could share the work and keep her job. From then on, Eli called her "boss" with less sarcasm and more respect.

With yesterday's offense stinging her now, however, Zoë found Eli's tone more irritating than usual. "What are those?" she asked harshly, pointing at the demo cups in her assistant's hands. "Are you drinking alcohol?"

"No, not really. It's mostly fentanyl gel. The alcohol percentage is low."

"*Excuse me?*"

Eli trashed the cups. "Sorry."

Somewhat mollified by Eli's sheepishness behind those ridiculous glasses, she said, in a gentler tone, "Send me those names. And stay near the booth."

Zoë spun on her heels, fingers already dialling for Rashid. Before fast-walking away, she called to Eli, annoying, difficult Eli, "Let's nip this in the bud."

"Fantastic job today, Zoë," Rashid said, setting down his highball on the oak wood counter, slightly smacking his lips. She stirred her own drink, allowing herself a demure smile. They were sitting at the bar of the hotel lounge, long after the speeches had concluded an electrifying first day, the exhibitors had packed up, the professionals had shaken enough hands, and all had retired for the night. Rashid had convinced her to let loose and have a few drinks with the team. She would've liked to have had more than three hours of sleep before the rodeo began again tomorrow, but her boss had a shy, sleepy-eyed smile that made her forget the bra digging into her flesh, the pinching of her toes in her shoes, and the pull of her thick hair in the bun. In the last hour they had drifted from the team chatting and laughing in lounge chairs—ties loosened, heels slipped off, Michelle becoming more talkative, Eli not frowning for once—and

stayed at the bar. Rashid had wanted to relay compliments on the lunch and the way she handled the complaints—gifting the disgruntled, displaying a disclaimer at the Miller Tech booth for the rest of the expo—in private.

“Not just today, even. These last few months, the past two years. You’ve been amazing.”

“Wow.” She felt heat rise up in her cheeks. “Thanks.”

“I know it hasn’t been easy.”

Zoë looked at her boss, who seemed unable to meet her gaze. If she had not had to use his passport to book him a trip one time, she would not have guessed that he rose in his early forties. His face was warm-brown and youthful, his teeth straight and white, his physique athletic. They had various experiences and interests in common: they both had a parent of Bahamian descent, they’d studied at the same schools, they liked the same music. From the get-go, their interactions had a strange spark that she suspected he had been struggling to extinguish without coming off as inappropriate, superior, or distant.

“I remember when I first entered the market. Everyone picked on me. Called me ‘baby face,’ ‘inexperienced,’ ‘immature.’ There were a few, more racial, terms behind my back. I’m sure it’s even worse for a woman.”

“Honestly, it’s been fine. Nothing I can’t handle.”

Rashid gave her a wonderful smile. “You’re incredibly brave.”

“It helps to have your boss on your side. Someone supportive, caring, and understanding.” The words sounded less embarrassing in her head. Feeling flushed, she watched his smile falter, the flecks of amber in his eyes shimmering like warm sand.

The thud of a glass against the counter prevented her from having to decide what to do next. When she saw whose glass it was, her body tensed, straddling between fight and flight.

“Oh, you found your daddy,” said the man who had offended her last night. Rashid turned around to face him, and then back again to see who he was talking to. Zoë knew there was no one behind her. His words were meant for her.

She wiped her face of emotion. “Rashid, this is Christian Miller. He represents Miller Technology.” Dealing with the complaints earlier, she had searched for his name on the registration list, burned it onto her retina, tossed it about in her mouth until she could say it without spitting.

“I *own* Miller Tech,” he corrected her. She swallowed a groan.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Rashid Parris, one of the managers of Convenesis National.”

Rashid extended his hand.

Miller eyed it, took a drink, and said, “I don’t shake hands with pedophiles.”

Zoë felt her stomach lurch, as the words seemed to dawdle in the space between them before her boss breathed them in, registered their full meaning. He took a couple of seconds to recover from his shock, and then stood up, straightening his jacket. “I think you should apologize and leave,” he said calmly.

Miller locked eyes with her. “A child playing dress-up,” he said. She stopped breathing.

“That’s enough.”

“You’ve outgrown your doll, Mr. Parris.”

“I’m calling security.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” The man put his hands up. “I’m being such a killjoy. Please. Go back to rocking the cradle.”

Zoë had never seen Rashid as enraged as he was now: brows knitted, jaw clenched, eyes stern and narrowed. He pointed a finger at the man as if to scold him. “We’re going to make sure you’re never allowed at future expos. You hear me?”

Miller laughed. “You’ve got it backwards. But hey, I’ll leave.” He walked around Rashid, a smirk still on his lips. When he noticed that the rest of the team had grown silent and eyed his every move, he turned around and said, “No, but really, celebrate the Everlast. Wear each cut and bruise like a badge of honour. Live long and deteriorate. Everlasting carcasses. Condone deception and baby-fucking, I mean, merry-making.”

She heard Michelle gasp and say something under her breath. If she had let her eyes stray, she would’ve seen that Eli’s frown was back. But she kept her eyes on the man, who seemed like he was starting to stroll away, finally an end, who suddenly turned back to her, set his face in front of her, locked her in place with his hate, called her something, a stab, a prick, too close to her now, and spat—hot, searing, shameful—right on her face. Her name. Her existence.

In the women’s washroom, Zoë cleaned the last of the spit off her chin. She managed to do it without upsetting her make-up. After a whole day of commotion, she still looked professional, mature, much older than fifteen.

Noticing flecks of saliva on her blazer and name tag, she wiped them with a dampened paper towel. The blazer had been her mom's, a treasured item that her mom had worn for her first job where she eventually met Zoë's dad and fell in love. Her mom had given it to her as a graduation present, re-tailored to her smaller shoulders and frame. She felt stronger wearing her mother's scent, her arms, her textures, as if she were closer than two countries away.

Before they moved out of Ontario, her parents had warned her. Long after tears of joy and wonder had been shed when they rose, when it became clear that she'd look fifteen forever, they had sat her down and warned her. Even with the miracle of immortality, people could be cruel, they said. People often judged with their eyes. People had preconceived notions about age. People often took advantage of others. She'd listened to them and knew they were right. At school, restaurants, shops, job interviews, anywhere, she'd found out that no one heeded young girls. If she cried, she was frail and inexperienced. So she stopped crying. If she laughed, she was hyper and temperamental. So she laughed less. If she spoke, her voice was eclipsed by others. So she affected a lower register. Her hair became tame and bundled up, business-like, her features became lined with age in kohl and dark burgundy, her clothing black and serious, her chest padded as if fully developed. Her parents worried less because she'd told them to, told them she was succeeding: professors started hearing her, employers stopped crossing her off their list, peers stopped interrupting her. Forever returned to being a gift, almost.

Zoë pressed her palms into the shirt of her jumpsuit, into the foam of her bra. For a millisecond, she wanted to cry, but the second gave way to laughter, instead, at her reflection, holding her girlhood.

Miller had mixed a racial slur with the word "changeling." It was the first time she'd heard it. She knew it wouldn't be the last.

Pulling some sweet-smelling Kleenexes from a compartment under the sink and wetting them, she smeared off her eye shadow, mascara, lipstick. Stroke by stroke, slow and meticulous. She loosened her hair, massaging a thousand nerves, letting go years of headache. She stepped down from her heels, her bare toes on the cold marble.

She looked like a lion, a cub, a short, skinny young thing, eyes round and youthful, lips easily parted, not hiding any secrets. She could get used to that.

She rubbed a stubborn smudge off her cheek. And it wasn't that secrets were bad either, she thought. Secrets were like stories, and both got you places.

*

Before every meeting in the large board room on the top floor of his office building, Christian liked to recite the following to his employees:

A cup becomes a chalice becomes a grail.

It holds wine holding blood holding eternal youth.

A secret becomes a lie becomes a story.

It holds power, gives power, takes power, too.

Anne

24 Anno Aeternum

“Excuse me,” Anne said, trying to get the attention of the store clerks at Calgary Co-op. One stood within the coffee bar, the other outside of it, leaning against the counter. Both had their eyes on the television screen on the wall, immersed in chatter, either unable or unwilling to acknowledge her presence.

She had just spent a substantial amount of energy on looking for a real turkey and some fresh vegetables with no success. Ever since the Big Cache last year, when people all over the country abandoned their adherence to the laws set by the food conservation policies and began to hunt, harvest, buy, steal, consume, and store in bulk whatever wildlife and food were left, she had seen more grocery stores and restaurants close than she could remember. Those that remained open survived mostly on the sale of chem foods. She could deal with eating fake, counterfeit food to stave off hunger more often than not, but she absolutely refused to use it for her annual illustrious Thanksgiving dinner. Every year since the year of the Rising, she had managed to get her hands on real meat and produce. This year had been the most difficult. As soon as she’d found out, in the deep bowels of certain online forums, that this last Calgary Co-op in the city sometimes brought out special fresh items for certain holidays, if you could get there fast enough in the mornings, she’d driven all the way from Crescent Heights to buy ingredients here. When she’d arrived at the store, with her pyjamas under a trench coat, she’d burst through the entrance, along with two other wild-eyed shoppers, and fast-walked in and out of the aisles, trying not to appear nervous, over-excited, or too aware of where the other patrons were. It was soon clear to her from the toothless grin of the rows in the aisles that Calgary Co-op either hid their more valuable items in the back or was going under in a matter of weeks. There was only one lonely shelf stocked gluttonously with chem foods; other than that, the store was as empty as a ghost town. The number of employees also seemed to have dwindled to only two.

“I can’t believe she held him captive for *two* years. Can you imagine?” Anne heard one of the clerks say instead of responding to her call.

“It’s horrifying. I read that he was forced to wear diapers and drink fake formula,” said the other.

“Oh God, and she would clean him?”

“Among *other* things.”

Anne cleared her throat loudly. The two clerks started and turned around.

“Yes?” the one outside of the bar asked, in a tone that suggested *she* was wasting *his* time. He was youthful, muscular, and bearded, with no name tag on his uniform. His round, black eyes, pointed ears, and overall shagginess reminded her of her neighbour’s forever-senile black terrier, who she despised.

Checking that the other two shoppers were nowhere in sight, she signalled for the clerk to lean in before she whispered, “You wouldn’t happen to have a real turkey stashed somewhere? Some fresh celery?”

“Um. No.”

At his words, the migraine, which had developed with every step she’d taken in the store with empty hands, threatened to pound her eyes out of their sockets. “What am I going to do?” she muttered, feeling betrayed by the internet. She hadn’t realized that she’d been heard until she caught the clerk exchange a smirk with his co-worker, who also looked like she rose in her twenties. Both of their smirking faces had few to no scratches and scuffs. Certain that they were laughing at her, she imagined pummelling the sides of their arrogant, privileged, twenties-risen heads with her umbrella. In reality she clenched her fist over the handle.

“Where is your manager?” she demanded. Instead of seeing fear on the clerk’s terrier face, she saw bored disdain, almost amusement.

“Honestly, I don’t think my manager, if she still has her job by the time you reach her, is going to care about what you have to say. Sorry, lady. Why don’t you get the chem products like everybody else? I’m sure if you think turkey, it’ll taste like turkey.”

Anne gaped at him. His comments convinced her that he had no capacity for judging what tasted good. He probably preferred chemically engineered foods.

“Gabe,” the other clerk said. Anne expected her to admonish her rude co-worker; instead, she pointed to the screen. “They’re escorting her into trial now. She looks like a crazy person.”

The one called Gabe turned back to the TV and scoffed. “That’s not a face. That’s a cracked vase.”

Hearing this, Anne took a step back, her hand pulling up the collar of her trench coat. There were cracks all along the right side of her neck and down her chest.

“She rose in her fifties?”

“No, mid-thirties. She was a hard Celebrant for two decades. Explains the bruises and the cracks.”

Anne disliked that term. When it was first introduced in 10 AA, the same year people began using the Everlast calendar, it encapsulated the majority attitude towards the Everlast: treating immortality as a gift to be celebrated. In recent years the term was frequently being adapted to refer to a specific group of people within that majority who tended to celebrate “a little too much.” She felt that “Celebrant” now had a negative connotation used by people to condescend in a way similar to the use of “Millennials” back in the day. Sure, she did indulge for a few years, after rising at thirty-four, in the Celebrant lifestyle of excess over moderation, of fun, liberating audacity over bland, conservative caution, but she didn’t go overboard. It was true that her thigh now had a large purple bruise that never faded, that the cracks on her neck and chest seemed to be expanding each year, that her flesh had become as brittle as dried plaster, but at least she looked better than Sarah Adelson, the woman arrested and taken into the courthouse on television. Apart from the network of fissures across her entire face, the woman’s nose seemed to have crumbled inwards. Her skin was sickly pale but dark and cracked where bruises sat like stains, unable to heal. Her dull-looking eyes swivelled from one shiny camera to the next before they were shielded from view by the doors of the courthouse. The captions indicated that Sarah Adelson was facing trial for the abduction and unlawful confinement of Ryan Hills.

“She had a miscarriage the year before she rose, that’s what I read.”

“That’s kind of sad.”

“Doesn’t justify what she did.”

“Of course not.”

Anne clenched the umbrella handle tighter in her fist. If she wasted any more time with these idiots, she would not be able to brine the meat, make her special curry gravy, scrub and bake the potatoes in brie, wash and cut up vegetables for her famous avocado cashew dip, dice the sweet, pickled carrots, and put the finishing touches on the caramel berry pie, let alone get groceries.

“Excuse me.” She knocked the ferrule of her umbrella against the floor to regain the clerk’s attention. A shock of intense, raw pain cut into her index finger to coincide with a quiet snap. Before she could register what had happened, she saw what appeared to be a broken finger rolling on the glossy floor, next to two spots of blood. Something in her told her to pick up the

finger, shove it into her pocket, and act like nothing had happened. She had just stepped onto the blood to hide it when Gabe turned his head to her.

“Yes?”

“I’m still here,” she said, gritting her teeth a little to hide the pain screaming in her pocket.

“I see that.”

“You must have *some* other real meat, if not turkey. Is there a special trade we could do? I’m willing to give a lot for something fresh.”

Gabe leaned back with an obvious look of disgust. Did he notice that her umbrella was in her left hand now or could he somehow tell that the stump of her finger was bleeding into the fabric of her coat pocket? She was starting to sweat. Her finger had never broken off like that before. Once she’d stubbed her toe against a metal chair and the tip had completely flaked off as if her toe had been frostbitten. But the nurses at the emergency said it was normal and very common. They had patched it up with a strange varnish and the muted sting had become as familiar to her as the feel of fabric against one’s skin when one wore clothes.

“We *really* don’t have that kind of stuff anymore. It’s inhumane, not to say illegal, to cook and eat an animal or a plant that cannot die, you know that, right?”

She hated that line of reasoning. It reminded her of the approach that vegans would use against her whenever she happened to talk about her culinary ambitions at parties before the Everlast. What was so wrong about opening a concept restaurant providing gourmet dishes that featured a different exotic animal every month? Animals were meant to be killed and eaten. It was true that they couldn’t be killed now, which was an improvement in a sense—at least they were still alive, but the concept of humanity had also changed. She couldn’t understand why people were still using old-world arguments to defend dissentientism.

“I *know* I cannot serve chem food to my guests,” she replied. The thought of serving synthetic food to her old culinary school classmates was horrifying. Since graduation, she and nine of her classmates had been participating in a ritual of cooking a grand meal for one another every holiday. For Labour Day, Christy had made smoked squabs and kale coleslaw with a honey-drizzled apple mascarpone crumble as dessert; on Canada Day, Shannon had served seared minnows with kumquat marmalade, dill-pickled shallots, and chocolate spiced rum cakes. Now that it was her turn, what would everyone say if she followed up those meals with tubes of

unnatural junk? Imagining their expressions of revulsion or scorn was enough to make her forget about the pain in her hand.

Gabe shook his head, emitting a sound like a low, canine growl. The clerk in the coffee bar rolled her eyes, told him not to bother, and muttered something about excess and heartlessness before they both returned to ignoring Anne.

“Try the abandoned warehouses in Inglewood off of highway 1A,” someone whispered behind her. She turned around. It was one of the two shoppers who had raided the store with her. He had similarly empty hands. Before she could say anything, he shifted off nervously, as if he was being pursued.

“What’s there?” she half-called, half-whispered after him.

“Your dinner ingredients,” he mouthed.

After parking near several other cars in a fenced-off area under the highway, Anne stayed in the vehicle for several minutes, picking at her sewn and bandaged finger while taking in her surroundings. She normally would’ve gone to the emergency room, but she had no time to spare. It had been eight forty-five a.m. when she’d left the store, and she still needed a turkey, and some celery. Using some thread stashed in the glove compartment of her car, she had bitten down on the collar of her coat and sewn her finger back on in the parking lot. It was strange, but even before she’d reattached her finger, she could feel the lining of her coat pocket against her detached digit and the syrupy texture of the pool of blood in which it was submerged. Now that it was attached, she could move it like before. Nothing seemed different, except for the stitches and the persistent pain, albeit far less acute. For a few seconds, she wondered why none of the celebrity Celebrants, such as the Qūm and that Brazilian senior, ever mentioned whether they could still feel discomfort from their Rising marks. She was glad she had taken pentobarbital at her Rising party rather than chosen something flashy.

In Inglewood, the number of cars around the abandoned warehouses indicated many visitors, but there was no one walking about on the grounds. The mist that had begun when she got onto the highway now splattered as angry raindrops onto the muddy gravel, the rusted container boxes, and the deserted excavators lined up against the wire fence. Nothing looked as stained, broken, and despondent as the one-storey warehouses in the centre of the lot. There were no lights within the faded red brick, the jagged windows. It was possible she could’ve been lied

to again. These days, people either wanted sentient products for themselves or barred others from eating them, as dissentients did.

Anne looked at her watch. It was now nine-thirty.

“I’ll marinate instead of brine,” she decided. Then she was out of the car and splashing into puddles to get to the warehouses, the rain pummeling against her umbrella.

The sight of an empty warehouse when she first entered had renewed the urge to hurt that terrier-like blockhead. He deserved the blame, somehow. When opening two more creaky doors revealed a candle-lit space with boarded-up windows and people wandering and making purchases at tables displaying small assortments of goods, Anne let out a sigh of relief. She hurried from table to table, unable to contain her delight at finding everything she needed. There was even a cigarette or two, although she had already gotten used to skippe, the synthetic alternative with lab-made nicotine. She managed to bag the only celery stalks being sold by buying them from another shopper. There was only one thing missing: the turkey.

“What’s in that?” She tapped on the cooler next to a table with her umbrella before she remembered she had better stop doing so. It was the only cooler she found in the place. The gloved man cleaning the surface of the table glanced at her. “Is it fresh meat?” she asked him.

He nodded. “Hunted and gutted an hour ago.”

“Turkey?” She grinned, raising her eyebrows.

“No.”

“Chicken?” she prodded, no longer smiling.

“Nope.”

“Goose? Duck?”

“More like rat.”

“That’s disgusting!”

The man shrugged. “Rats are more accessible than turkeys right now, ma’am. You won’t find a turkey here. ”

“But I *need* a turkey.”

“You need it or you want it?”

“What’s the difference?” she snapped. The migraine was back, squeezing the circumference of her head as if it was trying to pop her brains like a ripe pimple.

“Well, knowing the difference determines how you set your priorities.”

“What?” She glared at him. Why was everyone lecturing her today? Was the universe trying to tell her something? She felt like she was in a story, and all the characters were pressuring her to come to a conclusion of some sort. The man continued to predict loudly that rat would be a rare delicacy in a few years, but she had just about enough of having her plans thwarted.

“I don’t want rat, okay?” she said, raising her voice. “I need something bigger, able to feed ten mouths, like a turkey!”

“Analyn?”

She turned to the sound of her full name. Nobody but her parents called her that. The gentle voice belonged to a woman with bright eyes, thick eyebrows, and plump, smiling lips. Even with the scrapes on her cheeks and chin, the woman had a soft, friendly-looking face. One that reminded Anne of her childhood friend.

“Karen?”

“It *is* you!” Karen laughed, clapping her arms, landing swift kisses on her cheeks. “It’s been ages!”

“I haven’t seen you since high school, I think.”

“High school! My God, high school was more than forty years ago. How have you been? How is your family?”

Anne thought of her parents’ quiet disappointment when she told them she was moving out. It’d been a few months after they’d all risen, and she’d gotten weary of living at home, a custom for unmarried women in Filipino culture. She hadn’t yet finished her culinary arts program or gotten married, but the limitations of time had been removed. It didn’t make sense to be restricted by a concept that no longer applied. Her parents disagreed; she rarely visited them. “They’re good,” she told Karen.

“What have you been doing since high school?”

The memory of seeing a tall stack of acceptance letters from universities around the world on Karen’s desk in her room prompted her to say, “What *haven’t* I been doing?”

Karen laughed. “Of course! You had so many life goals, I remember. You wanted to do everything.” As Karen launched into full reminiscing mode, Anne tried not to compare her own face to the one before her while she listened and nodded. All she could think of was how tired,

dry, and chipped her face must've looked, as Karen gushed about how the Everlast had already allowed her to acquire three more degrees, change her career more than twice, get divorced, and get married again. When Karen remarked on how crazy it was to run into a childhood friend and see how much they'd grown and matured, an unfamiliar phenomenon now, Anne tightened her coat around her to hide her pyjamas and wished she'd put some make-up on her dark under-eye circles. If it wasn't for the damn terrier, which liked to bark in the yard at different times throughout the night, she wouldn't have acquired the permanent discolouration under her eyes.

"I do wish I could've had more kids though. Have you been following the Adelson affair? I hear she might walk."

"Oh?"

"I would feel so bad for the victim. Forced to live as her child, and then watch her get away with it scot-free? Sure, Adelson's situation is sad but I can't imagine being driven to kidnapping." Karen sighed. "I guess I don't know what that's like, thanks to Tala."

"Tala?"

"My daughter. I had her before the Rising."

Anne felt something like a stab in her chest while Karen called for her daughter. A girl who appeared no bigger than a toddler came strolling from a nearby table. Despite the heels, the tight, mature clothing, the big, gold earrings, and the heavy eye shadow, she did not look older than four or five. She smiled prettily up at Anne when she neared them.

"Hello."

Her voice was angelic. Anne smiled despite herself, softened by the cuteness of her dimples, her little nose, her wide, doll-like eyes.

"Tala's getting married next month!" Karen blurted out, bending down to clasp her daughter's shoulders. "We're having the wedding in Manila!"

"Mom, you don't need to tell everyone," Tala whispered shyly.

"Sorry, honey. Too excited."

"C-congratulations," Anne said in what she hoped was a gentle tone. Something was hurting her chest. She worried that the cracks there had somehow crumbled inwards. Karen straightened her back to stroke the top of Tala's head like the proud mother she was. Anne tried to stand a bit more upright.

“So, what’s new with you? Are you a chef now?” Karen asked her. Before she could answer, Karen turned to her daughter and said, “Ms. Delarosa and I went to the same high school, and she was one of those few talented people who would’ve been able to accomplish all her dreams even without the gift of forever.”

Tala beamed politely, her face brightening even more. The resemblance between the friendly faces of the mother and daughter before Anne made her want to disappear.

“I-I finished culinary school,” she lied.

“That’s wonderful!”

“Went back-packing in Europe.”

“Awesome.”

“Worked at different restaurants.”

“All five-star, I bet.” Karen winked. “Where are you working now? Do you have your own restaurant? Is it Michelin-starred?”

“I work at a Lifetime Planning centre.”

“Oh!” Karen’s surprise shifted into polite curiosity without missing a beat. “I’ve heard of those. They help people manage and plan out their lives. That’s nice.”

“I haven’t gotten married,” she continued. She could feel her brain shutting off, with her voice somehow carrying on, vomiting words without a filter. “But I moved out.”

“Oh!” Karen smiled, giving an easy shrug. “That’s cool. My parents were not very happy when I got divorced. You know how it is with Filipino parents. But they love Tala and want what’s best for us.”

“I don’t have kids. None. Missed that train.”

“Oh…” Karen nodded, her smile faltering at the edges. “That’s fine too.”

She carried on: “It’s better than fine. I don’t even think about it. In fact, I’m too busy to have a family. I work, I play, I give these lavish dinner parties. They’re so much work. I’m giving one tonight, actually, for Thanksgiving. You should come. With Tala.”

“Really?”

Anne was just as surprised herself at the invitation. “Why not? It’s at seven. Here’s my address.” She wrote down her address on Karen’s hand, trying not to notice how smooth her friend’s hand felt. “I’m making herb potatoes in baked brie, avocado cashew poured over glazed celery sticks, carrots pickled in molasses, a two-crust pie filled with blueberries in melted

caramel, my special garam masala curry gravy, and a large, wild turkey in a spicy mustard, Scotch marinade.”

Karen and Tala’s dumbfounded expressions stole a loud chuckle from her lips. The ache in her chest subsided a little.

“How have you managed to get so much real food with the shortage?”

“Resourcefulness.” Anne gestured to the run-down market around her, as if she’d known about it before today, as if she were a frequent visitor.

Karen giggled. “Yeah, I don’t think I would’ve ever thought to try rats or insects if it weren’t for this place. It’s Tala’s first time in the undermarket.” Karen put an arm around her daughter.

“Really? I’m here all the time.” Anne willed her legs to move. “I’ve got to run now though. Gotta go home and get my hands dirty. Dinner isn’t going to cook itself.”

“I’m so happy to hear you’re doing well, Analyn,” Karen said.

“And I you! See you tonight!” Anne hurried away, smiling and waving back at her childhood friend and the source of all her happiness and pride beside her, while feeling the dreadful absence of a turkey in her grocery bag.

On her way back to Crescent Heights, with a skippe in her mouth, Anne drove through downtown, thinking the traffic would be minimal in the early afternoon. She had not anticipated the number of pedestrians on the streets, toting signs. Trying to read the boards and banners, she almost ran over someone; she slammed the breaks just in time. The signs seemed to be colour-coded: red vs. blue. There were more blue than red. The red signs had a logo of a chalice that read “KJT” and Sarah Adelson’s dull, splintered face on them, under “FREE” in large block letters. The cheap paint bled into the cracks of her visage, gathering under her vacant eyes, seeping down her fractured cheeks, weeping crimson.

The flashing red of the traffic lights and the streams of blood on cardboard monopolized Anne’s vision, pulsating with each thump of the returned migraine, hammering, whacking, yapping.

When the lights changed, she accelerated, gunning for home. She could see her turkey now, waiting at home, yapping in the next yard, shitting in her front lawn, waking her up at night. She could slice off its stupid, large ears pointed like horns, gouge out its round, black,

arrogant eyes, chop off its noisy muzzle, and shear and pluck its fur off, gutting and skinning it red and velvety. She would rub it down with her hoarded, stashed goods—a mix of Scotch whiskey, brown sugar, soy sauce, finely chopped onions and garlic, and spicy mustard—before letting it soak in a bag of marinade and meat juices. When it was ready, she would broil it to perfection, plump, golden, aromatic. Before the guests arrived, she would set it in the centre of the table, dim the lights, and let its beauty speak for itself.

All eyes would be on the source of her happiness and pride.

“This is absolutely delicious!”

“The meat is so tender.”

“Ostrich for Thanksgiving is ingenious.”

“How did you even—”

“Adelson got imprisonment for life!”

Everyone at the dinner table turned their attention from Anne to Karen, whose hands gripped her phone above her teeming plate, her abandoned utensils. Her plump lips were stretched from ear to ear. Moments earlier, Anne and her eleven guests had all sat down at the table in her house and taken their first bites of the meal she’d prepared. She’d told them that she substituted ostrich for turkey, hence the redness and the beefy flavour. She’d sliced the meat into small pieces beforehand to prevent it from twitching too much or running off of the table. Her culinary program had not taught her how to handle immortal foods; she had to learn that herself. It wasn’t that much different from skewering live shrimp or bleeding out an animal, really. All that was different was the duration.

“Did you say—”

“Oh my God, is that true—”

“Oh, I’m so glad—”

“The trial’s already finished?”

“What happened?”

Anne looked at her old classmates, their forks and knives lowered, their mouths hardly greasy or chewing, their eyes, wide and curious, on Karen and her plump, smiling lips. A second ago, there had been wonderful noises: the clank of knives against plates, the tinkling of wine glasses, the crunch of carrots, the slurping of meat juices, and overlapping compliments. Now it

was just Karen's voice, reading from her phone: it was an easy decision; there was pressure from protestors; if Adelson had pleaded not guilty by reason of temporary insanity due to her inability to cope with her infertility, she might've walked or gotten a reduced sentence; she pleaded not guilty by claiming that she had rationally taken in, or "rescued," an abandoned infant and was in the process of finalizing his adoption.

The guests groaned, cringed, frowned at her words.

Tala shook her head in disgust and said, "Only a severely troubled person would believe that Ryan Hills is actually a baby. That's like saying I'm deceiving anyone here about my age."

Anne observed Tala beside her: that cute little nose, cherubic cheeks, bleached blonde hair in such perfect big curls they looked plastic. In front of Tala, a piece of succulent meat was stuck to her fork on the plate, neglected. Concerned that Tala disliked the meat, or worse, that it was too lean, Anne began to feel cold sweat on her chest, her neck, her face.

"Oh, honey. No one would ever think that," Karen cooed. Others chimed in.

"It's so disrespectful to call him an infant."

"She should've seen a therapist or something. That's what I did. I have no sympathy for her."

"I hope he recovers from this in time and has a happy, fulfilling life."

According to Karen, Ryan Hills was overjoyed to be back with his family, friends, and long-time partner, Jesse Wilcott, the nephew of Prime Minister Wilcott. Hearing that the prime minister, who had a passion for helping minorities, had offered support to his nephew and the victim's family throughout this difficult time, Shannon raised her glass, remarking that the happy ending deserved cheers. All around Anne, hands mimicked this action, dragging out the clinking of each glass, the exchange of identical phrases of relief and joy at the culmination of an engrossingly tragic but ultimately just affair. The beautifully carved ostrich turkey sat as untouched in the centre as the pieces of itself distributed on plates around the table.

Anne gripped her knife. Here she was, carving herself up for her guests and no one appreciated her work. When she rose in 1 AA, she thought God had answered her prayers. She'd lost her baby the year before, and the Everlast gave her the opportunity to keep trying. She'd always have time; it'd never be too late. But then it became clear that humanity could no longer reproduce, as if reproduction had been covertly exchanged for immortality. She was fine with it then; she embraced the Everlast anyway. She left her boyfriend and moved out. She celebrated—

wasn't that what you were supposed to do? She put off finishing her program, opening that restaurant, getting married, making amends with her parents, seeking help—why would she do all those things, she thought, why should she set priorities, if she'd always have time, ample time, infinite time to deal with that later? But sitting here, barred from the praise she'd expected to receive, with nothing to be proud of but a living carcass loved by no one, she knew she hadn't been fine. She'd felt cheated, duped, as she did now. She wasn't sure who to blame. Who knew you could waste forever?

She glared at the feast before her. Her anger, frustration, disappointment, incredible sadness, or whatever it was, made her want to lop off her fingers and dip them in the avocado cashew that no one was touching; break off each one of her toes, mix them in with the berries in the pie that no one would enjoy; scoop out her eyes, twist them around in the forgotten brie, and pull them out again, stretching their warm, cheesy tendrils.

“Ms. Delarosa!”

Tala's voice shocked her out of her trance. She turned to Tala, whose eyes were so wide she could've fallen into them.

“This ostrich meat is—honest-to-God—the *best* I've ever had!”

Anne wasn't sure if she heard Tala correctly. “The best...?”

“Yes! You'll have to teach me the recipe.” Tala smiled. Her face seemed to glow, heavenly, making Anne blink.

“I-I'm glad you like it, Tala,” she said, finding her voice again. “You're such a sweetie.”

Tala giggled. The adorable sound warmed Anne's body, despite the cracks, the discolouration, the missed opportunities. She sat a little bit straighter.

“I'll teach you the recipe, honey,” Anne said, nodding. “It's real easy.”

*

In contrast to the sounds of chatter in Anne's house, the world outside was quiet. The rain had stopped, the protesters had long gone home, and there were only a few cars left on the streets. The yard next to hers was also quiet. If there had been a bark or two, she would not have heard it; her house was too alive.

Mrs. Gupta

29 Anno Aeternum

Perched on the driver's seat, Mrs. Gupta waited for her children in the car on the driveway of her house. She had made sure last night that the battery pack was charged to full for this trip. Even though she'd had an electric car for a couple of years now, since the government had made it mandatory, she still often forgot to charge it. Old habits were hard to kill. But today was different.

She breathed in the crispness of the morning, knowing that, to anyone else, the day would've appeared average. The morning sun would not have seemed like a great, citrusy lozenge. The hum of hard-to-catch insects would not have had the cadence of a carefree tune. The water spitting from the sprinklers onto the fake grass would not have added misty romance to the picturesqueness of her house. Today was the beginning of forever, even more so than that unforgettable day she rose at forty-three.

Her fingers drummed the steering wheel in anticipation. Her heart was doing the *thumka*. The ends of her mouth kept lifting despite her best efforts. How silly she must've looked, sitting in the car by herself, simpering like a girl.

"Divit! Neerav! Are you two coming?" she called from the car window. Two voices unmarred by puberty answered her from within the house amidst low clattering noises.

"Boys." She chuckled, shaking her head. They always had trouble getting up and getting out of the house in the morning. Every weekday, she would get up at six, have her chai, do her morning poop, put the dishes away (quietly), make chem eggs and undermarket *chapati* for the boys, and wake them up at seven-fifteen. While they brushed their teeth and got dressed, she would make Neerav's bed (Divit was the tidy one), prepare their lunches and snacks, and dish out breakfast and chai. Often she would have to keep checking on them throughout this process: Neerav tended to fall asleep again, and Divit took ages to decide what to wear. Today she had to wake them up an hour early, which resulted in more complaints and grumpy faces than usual.

She lowered the visor to inspect her face in the mirror. As she often did while she waited for the boys, she checked to see how much the crazing on her skin had extended and whether her wrinkles had deepened. A few millimetres, perhaps. Nothing she did seemed to stop the splintering, which was miniscule, for the most part, but everywhere: on her face, her fingers, her legs, her arms. She tried not to laugh too broadly, avoided heavy lifting and excessive exercise.

She suspected that the only way to prevent cracks from forming was to lie still, but she couldn't do that. There was too much to do every day. Her reflection was frowning now, which rendered her lined features even grimmer. She willed herself to remember what today might bring.

“Goodbye, Mrs. Gupta,” she said to the woman in the mirror. “Hello, eternal prime.”

In her mind she also said hello to Richard, a name that would've made her blush to say out loud.

The first time she'd met Richard was at a Rising party in 1 AA. She had gone to the event with her husband, but their marriage had been turbulent for years at that point. He ignored her the whole night, and she allowed it like she allowed his other abuses. Divorce was out of the question—what would *ammi* and *abbu* say? And she couldn't do that to the boys. Upon discovering the gift of Everlast, she'd found herself without anyone to embrace. Richard, an acquaintance made earlier in the evening and soon forgotten, who had recognized her sadness from across the room, came to her then, held her in his strange but familiar arms, and she surprised herself by not pulling away.

The second time she'd encountered him was at a bookstore a few days after her husband left for good in 12 AA. He'd had enough of being a family man, and wanted to pursue the full Celebrant lifestyle—what was the point of immortality if he couldn't do what he wanted?, he'd said to her. She couldn't exactly disagree. Upon seeing Richard's face, a little bit cracked but warm and handsome nonetheless, she had started crying, for no reason, it seemed. They ended up spending the day together, him listening to her grief, infecting her with his kindness again. She could've continued seeing him perhaps, but her embarrassment and shyness were stronger than her desire.

The last time she saw him in person was in 23 AA. His skin had become so splintered, crinkly, and stitched-up that she hardly recognized him. She wasn't a stranger to such wear and tear herself by that point, but she could tell it embarrassed him to have her see him so broken and altered. She wished she'd had the courage to give him what he'd given her throughout the years: hope and comfort. After today, just possibly, she could at last.

She flipped up the visor at the sound of car doors opening. Her children climbed in, stacking their schoolbags in the centre. She waited until they buckled up, their short legs dangling over their seats, before pulling out of the driveway.

“Did you take your lunch canisters, *beta*?” she asked, driving out of Rexdale along Elmhurst Drive.

“Yes, Ma,” Divit answered.

Neerav’s silence meant he was either rolling his eyes or still half-grumpy, half-asleep. A peek in the rear-view mirror confirmed it. Neerav had her frown on his face, which accentuated the discolouration on his chin and the jagged fissures between his eyebrows. She was about to warn him, as she often did, that frowning hardened the creases, when Divit’s shirt and tie caught her attention.

“Oh, don’t you look fancy today, Divit.”

He smoothed down his tie. “Yes, well, I have a meeting with my supervisor today. He seems to take me more seriously when I’m not dressed as an eight-year old.”

“But you *are* an eight-year old!” she exclaimed, laughing.

Neerav groaned. “Ma, you’re not funny.”

She stopped smiling. His phone began to ring. He answered it by embarking on a long dictation of the day’s tasks to his secretary.

“Sorry, *beta*,” she whispered, and looked ahead at the road. Neerav was having difficulty at work lately; it had to do with pressures from a new boss. She was ashamed that it had slipped her mind (her brain was full of Richard these days). She wasn’t sure why, but it had always been hard for her to remember that her sons were not eight-years-old, that they no longer went to elementary school, or high school, for that matter. They had both graduated from college years ago in 15 AA, with Divit pursuing a master’s in journalism after working as a copy-editor for a decade and Neerav developing his career in accounting.

“I’m being silly,” she said softly.

Divit laid a small hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay, Ma. Thanks for driving us.”

Hearing that was like biting into a fresh, steaming, authentic *chapati* in the morning.

“Don’t mention it! Until they make cars small enough for you, I am happy to be your chauffeur!”

“They do, Ma. They have,” Neerav said, before returning to his call.

“Oh?” It dawned on her that the few smallish vehicles she’d seen parked here and there in the last year or two were maybe not adorable toy cars. “Are they safe though? I don’t know if I’d trust my babies in those.”

“Don’t worry about it now,” Divit assured her. “We’ll discuss that down the line.”

She wondered if he was referring to the thing he had proposed a week ago. She could feel her frown coming back.

“Isn’t it a beautiful June morning, boys?” She refocused her attention on the road, the sunshine, the trees. She tried not to notice how most of the trees looked naked without leaves, due to the Big Cache. Apparently leaves tasted like any leafy greens with the right dressing.

“Yeah, Ma. It sure is.”

“I have a conference call in an hour, so we need to leave here in forty minutes. Forty-five max, okay?” Neerav said, after having hopped out of the car and onto the curb. Mrs. Gupta had parked on Northwestern Avenue on the outskirts of Brookhaven-Amesbury, gotten out of the vehicle, and stood unmoving on the sidewalk, transfixed by the building in front of them.

“That works for me too,” Divit said, although she hardly heard him. “Ma?”

“Have you ever seen anything so magnificent?” she managed to say. The building before them was twenty stories high, its surface an endless grid of cascading white marble and two-way mirrors reflecting the cerulean sky and cotton-white clouds. Two sets of symmetrical stone steps, flanking a sloped marble panel housing a fountain flowing with what appeared to be milk, led to the entrance of the building.

“Only in my dreams,” said Neerav. She failed to hear this, or to see Divit shoot his brother a look of warning. She could only hear the pounding of her own heart and marvel at the astounding architecture before her, the gifts and the opportunities it promised. It wouldn’t have surprised her if the building twisted and faded away like a mirage.

“C’mon, Ma, let’s check this thing out,” Divit prompted. Feeling his palm on the back of her thigh, she let him push her gently towards the building.

Once they’d passed the rushing fountain and entered the dark entrance hall, Mrs. Gupta found it even harder to keep walking. Surely they had made a mistake; surely they had picked some other name from the lottery.

When she’d received a call from Recon, Inc. earlier this month, telling her she’d won, it took her a few minutes to remember that she’d participated in a lottery. The cosmetic company had solicited her participation a year ago—or was it two?—and as she hadn’t heard back, it was natural to assume she’d lost. Winning was a foreign experience to her. Neerav had been

sceptical. He didn't think the company's products or services could work if they were being given away for free. Divit had said that a lot of budding companies in the industry conducted this type of marketing and lottery gifting to attract customers. Neerav had countered that he doubted Recon needed more visibility after securing the prime minister as their lifelong sponsor. Divit had added that the plastics market was very competitive these days, considering the increasing recognition of the mysterious ubiquity of dry, bruised, splintering skin. The debate went on and on. The boys didn't want her to get her hopes up but didn't want her to be discouraged either. After seeing Recon's latest promotional video, however, she'd decided to go for it.

Now the prospect of priming her whole body seemed even more tenuous. Was she worried that the recon wouldn't work, or was she worried that it would?

At the end of the entranceway, the sight of a spacious, brightly-lit main hall raised by round columns of smooth, cream-white stone quieted her anxieties. The reflection of the columns against the polished marble floors rendered the ground bottomless, as if one fallen into its depths would continue to drop from the ceiling and down again into the ground, in an infinite loop. In the centre of the hall was the Sangraal, a chalice carved from fire agate, mounted on a long golden stem with handles curved like fallopian tubes. The base was an inverted cup made of bloodstone. She knew all these details because the prime minister had marvelled at this chalice in an interview back in 27 AA, when he introduced the world to the wonders of Recon, Inc.

"The Sangraal!" she couldn't help but squeal to the boys, pointing at the fixture, a symbol of eternal youth and beauty.

Immediately, a woman in an ivory cloak with short, caramel-brown curls appeared by her side from the edges of the hall. Two other individuals, in the same uniform, followed her and placed themselves beside Neerav and Divit. Because their faces were free of cracks and untainted by bruises, quite a rare sight now, they looked as if they'd risen in their twenties just yesterday.

"Welcome to Corbenic, our main office and workshop," the woman said in a charming, lilting voice.

"Thank you." Mrs. Gupta could hardly bring herself to make eye contact with the woman, whose lips, inflated and pink like bubble gum, parted just a little. There was not one line or blemish on her radiant, rosy face.

"What is the purpose of your visit today?"

“Oh!” Hoping that no one noticed how shaky (and brittle) her fingers were, she pulled the invitation card from her purse and smoothed down one of its upturned edges before handing it to the woman. The tall, lovely creature looked at the card and then back at her without taking it, her face expressionless. This type of reaction did not surprise Mrs. Gupta at all; it usually preceded the more familiar experience of losing.

“It says she got selected for the gift of Recon,” Divit offered, coming to her rescue.

The woman seemed alarmed by the suddenness of his high-pitched voice. There was a quick glint in her eyes as she looked down at him before it disappeared into an inviting smile. Mrs. Gupta hoped she wasn't one of those ladies who were still deeply affected by the discovery of world-wide infertility. Although the instances occurred less and less frequently, it still made her sad whenever women, and sometimes men, would break down into tears at the sight of her beautiful twin boys.

“I see.” The woman took the card and read it. “Mrs. Amita Gupta?”

Her hand shot upwards as she announced her presence with a squeak. The sound chased itself throughout the bright, empty hall for several agonizing minutes.

“Please take a seat.” The woman gestured to the marble slabs to the right of the chalice. “I have to verify your information before we continue.”

She nodded, too anxious to see Neerav raise his eyebrows at his brother, who rolled his eyes and looked away.

Guided by the two silent figures, they walked past the statue to the slabs draped in white mink fur. The marble slabs encircled another fountain, this one bedecked sparingly with yellow topaz gemstones. Although she was sure this dream would disintegrate any moment, it made her giddy to be standing where the prime minister was standing in that wonderful interview.

Two summers ago, a group of political extremists, some members of which derived from Wilcott's own party, had infiltrated his cottage and severed his body with a saw. Most of the group members had been arrested, except for two who escaped with the lower half of Wilcott's body. Neerav had told her that the body's eventual obliteration in a shredder was filmed, uploaded, televised, and ranked as the number one shared video that year. She had not had the stomach to watch it. She recalled that the media uproar was comparable to, but not quite as legendary as, the coverage of the Qūm's Rising. People speculated whether the prime minister would continue governing as just a torso, or whether he would resign. Then, a week later, to

everyone's bewilderment, Wilcott was whole again: he had a new groin, new legs, new feet, and even brighter, younger-looking skin. A small, then-unknown company called Recon, Inc. had come to his rescue with their latest reconstructive products and services. After that, he'd given an eye-opening tour into the cutting-edge work of Recon, which increased the company's fame but unfortunately not the wider accessibility of its products. For some reason or other, Recon could not supply the demand of even the most wealthy and most connected, let alone the general public, which was why her anticipation was half weighed down by the possibility of her going home as fractured as she had been when she left. She'd decided to try though, because of the latest promo featuring Richard.

"What are you doing?" Divit's question pulled her away from the gemstones. He was frowning at Neerav's hand dipped into the sienna cream that poured like molasses from the fountain. Propped on the mink fur with his short legs flopping in the air, he appeared to be trying to lift his hand from the thickness. The substance reminded her of the butterscotch pudding snacks she used to pack for the boys before they were discontinued.

"Neerav, stop that!" she urged.

He pulled his hand back up with a soft plop. The ocean of cream seemed to be in no hurry to fill the small hollow he had left.

"It tingles." Neerav twisted his hand around. "Almost burns, but it's not painful." His eyes widened. "Whoa, is this lacca?"

"It can't be." Wilcott had explained that lacca was a one-of-a-kind, state-of-the-art healing cream priced at thousands of dollars for a tube. She sat down between the boys to take a closer look. The cream seemed to dry before her eyes, tightening and brightening the skin on Neerav's hand. It was almost like concealer, but infinitely better.

"You should've dipped your face in instead," Divit said.

"*You* should soak your legs. Although they're so swollen and stained, they're probably a lost cause."

"Boys." She peered at the two silent figures that had stationed themselves on each side of the fountain. The last thing she wanted was a scene.

"Still sceptical?" Divit sneaked a last dig at his brother.

"We'll see." When Neerav gestured with his newly-lacquered hand at the woman walking back towards them, Mrs. Gupta felt her heart leap to her throat. If today was *not* the

beginning of forever, then at least she had her routines, her memories, her boys. She tried not to think about Leila, Divit's new girlfriend, or the thing he proposed last week.

"It's still weird they're giving treasure away for free."

"Yeah, but look at what they're using for fountain water," Divit muttered. Dollops of lacca dripped from a spout onto the immovable ocean underneath. "Worth is relative."

"And beauty is not," the woman said, having reached them, her hands clutching a thin tablet. Her silky lips were pressed hard against each other, as if suppressing some urge. Then they widened and stretched into a moist, glistening smile. "Congratulations, Mrs. Gupta. The code on your card has been verified. You are the recipient of this month's grand lottery prize: full-body reconstructive surgery valued at one million dollars."

She heard a squeal or a cry escape from her lips before she muffled it with her hands over her face. It was a dream, a fantasy, it couldn't be. Figures in ivory cloaks unveiled their positions all around the hall by lowering their hoods and applauding. Each face glowed with symmetry and seduction. She was going to look like that again, young and beautiful. She was going to start over. She was going to reunite with Richard. Maybe he did have a hand in her victory. This thought that she'd barely allowed herself to entertain brought warm tears to her eyes.

"Congratulations, Ma," Divit said, rubbing her arm, sighing in relief.

Neerav shook his head and laughed. "I guess it's really happening."

"Would you follow me, please, Mrs. Gupta?" The woman gestured down the hall. "Your family may come with us."

She let the boys help her up, lifting her arms above their heads on each side. Together they walked to the elevators, nodding and smiling at the beautiful Recon people still applauding them.

The elevator doors opened to reveal mirrors on all sides of the large space within. There was an operator inside the elevator as well as an oval stone couch. A cheery, Muzak version of a familiar tune played at a low volume through hidden speakers. A flowery scent filled her nostrils as the elevator doors closed, removing the two silent figures, which had remained in the hall, from their view.

"Fancy." Neerav pointed to the reflections that multiplied themselves into infinity in the mirrors, as the elevator moved upwards. If she hadn't been distracted by the repeated reflections of her wet, creased face, she might've noticed the operator's muscles and genitals protruding

from the sheer tunic he was wearing. Dabbing her tears off with a sponge as lightly as possible, she asked the woman leading them whether Richard was at Corbenic today.

“Who?”

“Richard. Richard Fisher.” Mrs. Gupta thought she saw the slightest hint of a furrow between the woman’s brows.

“I’m not sure who you mean.”

“A-are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t he the newest spokesperson for Recon?”

The woman looked blankly at her for a few seconds. Then her lips popped like a wet bubble into a smile. “Oh, yes, Richard! I will let him know you are here.”

Before Mrs. Gupta could calm her heart, the elevator doors had opened to another grand room. The woman took off her cloak and handed it to the operator before stepping out. The same sheer tunic danced along her curves in the light breeze. When the woman turned around, the tunic pulled against her breasts, their pink areolas as smooth as fondant. Mrs. Gupta gasped, shielding Divit and Neerav’s eyes on impulse.

“Ma!” The boys brushed her hands off.

“Please follow me to the waiting room,” the woman instructed.

A little disturbed by the blatant nudity in front of her boys, she followed the woman nonetheless, strolling through hallways made of glass and twinkling lights; it was like moving through fishbowls that housed fairies. There were also more Recon employees, all glistening and shapely, dressed in the same sheer tunic, coming and going around them. She felt it was a little bit much.

“Look straight ahead, *beta*,” was all she could say. The boys snickered behind her. In her embarrassment, she failed to notice that there were again two silent figures shadowing them as they moved from one fishbowl structure to the next.

“Here we are.” The woman stopped in front of a glass door full of small opals. “Please enter and wait until they call your name, Mrs. Gupta. Unfortunately, family will have to wait in a separate room during the registration and questioning process.”

“Questioning process?”

“Questions regarding medical history, allergies, the kind of body or skin you’d want, that type of thing. It won’t take long.”

She nodded. That weight was upon her again, telling her she could still be rejected, this could all go away, along with the possibility of being with Richard. Did she *want* it to go away? What was she really afraid of? Bending down, she kissed the boys before they could dodge her motherly affection.

“Don’t take too long, okay? Conference call.” Neerav tapped the face of his watch.

She shook her head, stroking his hair, thinking of him as Poor Neerav, under so much stress and yet still there for his Ma.

Divit sighed. “Don’t mind him, Ma. Take all the time you need. We can grab a cab if we’re running late.”

She stroked his hair too, calling him Sweet Divit, always gentle, always supportive. Their eyes told her that they had intuited her sense of anxiety, her fear.

“Everything will be fine, Ma.” Neerav gave a firm nod.

“Go in,” said Divit. “Don’t be scared.”

Their smiles and encouragement gave her the strength to leave them and go through the door. As soon as she stepped into the sweet-smelling corridor, the woman closed the door behind her.

Unknown to anyone else, Richard’s lips had pressed against hers on two occasions. The first had been during their second meeting, when her face had been wet with tears. The kiss was tender, slippery, consoling. The second kiss had occurred in their third encounter. They had bumped into each other on the street, ended up having dinner, ended up going to his place. It was so unlike her, but her courage had been short-lived. When he took her clothes off in the dark, kissed her lips, her breasts, rubbed her between her legs, thrust into her, her fear that it would stop immobilized her. When he broke himself inside her, she didn’t know how to react. The tear had sounded final, crude, somehow louder than Richard’s scream, his howls buried deep in the sheets, which were darkened by his bleeding stump. The split part of him was still inside her when she sat up and tried to fill the awkwardness. He said it had happened once before already. He said he regretted his choices. He said he would give anything to be whole and strong and beautiful again. If she’d been brave, she would’ve told him that he was beautiful still.

Now he was beyond beautiful. In the waiting room, she admired his new body in the ad playing on the large screen. She'd seen this promo for the first time last week. In it, Richard reclined on a cushioned armchair in a garden somehow lush with real plants and flowers. Even more rare was the live animal—a bobcat?—asleep on his waxy, naked body. Since people began to muddle the lines between pets, wildlife, and meat soon after the Big Cache, which led to the closing of zoos, aquariums, and pet stores throughout the country, she hadn't seen a real, breathing animal in years. The camera lingered on all of the areas of Richard's muscular flesh that had been reconstituted, stitch-free and supple, before resting on his chiselled face. Under his cinnamon hair, his green eyes, as crisp as apples, stared into hers. As soon as she'd taken in his wholeness, his smooth, mannequin skin, now glowing with oil poured from a decanter, she'd decided to accept the lottery gift. The pride she'd felt from his achievement was not uncontaminated by some anxiety.

“When I rose in 1 AA, I was fifty-one and past my prime. The subsequent decades only added to my brokenness,” Richard spoke from the screen. His voice, bolstered in the video to sound as rich as melted chocolate, seemed to lap against her eardrums and reverberate in the waiting room. “Thanks to Recon, my prime has been restored. With its help, you, too, can start eternity in your prime.” Next to the logo of a chalice, the text “Eternal Prime” materialized and glistened like diamonds over the scene.

“He was at my Rising party,” she mumbled to the two others seated in the room with her. They seemed to be in worse shape than her, either risen in their fifties or eighties, she couldn't really tell. Instead of being impressed, their smirks implied that they didn't believe someone godlike could know someone shrunken like her. She couldn't blame them; she hardly believed it herself that the Richard that had made love to her was the same as the one on the screen.

“Mrs. Gupta?” an amplified voice called from the counter on one side of the room.

“Yes, that's me!” She hurried to the counter covered entirely by a mosaic window. There was no opening in the window, the textured glass on which obscured the appearance of the speaker. If Richard's ad, with its sensual tune, hadn't been replaced in that moment by a music video of the Qūm's latest hit, “Round-Up,” she wouldn't have felt so anxious at not being able to see the speaker instructing her to proceed down the hall to room 13. It was hard to avoid seeing the charred meat masks of the four Qūm members while they smashed their guitars in the video. Their Rising marks, although still glorious and well-respected, seemed to look grosser each year.

Their song, with that catchy but troubling refrain of “Bodies of innocence/ hearts of malice” pulsing on repeat, had been playing in the elevators, she realized.

“A specialist of your skin tone and body type is ready to see you there,” the disembodied voice continued behind the window.

“Thank you,” she said, and rushed down the hall, grateful for the opportunity to leave the disfigured metal heads and the two smirking strangers behind.

“Mrs. Amita Gupta,” the young-looking man in the lab coat read her name from a thin tablet. They were both sitting at a steel table, one across from the other, in a room that mimicked the mirrored interiors of the elevator, however with a less elegant, luxurious feel. The lighting in room 13 was cold and blinding, the same flowery scent—was that lilac?—had a stronger chemical tinge, and the Qūm’s “Round-Up,” fast-paced with heavy drums and screechy vocals, had followed her here, albeit without the discomfiting visuals. The clear plastic suit that she wore instead of her clothes stuck to her flesh as she shifted in her seat in anticipation of the specialist’s questions. The first thing he’d requested was for her to shed her clothes, which she’d done with much reluctance. She placed an arm now across the table in front of her droopy chest and another around her hairy belly.

“First of all, congratulations,” he said, smiling with all of his shiny upper teeth. “This is an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You are a very lucky woman.”

She nodded.

“After today, your crumpled, broken shell will be replaced by perfection. You will be able to start the rest of eternity in your prime. A healthy, robust, one-coloured body with curves, tightness, and plumpness in all the right places.”

The specialist stood up and walked around the table, motioning for her to stand as well. She could only blink at him, heat travelling up her cheeks. Why would he want to survey a crumpled, broken shell?

“No need to be embarrassed, Mrs. Gupta. I promise you, if you cooperate, this will be the last time anyone will ever see this...body of yours.”

She willed her legs to move, pushing the steel chair out behind her as she stood. She had been worried about disappointment or possible physical pain during the reconstructive process,

not humiliation. The specialist unbuckled a pointer from the tablet and began drawing on her plastic suit.

“Now, we’re envisioning taut but baby-soft skin that is hair-free and twenty shades lighter with a touch of peach, measurements of 36, 24, and 34, perkier, rounder breasts, bigger areolas, nipples are probably fine, flatter stomach, thicker thighs, smaller vaginal lips, bigger butt, longer legs, wider feet. For the face, smaller nose, less hair, more cheekbones, but you can keep the eyes and the lips. All of the lines will be gone, of course. What colour would you like your hair?”

“Um...” She looked down at her suit. There were no marks on it. “Could I keep it black?”

“As you wish. We’ll just add some volume. The whole thing might require a full-body flesh peel, various corrections involving bone-shaving and muscle, organ, and fat reduction, applications of sealant, foama, lacca, extra coating, lengthy moisture-controlled cooling, and copious amounts of fine—very fine—stitch work. This is just an estimate, keep in mind. Once you commit to the waivers, a specialist will give you the exact details of the operation. Any allergies to volatile organic compounds?”

“I-I don’t know what that is.” All of the things he listed sounded like they would hurt.

“Don’t worry, our products produce little to no VOCs, so you should be fine even if you have an allergy.”

“Okay.” Her throat was starting to feel dry. “Did you say a specialist will give me details later?”

“Yes. Have a seat. We’ll go over the waivers now.”

She pulled the chair in and sat back down. It was a lot less nerve-wracking to be able to hide behind the table. “You’re *not* the specialist?”

“No, Mrs. Gupta, my name is Killjoy Skylar. I take care of the contracts. I present to you the body you could have, and then I help you gain the body you *will* have by acquiring your verbal acceptance of the terms.”

“Oh.” She slid her arms back to their original places. “What are the terms?”

“The terms are very simple. They are a string of yes or no questions that would benefit you to answer with the utmost honesty. Now, keep in mind, there are no wrong answers; there are only positive answers.”

She knew she was frowning again but it was hard to understand Killjoy Skylar. He also had the most unusual name.

He began: “Are Divit and Neerav Gupta members of your biological family?”

That was a plain question she could answer without confusion. “Yes.”

“Are they twins?”

“Yes. Beautiful twins.” She wondered if what she won would perhaps be extended to the boys. Sure, Divit could hide the bruises on his legs under clothes, but Neerav’s was too visible. Maybe his new boss would stop bullying him if he looked less damaged, she thought.

“Were they once a part of you, growing in your womb, but have, since their births, been severed from your body?”

She never thought of it that way. “Sure. Yes.”

“Are they the only entities to have come from your womb?”

“Yes.” She chuckled. Something about the question amused her.

“There is no other Childlike living with or related to you?”

His words were confusing again. She repeated his question in her head a few times before she said, “Childlike? I’m not sure—”

“Please stick to yes or no, Mrs. Gupta. It’s imperative that you only answer yes or no.”

It occurred to her then that a wrong answer could lead to disappointing consequences. She would never be able to face the boys, herself, or Richard if she got this far and failed. Pressed to assume that he meant children, she answered, “No—I mean yes, there is no other Child...Childlike...”

“Did you become infertile in 1 AA?”

The question should not have shocked her as much as it did, but no one ever asked her about it so directly. In fact, she had never discussed the topic with anyone, not that she had any friends to discuss such things with, apart from the boys.

“It would benefit you to answer the question, Mrs. Gupta. I repeat: did you become infertile in 1 AA?”

“Y-yes, of course.”

Killjoy Skylar laid a sculpted hand on her plastic arm. There was nowhere to look but at his eyes, which expressed his understanding, his disappointments, and struggles to cope with his

own sterility. As she was about to sniffle and give his hand a grateful squeeze, he retracted it as quickly as if he had released a stretched elastic band.

“Were you informed prior to today to come along with members of your biological family and all of your body parts, whether intact or disconnected, to Corbenic?” he continued without missing a beat.

“Y-yes.” She recalled hearing that on the call earlier this month, which was why she brought Divit and Neerav along.

“And can you confirm that you have come to Corbenic today with all of your body parts, whether intact or disconnected?”

“Yes.” Her mind returned to Richard, the kisses, the love-making, the blood; none of her appendages ever broke off, thankfully.

“When you rose in 1 AA, were you forty-three-years old?”

“Yes.”

“Apologies. I forgot to ask earlier, when the members of your biological family that came with you today rose in 1 AA, were they both eight-years old?”

“Yes.”

“Do they look like they’re eight on the outside, but are in fact thirty-seven on the inside?”

The thought of her boys as grumpy, almost middle-aged men trapped in toddler bodies made her giggle. “Yes!”

Killjoy Skylar smiled. His features were softer in smiling mode than in interrogation mode. “Would you say their charming disguise has tricked you at least once?”

“Oh, yes. But I’m a forgetful—”

“Would you say their childlike appearance is deceiving to not just you, but to others as well?” His smile shifted to a sympathetic pout. She realized that he must have children himself, although he looked as if a day had not gone by since he rose at twenty. The way he was emoting showed that he must’ve encountered people weeping in front of his children too; he must know what it was like to struggle with the gratification and guilt of having children while others could not.

“Yes, sadly.”

“Excellent, Mrs. Gupta!” he exclaimed, all traces of sorrow gone. “There is just one more question left, and if you answer it positively, you will gain that body you’ve always dreamed of,

those privileges and looks of jealousy and desire wherever you go, and even the object of your deepest desire: Killjoy Richard. We want you to join him on the next promotional shoot.”

“Me?” It was really happening, she thought. She could be with Richard; they could start over together. And yet, there was a voice inside her that prevented her from believing it. What if she became whole, strong, and beautiful, but he didn’t want her? What if Recon restored her prime and he ended up leaving her anyway like her husband? A week ago, Divit had revealed his plan to move out. He had found a place with Leila. Neerav had said that if his brother was going to have his own place, then it’d be embarrassing for him not to do the same. After decades of caring for them, having them close to her, her boys were leaving her. It was too much to take. She could suffer through physical pain, constant wear and tear, humiliation, guilt, and even heartache, but not loneliness. Spending eternity alone, even if she appeared lovely and youthful, would be akin to walking on an endless, barren plain with only the sound of her footsteps as accompaniment.

“Is that what Richard wants?” Her voice sounded small and insignificant.

“Actually, his professional name is *Killjoy* Richard now. There’s a funny anecdote, and a small legal obligation, attached to that title.”

Before she could stop herself, she blurted out, “If that’s not what he wants, then I don’t want it.” She couldn’t believe what she was saying, but she couldn’t refute it either.

Killjoy Skylar stared at her. He seemed surprised, or maybe deep in thought. A few minutes passed before he replied, in a sincere, compassionate tone, “It is definitely what he wants. But, Mrs. Gupta, you should know that as soon as you accept the final term and the surgery is complete, your new body, next to Killjoy Richard’s, will become loved, desired, and worshipped by the *world*. Everyone, and I mean everyone, will fall in love with you. You will never be alone once you are part of the Recon family.”

She wanted this to be true; she imagined that it could. And Divit and Neerav would always be in her life. And Richard would always be her friend, if not her partner. And she could change her life, her many habits. Instead of her daily routine catering to the boys, she could wake up late, not make the bed, leave dishes in the sink, read the paper, or go to the cinema (twice in a day!). She could join a choir, make friends, stay out late, never pack lunches. Change was scary, but necessary.

“You just have to answer the last question, Mrs. Gupta. Are you ready?”

She nodded, with renewed will.

“Do you allow Recon, Inc. full access to alter, add, and/or remove your body parts, whether intact or disconnected, as well as full possession of the parts altered, added, and/or removed until the final completion date of reconstructive surgery, without obligation of disclosing information related to medical procedures and products created and patented by Recon, Inc.?”

She blinked at him. He had sounded like a robot just then. “C-could you repeat that?”

He repeated the question. When he finished, he swiped his tablet and pressed his fingers against the circle in the centre. All at once, the plastic suit resting against her naked flesh came to life: it tightened, bulged, and lit up with a sharp peep. She stood up as the suit dug into her crotch, pushed against her stomach, ballooned out near her chest and butt, and added short stilts for her to step on, raising her height a few inches. Across the plastic surface, she saw a glowing image grow clearer, obscuring the bruises, cracks, and wrinkles of her skin underneath. It was a mock-up of her new one-coloured, curvy, peachy smooth body. Turning this way and that, she examined her reflection. It was strange to see the juxtaposition of her dark, fatigued face on top of a shiny new body and its countless repetitions in the mirrors.

“This could be your reality, Mrs. Gupta.” Killjoy Skylar pounded once against the table. “What do you say?”

“Yes!” The answer seemed to have left her mouth of its own accord. “Yes, yes, yes!” Bouts of laughter erupted from her lips. If she could’ve contained her excitement, she might’ve heard the guttural chanting at the end of the song “Round-Up” that repeated “Changeling disguise/ Childlike lies” for forty bars.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” Killjoy Skylar smiled, standing and shaking her hands. “You will be released from the terms of the contract upon the final completion of the operation.”

“How long does the operation usually take?”

“It varies, Mrs. Gupta. The specialist will let you know. I will now take you to see him and his team of experts.” Killjoy Skylar walked to one end of the small room.

She thought of how the boys would be so proud to know how brave she’d been. “Is it alright if I just pop by the family waiting room first to give my sons the good news?” she asked.

Killjoy Skylar shook his head immediately. “No, Mrs. Gupta. The terms come into effect the second you give your verbal consent. The operation has begun and requires all of your intact or disconnected body parts, which are under the possession of Recon, Inc., to proceed with the next steps.”

The legal jargon was making her head spin, or was it the elation? “No problem.” If she had to get used to being on her own once Divit and Neerav moved out, she might as well start now. She followed Killjoy Skylar to the corner.

“Today,” he said, opening an unimposing door in the wall to usher her in, “is the day you begin forever.”

*

One of the earliest and most popular Recon commercials aired after 30 AA was of a woman who looked like she’d just risen in her twenties twirling herself gently in a shallow, clear-blue pool flanked by bushels of red roses. While she twirled in slow motion, her hair, liquorice-black and voluminous, bounced against her back. The parts of her fair skin not covered by a mink shawl were dewy, flawless, soft, and blushing. A string of large pearls hung from her neck to her thighs, tapping against her heaving chest and protruding nipples as her body circled around in the petaled water in slow time. Behind her sprawled a fountain shaped as a fan, trickling water into the pool. In this promo, Killjoy Richard, before he was known as such, stepped into the pool from the side, wearing nothing but a leather cloth, and took the woman in a slow embrace. Flesh against flesh, she slid down to his feet, clinging onto his strong legs. With her back arched, the cleave between her plump buttocks in full view, Killjoy Richard lowered a string of round, white grapes into her mouth. Her crimson lips opened as a gash to receive them. Her name had been Killjoy Greta, although this was not known until years later, when it became evident that the owner of Recon, Inc. was Killjoy Technology, a corporation that had begun as Miller Technology until it subsumed numerous other corporations under it, including Nectar, ProSen, Sunthetic, and Convenesis National.

By then, the No-Kid policy had already been implemented worldwide.

Jackie

100 Anno Aeternum

Jackie woke up in a pink bathtub to the sight of grimy pink tiles and a streamer hanging lifelessly from the neck of the shower head.

A second earlier, she had dreamt of her partner, Isaiah: the two of them had been rising upwards, away from the blue of the ocean beneath them and into the blue of the skies above. Or, more specifically, *he* had been rising upwards, and *she* had been clutching his legs, dangling, being slapped around by the breeze. His wavy brown hair had danced in the wind, or perhaps waved goodbye.

In the dream he'd said he was leaving her. He was going up to meet someone else, someone new.

"Is it Thoko?" she'd asked, thinking of the woman that had come between them years ago. Isaiah had smiled in that sleepy way, shaken his head, and explained he was meeting someone new, someone with long tresses drawn back in a braid, a stitch-free face as smooth as a Killjoy's, a delicate voice, and a scent as saccharine and radiant as lilac and orange leaves. Everything she lacked, basically.

She'd asked him why, and he'd listed the things he'd grown tired of after eight decades: her thin, discoloured body; her patched-up skin; that long string of stitches down her back; her toes that broke off one too many times due to cheap glue; her short, greasy, red-brown hair; the rasp in her voice; the way she played with her tongue piercing; the lethargic way she moved; and the way her lips quivered when she was anxious. She might've argued that he didn't look so hot either—worse than her, really—if the wind had not filled her open mouth.

The list continued. Before she could hear the end of it, her fingers had slipped (or had he kicked her off?) and she fell into the blue, blue water. She'd slapped her hands against the current, only to find her arms flapping against air, splitting clouds. As her arm tore through a cloud, the cloud had shrieked, waking her up.

Prostrate in the bathtub, she rubbed her eyes. Their friend, Paul-Jean, had hosted a party to usher in the Centennial. There had been games, chem drinks, Assistant tabs, a countdown, maybe. She recalled the party's general outlines, but not how she ended up in the bathroom. Details were elusive in the moments between Assistant-induced sleep and consciousness.

“Isaiah?” she croaked. Her throat scratched like sandpaper, and her limbs were numb and heavy, as if weighed down by water, by air, by screaming clouds. Did he leave her? She realized that the weight was in fact Isaiah’s jacket on top of her, smelling of skippe smoke, and the scream was a weird, muffled squeal that sounded whenever she moved her hip, like something was stuck under her. It turned out to be an old shampoo bottle shaped like a Childlike’s head.

Paul-Jean had the weirdest hobby. He collected vintage anti-Childlike paraphernalia and never failed to show her his latest find even though she’d told him time and time again that it grossed her out. When he’d shown her this limited-edition item, pressing the neck embellished as a sword into the head to squeeze out some red-coloured shampoo, she’d gagged. All Childlikes, even their representations, with their deceitfully innocent eyes and manipulative pouts, looked vile to her. She couldn’t believe that people used to think they were cute or wanted to shelter and care for them. Ever since the steady rise of crimes committed by Childlike offenders, as reported by KJT stations, culminated in 35 AA in the arrest of Chucky, the notorious Childlike psychopath who preyed on people by pretending to be a toddler, she stopped trusting those who appeared like children. When the No-Kid policy, guaranteeing the round-up and incarceration of people risen below the age of sixteen by 40 AA, was introduced a few years later, people everywhere had been relieved. By 39 AA, she’d stopped seeing Childlikes on the streets, although there were always rumours and reports that some were hidden in the north and along the west coast. Even if the air ban was lifted, even if there were somehow any fuel left for public citizens, she would not want to leave the east. The east was safe. It was home. It was Montreal. It was Isaiah.

Jackie tossed the bottle aside and pushed on her arms to a sitting position. All at once, several pains vied for her attention: soreness in her back, wooziness in her head, gnawing in her stomach, throbbing in her toes, a pounding in her ears. She held onto the ledge of the tub to make the tiles stop swaying. She rarely mixed chem drinks with Assistants, which suppressed hunger and induced hallucinations, but how often did a Centennial happen?

Imagining that she was submerged in a bath of soothing, milk-white foama brought a smile to her lips. The only foama product she owned was in a container smaller than her palm, which cousin Matty had bought for her from Recon, Inc. a few months ago. An employee of KJT, he was the only one in her family who could afford such luxury. Wondering where he was, she suddenly connected the fragments of last night.

Drawing back the shower curtains, she saw him passed out on the bathroom floor, curled around the toilet in a fetal position. A toothbrush holder shaped like a rod skewering the mangled bodies of three disgusting Childlikes had been knocked to the ground. It lay like road kill, chipped and abused, amidst pools of Matty's blood.

She sighed. There was blood glistening in his blonde hair, on his shirt, his pants. With some effort, she climbed out of the bathtub and sat down beside her cousin, lifting his arms to check his wrists. The gashes were still pinched close by thick, zigzagging threads. If her friend, Bo, who always had thread (cheap, thick, and never flesh-coloured, but thread nonetheless), hadn't been there to sew him up, Matty would still be bleeding right now. Or would he have died? A year ago, she wouldn't have worried. But she'd since seen so many KJT talk shows about the potential end of forever that the fear she hadn't felt for almost a hundred years returned like a childhood friend, strange but familiar.

Most of these shows predicted that the Everlast would end on the Centennial. She and Matty were religious viewers of "Will it End, or Will it End?", a weekly special in which the hosts discussed theories and unpacked rumours about the Everlast, interspersed with interviews with renowned doctors, scientists, and researchers. Sometimes people could call in and receive small Recon products as prizes. Contrary to Matty, who gobbled up everything, she found some of the conclusions far-fetched, unless they were delivered by one of the hosts, Killjoy Serena, who had four doctorate degrees, a soft but commanding voice, and reliable, arresting features. Jackie could never look anywhere but at her wine-red hair, dark eyebrows, and whipped-cream skin, illuminated at the edges by the number "100" that flashed on the large screens behind her in gaudy colours. If Killjoy Serena thought the Everlast could end today, then it was a real possibility.

Didn't matter if he would've died, Jackie thought, he was alive now—not looking his best, but alive. She winced at the hideous sutures juxtaposed against the smoothness of the rest of his skin. The stitches seemed to grin back, finding humour in the irony of someone giving up all of his savings for full-body Recon only to deface the flawless product a month after. Matty had been convinced that the exchange of a mishmashed Celebrant body for one that was as glossy, crack-free, and patchless as a Killjoy's would bring his Etienne back. It had not. For Etienne, love had a tenacious hold for thirty-three years, and then, one day, because it took as easily as a day for some, love let go.

Because Matty had taken the break-up so badly, it did not surprise her to find him, at some point after midnight, thrashing, crying, and bleeding on the floor of the bathroom. He had taken however many Assistant tabs, peaked, and opened his wrists to welcome the Centennial, the end of forever. Lucky for him, she hadn't peaked yet, and was able to get Bo, cautious, dependable Bo, to tighten his torn flesh into crooked lines via some thread and her arthritic fingers.

While Matty's eyes rolled to the back of his head, lost in a chemical dreamscape, Bo had scolded her, as if she were her granddaughter. Bo had warned her and Matty not to watch the KJT programs, not to get duped by the allure of paraprimes (her term of insult for the Killjoys and their wannabes), not to get caught up in the wasteful cycle of aesthetics, capitalism, consumerism—why hadn't they listened? Jackie had kept silent. It was easier not to challenge Bo's increasingly fringe ideas and conspiracy theories. It was easier to watch Bo wash her hands of blood and then rinse Matty's with a washcloth before the effects of the Assistant tab on the roof of her own mouth kicked in. When it did, the mania on Matty's face stretched from floor to ceiling, melting with the pink. Something had unfurled from his elongated mouth: a blizzard of tiny insects, swirling, buzzing, sounding out Etienne's name. They'd stung her head with all of the reasons, the list of reasons, the list of things that Etienne had grown tired of—Matty's hair, Matty's eyes, Matty's mouth—and her brain had ballooned out of her head and imprisoned her in its confines. Before the walls of the bathroom slipped and fell onto each other around her, before she laughed out loud at their slapstick play and tumbled into the bathtub, she thought she'd seen Isaiah leave the party, wrapped in lilac and orange leaves.

Jackie laid Matty's sewn arms back down. The flowery scent had belonged to Thoko. With this recollection, she stood up and walked out of the bathroom, chips of the toothbrush holder crunching beneath her feet.

In the living room, the incessant growls of the Qūm playing in the background were the only sign of activity. There was someone cocooned in a blanket on the couch, but it was too tall to be Isaiah. Most likely Paul-Jean, she assumed. Stepping over empty bottles on the floor, she called for Isaiah. She could barely hear her own weak voice rubbing against the strong, repetitive twang of the never-ending classic, "Wiles of an Old Man in the Body of Your Child."

There was still a hint of the citrusy sweet-smelling perfume in the room. No wonder she dreamt of Thoko: she had been at the party. At least, her delicate voice had been. Everything else had been reconstituted. She was still recognizable as Thoko, but her forehead was broader, her cheekbones were higher, her eyes were bigger, her lips plumper, her skin monochromatic, stitchless, taut. She had also grown a foot, as if that was organically possible anymore, and her limbs were thinner. Her hair was no longer short, but long and beautifully braided. Isaiah had been dating Thoko when they met in 16 AA. Polygamy had been another new thing Jackie embraced as a Celebrant, along with leaving Calgary, but by 22 AA, she'd had enough of sharing Isaiah, who agreed to end things with Thoko. She suspected that Thoko never forgave her. Last night, Thoko had lingered by Isaiah, reminiscing, teasing, making him laugh with his mouth open. He never laughed with his mouth open.

She called his name again, this time louder and clearer.

From a distance, as in a dream, he answered, "*Chui là.*"

She almost tripped over a stack of old No-Kid comics on her way to the balcony.

Isaiah was sitting on the granite with his back against the window, legs stretched, puffing skippe rings into the night air. Dawn had not yet broken, it seemed.

"Hey, Jack." He smiled at her, his brown eyes crinkling. "Just savouring my goodbye to the ninety-ninth year." His hair was sticking up in the back, like he had been leaning against the same place for a while. He scratched the shallow scruff on his chin, and opened his arms to her. As she often did in response to this movement, she crumpled herself against his warmth and breathed in his scent. The nook of his armpit capped the top of her head, as if she would've been carried off by the wind otherwise. He gave her the skippe and she sucked on it languidly.

"I thought you had gone."

"Without you?"

She smirked, thankful that no one else was on the balcony, save for the handful of stars above.

"I saw what happened. Bo came to get me," Isaiah said. "How's Matty?"

"He's got teeth on his arms now." Her shoulders gave a little shudder.

"He didn't need Recon in the first place."

She passed back the device. He was starting to sound more like Bo every day, which didn't necessarily mean that he wouldn't prefer the newly primed Thoko to her. "You don't think Matty looks great though?" After a quick pause, she whispered, "Or Thoko?"

"Sure."

She looked up at him. All she could see was the scar on his chin.

"But Recon wiped all of the stories from their bodies."

She thought of what Matty and Thoko looked like before they got Recon: shorter, chubbier, faded, peeling, charred, human mosaics. "Okay." She held up Isaiah's left hand, which was missing two fingers. "What wonderful story does this tell?"

"Always pick up your digits the second they fall."

She tried not to smile. They had been in a dark theatre, and she had stepped on them accidentally when he tried to pick up his fallen phone.

"And these?" She rubbed the permanently purple, swollen rings around his wrists, feeling the coarseness of his bumpy flesh. When she'd first noticed them, she'd thought they were ugly handcuff tattoos.

"Don't jump the Killjoy guards. Not alone, anyway."

Isaiah was one of the few people she knew who dared to be irreverent to the Killjoy guards who patrolled and sometimes shut down the undermarkets. Like Bo, he wasn't worried about his actions being traceable and possibly used to determine whether he could purchase or win Recon products.

"These sound more like lessons than stories," she teased.

He chuckled softly and kissed her cheek. She rolled up one of his pant leg. There were two puckered skin grafts of different shades sewn into the flesh below his knee.

"Now, this is a particularly gross story," she said.

"I disagree."

She had witnessed too many of his extreme sports wipeouts and subsequent emergency patch-up undermarket runs to remember which activity this was from. "'Beggars can't be choosers'? 'Don't haggle at the undermarket if you can't pull it off'? Oh, wait, no, this is better—'Get up early or it's slim pickings.'"

He smiled, shaking his head. "More like 'People can sometimes be real generous when you're in a bind.'"

She rolled her eyes. They refocused on the scar that stretched from his shoulder to his neck, the only wound that healed because it had been given by his father before his death in 2014. She touched the tail of the scar that flicked up to his chin.

“Well, this story could probably be wiped.”

“*Ben non.*” He clasped her hand. “It reminds me that had the Everlast arrived two years earlier, my dad would be alive. Forever.”

“Sounds like divine intervention,” she joked.

“Hey, I believed it. Still do.”

“You’re the last one. Always the nonconformist.”

She wondered where she would’ve been if the Everlast had happened in 2014. Would she have left Calgary earlier? Would she have made it hitchhiking to New York, home to the largest concentration of Celebrants in North America, as she’d originally planned with Matty? Or would she have lingered in Montreal, gone to every Tam-Tams celebrating the Everlast, and met Isaiah on the sloping fields of Mont-Royal anyway?

She’d met Bo there too. Risen at seventy-nine, her hair as white as a cloud, her face as glittered as the cosmos, Bo was the most spirited Celebrant she’d ever encountered. One of the first things she’d shared with her was the story of her divorce from her husband of sixty years. They had already spent a lifetime together. Now she had an infinite supply of lifetimes to spend with others. When Jackie repeated this to Bo a little more than a year ago, Bo had replied that she should’ve said an infinitude of heartbreaks. Ever since her youngest granddaughter went missing in 36 AA, Bo had become a different person. She stopped partying as much, acting reckless, trusting people, watching screens, using Recon products, like she was trying to wear her heartache on her skin.

Matty’s elastic face oozed before Jackie’s eyes. Even the heady, fruity sweetness of Thoko’s perfume seemed to have followed her to the balcony.

“Would you ever leave me, Isaiah?” she asked, her voice so low and raspy she doubted he could hear her.

“Why do you ask?”

“We’ve been together for so long. Aren’t you tired of me?”

“Are you tired of me?”

“Never.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know.” She looked helplessly at the windows of the buildings in the neighbourhood. Most were dark and unfathomable; a few were bright, full of activity and perseverance, holding onto whatever it was that they were holding onto.

“How’s this?” Isaiah took one last drag before turning off the skippe. “I’m not tired of you because we’re constantly changing. No one stays the same forever, even if we can now live forever. Until our changes become incompatible, I’d never leave you. Probably not even then.”

She opened her mouth to speak, and then shut it when his words made sense to her. They were practical, almost romantic. “Actually, I’m kind of tired of you having all the answers.”

He chuckled, tightening his grip on her. “I’m sorry. I can change that.”

She breathed in, feeling her chest expanding. “I think I need something less tangible.”

“Like a promise?”

She nodded.

He brushed back her hair from her forehead. “As long as I’m alive, I won’t leave you. I promise.”

Satisfied, she gazed above them at the fading of the last stars and the receding opacity of the night. Isaiah kissed the top of her head and said soft goodbyes to the blackness lifting into streaks of yellow and brightening blue. The city was still. Cradled in his arms full of stories, she closed her eyes.

She was about to drift to sleep, nestled in his warmth, when a flash of gaudy numbers stunned her eyes open. If change was good and inevitable, forever could not remain forever. She sat up slowly. There was no longer a trace of yesterday visible in the sky. The Centennial sun had flooded the horizon.

“Isaiah.” She brought her face close to his. His eyes were shut, but he raised his eyebrows in response. “That promise is no good.”

He mouthed “why?” lazily.

“It’s no good if the Everlast ends today.”

He opened one of his eyes, a hint of a smile on his lips. “You have to stop watching that show with Matty.”

She groaned, slumping back down against him. “There is no proof that this will go on forever. You implied that change is unavoidable.”

“True.”

“So you think it could happen?”

“Perhaps.”

She looked up at him. “Aren’t you afraid?” The more she spoke, the more she felt her chest tighten, as if a swarm of insects was preparing for flight within.

He smiled. “I don’t have all the answers.”

“I’m serious.”

He nodded and sat up straighter, yawned, scratched his chin. Slowly he said, “Think about how long we’ve been alive. How much we’ve done—”

“But I don’t want to die.” Her eyes started to burn. The fear, that strange but familiar friend, was back, mocking her like a Childlike. Only a Childlike would promise to bestow a gift and then retract that promise. “I don’t want you to die.”

“Hey...” Isaiah pulled her up to face him.

Turning away, she wiped her eyes before any tears could fall. She was about to wipe her nose when she heard the sound of glass shattering and sprinkling over granite. Isaiah had smashed his elbow into one of the glass panes of the balcony and picked up a pointed shard of broken glass.

“What are you doing? Paul-Jean’s gonna kill you!” she exclaimed.

Aiming the shard at the opening in the front of his shirt, he drove it into his chest where his heart would have been. His face contorted in pain as the skin around the glass cracked and splintered into webs.

“What is *wrong* with you?”

“It’s okay, babe,” he grunted, pulling out the shard. Blood and chipped skin spit from his wound like curses. Words failed her as she stared at the open slit and the trickling of blood mixed with pieces of brittle flesh. It was possible that what had become an ever-running stream a hundred years ago could cease running today. But the bloom of red spreading centrifugally on his shirt was fast and aggressive.

“Are you trying to prove a point or something?”

He leaned against the wall, smiling through his wince. “You’ll see.”

She shook her head at him. “I get it. It’s the Centennial and you’re fine.”

“Well, we don’t know that yet. You gotta wait.”

“You’re an idiot.”

He laughed, trying to pull her closer. “The point is I could bleed for a year and I’d still be breathing.”

“Then I’ll go and come back in a year.”

“Stopped you crying.”

“Congratulations.” She inched closer, trying to put the broken shard back into his chest to stop the blood flow. In the moment, with her hands slippery with blood and vitality, her fears seemed silly and childish, the stuff of bogeyman nightmares. Maybe she preferred Bo’s collaged face and throaty voice to Killjoy Serena’s synthetically perfect ones.

“Where are we going to find thread now, without Bo?” she grumbled.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“You owe Paul-Jean a glass pane.”

“He broke my coffee table.”

She wrung out a groan.

“I love you, Jack,” Isaiah said between gasps of pain.

“I know.”

Eventually she wiped her hands on his shirt, pointed to his new wound, that uneven bouquet of red, and said, trying not to smile, “Another *great* story.”

Under the afternoon sun in old Montreal, Jackie observed hundreds of hodgepodged Celebrants lying, stretching, strolling, and dancing along the water on the pier, the synthetic grass, the warm beach, and the cool cobblestone streets. Pumped by Inoculation’s new electro-metal beats, the ground surrounding the beach quaked rhythmically, jolting the legs above it like marionettes. The balloons and banners tied to the old-fashioned lampposts seemed to undulate to the slower tempo of a ballad. People wove in and out of the romance of barbeque and skippe fumes.

“Happy Centennial,” Bo chirped, kissing her and Isaiah on the cheeks before running off to embrace every one of their friends. They had picked a spot on the beach, amidst crowds of people, not too far from the glistening water. Its blueness extended effortlessly to the blue of the sky above them.

“Happy Centennial, babe,” Isaiah said, holding her in his arms, his face in her hair. Feeling dreamy from the chem drinks in her stomach, she rocked with him from side-to-side, watching their friends twirl their arms and laugh at every little thing around them. It was hard to believe that she had been panicking about time running out just this morning.

She beamed and breathed in deeply, her skin tingling with euphoria. “Happy Centennial,” she said to her love.

Paul-Jean ran towards them from the water, the hems of his pants sopping wet, the ends of his mouth lifted in a grin too big for his face. “They’re starting up the dayworks!” he yelled.

Immediately, there was a shrill sound of rushing air, a fast whistle for attention. Hundreds of heads lifted up as the sky cracked noisily into puffs of red, yellow, and green. From each puff of tinted dust, more colours bled down, like claw marks, like hasty, frantic brush strokes. People around her cheered at the heavenly artwork, beating their hands together, splitting their mouths open in whoops. She filled her eyes with the moving colours.

A second rustling of wind signalled the next explosion, the violent sound of which jolted her out of Isaiah’s arms. She gasped along with a multitude of others as the sky was mottled with countless dark drops that further erupted into mounting clouds of black. Applause, whistles, and voices raised to a chant pounded against her eardrums.

Without warning, the noises turned into panicked screams as the next two dayworks, instead of flying up, soared straight and fast into the crowd of twisting bodies. Before she could react, before anyone could run, she saw them detonate together with one terrible sound, bursting hundreds of Celebrants in front of her into meat and bones.

She thought she saw Bo’s head fly off her neck before she felt something fling her body backwards. Her back slapped against the concrete surrounding the beach, splitting her stitches like sequential paper cuts. She could see nothing but smoke and white powder. Singed confetti. The smell of burnt hair and iron. If her ears hadn’t been ringing, she would’ve heard the chaos of moaning, crying, yelling.

“Isaiah?” she shouted. Her own voice was muffled, like someone else was calling his name. She began to feel that her left arm was half-detached, hanging by the tendons. She sat up despite the pain and pulled her left arm closer. It was then that she saw the morsel of flesh that must’ve landed on her palm: the slimy redness, the dry, open lips, the shallow scruff of hair around them.

She looked up from the severed mouth, her head swivelling and eyes bulging in frenzy.
“Isaiah!”

She shouted until she could hear her own voice. Until the smoke thinned. All around her were pulpy, shattered bodies, peppered across the concrete, adding to the warmth of the beach. The white-grey ash from the dayworks was just beginning to settle over the red and the pink.

Then she saw him. A few feet away lay half of a face, no mouth, no body, a fragment. The brown eyes stared right at her, blinking in fear.

*

“Ready in three, two,” the cameraman called, signalling the last number with his finger.

Positioning the curls of her wine-red locks, Killjoy Serena widened her eyes, lashes as long as her cherry lips were plump, and pulled her shoulders back to lift her breasts, squeezed in a tight, snow-white dress, towards the camera. She parted her mouth to address the millions watching her.

Tuned into the newest KJT program, “Picking Up the Pieces,” the millions watching held on to every word, caught each touch of light against her smooth, alabaster skin as she weaved in and out of the ruins around her. A thin gold chain cinched from the waist tapped against her pelvis, as rhythmically as her soft, commanding voice informing the viewers of the devastating accident that occurred at the Montreal site of the world-wide Centennial party. In the cordoned area, as she interviewed the disembodied chunks that could cry out their pain, her white dress picked up more and more shades of red, pink, and purple. By the time they wrapped up for the day, her dress, arms, and legs were sticky and smeared with lumps of Celebrants. They clung possessively to her curves, all the while pulsing, feeling, living the gift of forever.

“Mmm,” she sighed to the cameraman before getting in the van, readjusting her breasts in her little white canvas of throbbing sinews. “Nothing beats live reporting.”

Sam

143 Anno Aeternum, Age of Covet

In the dark coolness of the KJT shrine, Sam kneeled, along with eleven others, on the death square lined with caskets. He lowered his chest over his knees, and touched his palms and forehead to the icy surface of the square. It hummed against his body, prickling and freezing it to numbness. Over the low snarls, double-kick drumming, and down-tuned riffs of Mutelate's "Worse than Death," a clear, serene voice resounded throughout the shrine as it began the service:

"Past mountainous terrain, out in the clearing of the woods, there is a wide, frozen lake. The surface of the lake, unbreakably hard and strong, stretches to infinity without a crack or a hint of what's underneath. For decades, people have traversed its immeasurable length, buckling under the swirling clouds and harsh cold winds, forgetting what it is to fall. There are no more mysteries, only the certainty that the weary walk continues forth, while the heavens mark their boundaries above with tempestuous howls and thunderous beats.

"One day, the temperature will rise. The storms will subside, the ice will break. The surface of the lake will open and envelope the weather-beaten in its soft shroud of oblivion. With the ice gone and the heavens calm, the dark depths, unveiled, will reflect the stillness of the skies above. There will be no more boundaries. Those who rest in an eternally peaceful sleep in the depths will become forever a part of the heavenly framework, as ageless stars."

Dulled to everything but the stirring effects of this voice, Sam felt as if the ice below him had opened and swallowed him whole, as if he had become one with nothingness. In the moment, he could forget the monotony of a life bound by endless feeling and thinking, by families and communities that formed and tore apart, by histories that reiterated what had already been repeated. In the moment he wiped from his existence all of the joys and pains he had ever felt. At a certain point, the greatest joy was akin to the greatest pain when all degrees of feeling in any context had already been felt before. Memories of the people echoing all the people he had ever met, loved, and despised flitted away in the coldness. He thought no more of his childhood best friend, who bit his lip the same way his high school—or was it college?—girlfriend did. No more of his first boss, laughing stupidly at the same punch lines as his third ex-husband. No more of his latest companion, Olivier, who demanded from him the kind of blunt openness that drove apart his family, once upon a time.

Everyone lived through life in cycles: you filled your mouth until you hungered again, you got up until you fell again, you talked figuratively until you had to live literally, and you always wanted more and more and more, once you'd gotten less and less and less. Here, in these few precious moments, he could want nothing, feel nothing. A release from the cycle.

The voice began the finishing prayer, appropriating familiar language. Without new people and new experiences, there was even a limit to how many different ways words could be phrased and strung together: "Only death brings an end to the slings and arrows, the sea of troubles, the whips and scorns of endless time. Only that sleep of death, dreamless, can extinguish the eternal light that is our weary life, under which we grunt and sweat and toil and rot and break as long as the curse of forever is upon us. So be it."

It wasn't clear to him whether the verses were Shakespeare's or Killjoy Serena's, nor did it matter.

"So be it," he muttered in habit, his jaw frozen, his voice echoed by eleven others. A sharp peep indicated that the death square had turned itself off, followed by the rapid decrease of the coldness of its surface. All at once, existence returned, and with it, the bind of monotony. Lights came on in the shrine. Around him, bodies began to get up and leave in haste.

"One with nothingness," he whispered, trying to grasp the remnants of that pure non-feeling. Sitting up, he placed his cold hands in prayer across his right eye and the stroke of stitches where his left eye would've been. Killjoy Frederick's white-blue irises, as still and silent as death, surfaced in his mind. As if to remind him of the impossibility of acquiring that which people most coveted, an electric shock from the square whipped against his knees, jolting him to stand on his feet.

"I'm leaving, I'm leaving!" a woman in the corner yelled at the hidden cameras. She stepped down from the square and hurried out of the shrine. Sam did the same, but not before the shock intensified and plunged like a legion of knives into his legs. The shooting sharpness felt familiar, but even the thought of the pain being familiar was familiar. He had been coming to temple since its establishment all over the country about forty years ago, after all. The Centennial explosions had finally lifted people's blood-coloured spectacles in their views on immortality.

Cursing the Everlast, as he always did at the end of the service, he hobbled out and down the snow-topped steps of the building that had purportedly once been a funeral home. He reminded himself that if he played his cards right tonight, if he put in the effort, it was the last

time he would have to put up with the brevity of the service and the unfriendly shocks. If everything went smoothly, if the code for the underden was the right one, if Olivier's friend, Gael, was where he said he was going to be, he could get his hands on an Obitus, and have those few precious moments of complete release become as long as eternity.

If he played his cards right. If he had thrown Mock off his trail like he thought he had. A thorough look around with his one good eye assured him of his spineless co-worker's absence. If there was talk of someone having something of value, the talk often came from or ended with Mock. It was hard to imagine—or maybe he meant easy—that in a world stripped of dignity and surprises, Mock could stoop even lower, always wheedling or grovelling for favours. As if mishmashed shells with entry-level jobs posting Childlike-bashing ads for KJT would ever have access to anything valuable. As valuable as an Obitus, say.

He collapsed onto a step halfway down to rub the shocks from his legs. A searing, splitting stab in his finger told him that the tip had snapped against his jeans and tumbled away to the bottom, leaving spots of red against the white of the snow. His fingernail flew off with a bead of blood and landed in the gutter.

He sighed at the fugitive finger. He had sighed at Olivier the last time he saw him in the same way. Always expecting so much, always disappointed.

"No one's chasing you," he called. Feeling the prick of pain as well as coldness from the snow on the ground, the finger lay in silence, as bored with him as he was with it. When he primed his entire body through Recon in 37 AA, he'd truly believed he was starting over. It became clear when his body began breaking down again in the last thirty years that he had merely initiated another cycle of retrogression.

Turning away from his fragment, he gazed at the snow-filled walkway against the sides of the temple. The crumples of snow dirtied with pebbles reminded him of something he used to eat or lick in the summer, decades and decades ago. It might've been called cookies and cream. He recalled not liking it, but not why or how it tasted. Not that it mattered. In the Obitus there is no hunger. No pain, no feeling in oblivion. No effort.

He shuffled down the steps and retrieved the fugitive, cinching it back onto his cracked, stitched-up hand with a dab of precious flesh glue.

"Last time," he conceded, slowly curling his fingers, some crusty with old glue, as if gripping a Childlike's head. "Then no more."

“Who you talking to?” Mock’s oily voice behind him almost made him slip on the flat ground. He turned around slower than usual and gave his shrunken colleague an unenthusiastic nod. Where had he been hiding?

“Hey, Mock.” Bye, Mock.

“What were you saying just now?”

“Does it matter?” Sam put his hands into his pockets. “You following me?”

“Is there reason to?” Mock inched closer. The growing smile on his ancient, intricately crazed face was dangerously close to ripping the frayed blue threads holding the left side of his jaw together. The stitchwork was so poor that some loose, crackled skin shivered in the wind.

“Not unless you wanna hear me complain about my tired old bones,” Sam said. He began to walk in the direction of the bridge across the Assiniboine River. The bridge appeared deserted at the moment, but the river walk leading to the historic port on the other side was teeming with people. It was almost time for Killjoy Frederick. He needed to see Frederick.

To Sam’s dismay, the shameless groveler hobbled closely behind him. One-track-minded people had no need for moral compasses.

“*Your* tired old bones.” Mock scoffed. “Wouldn’t you love to rest them in the O?”

Sam tightened his winter coat around him and quickened his pace. Mock talked of nothing else. There *was* nothing else. “Who wouldn’t? Everyone I know would.”

“You know anyone who *could*?”

Sam lifted his legs onto the bridge, kicking snow through the gaps between the placards as he hurried. The effort of lying seemed so pointless, but he forced himself to try. “Of course not, Mock. I wouldn’t be showing up to work now if I did, would I? I’d be busy blackmailing them.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted saying them. This was not playing the cards right; this was throwing them up in the air and scattering them across the frozen river. Mock pulled him to an abrupt stop in the middle of the bridge by the matted hair on one side of his head. If he’d run off or even squirmed a little, he would’ve had to part with what remained of his fragile scalp.

“You’d let me know, right? You said you would,” Mock whined, fogging up the evening air around them. “You owe me.”

“Let go.” Sam saw Mock’s bulging eyes dart around to check both sides of the bridge before he felt the flapping skin of Mock’s mouth against his ear.

With hot, eager breath, Mock sputtered, “I heard you found a Childlike. Is it true?”

“Let go, Mock.” Sam felt the pull on his hair slacken.

“Is it true?”

“Have you seen the new ad?” Straightening up, Sam pointed to the screen half-covered with snow above them. For the longest time, the screen affixed to the midpoint of the bridge had shown a vintage ad of a sneering Childlike being fed a bottle of milk in the arms of a woman. The Childlike was in a pinstripe suit, with shadows sharpening the glint in his eyes and deepening the malicious, alarming grin on his face. Now it showed five people of the same height sitting on stools at a bar, their pants hiked up slightly to reveal their ankles. Only one pair was covered in socks and appeared as thin as stilts. The text “Who’s Really Sitting Next to You?” glared at the bottom in cold, green neon. Below it in a clear, white font were the show times for the weekly special, “Hidden Among Us,” the most-watched segment after “Picking Up the Pieces.”

This show came as a reaction to the Silence. Earlier in the spring, a group of extremists had hacked into the KJT system and kept all of the screens throughout the country black and silent for a day. Apparently, the Silence was meant to mourn the millions of Childlikes abducted and incarcerated. To Sam, the gesture was not only playing devil doll’s advocate but also meaningless. Some people liked going against the grain in a pointless effort to distinguish themselves from the mottled masses. Like growing a moustache or wearing a ribbon, a poppy, or a Rising mark back in the day, such gestures led to no changes. The Silence did not lead to a release of Childlikes—no one in their right mind would want that.

After the Silence, when the screens regained power, the KJT stations reported that the extremist group likely originated in B.C. and consisted of several Childlikes who evaded the world-wide round-up during 37-40 AA. Now that was interesting. Over the course of the summer, new anti-Childlike commercials, merchandise, and programs, such as “Hidden Among Us,” sprang up all over the country, and then worldwide. People were suddenly reinvigorated to seek and capture hidden Childlikes. Everyone looked suspicious. Sam got a job with KJT around this time, although he hardly contributed to the rapid spread of this second wave of the No-Kid campaign; he worked too slowly. Some of his colleagues had said that the first wave had begun

as early as 25 AA, but he couldn't remember seeing any ads or hearing any claims until about 35 AA, maybe, when Chucky was captured. As with anything new (or old disguised as new), the excitement was short-lived. Local stories of actual captures were various, if false, and rare, if true.

Mock scrunched up his brittle face as he looked at the new ad. A tiny piece of skin or dried flesh paint popped off of his forehead and floated off the bridge. "Yeah, so?"

"The only Childlike I've seen in years has been two-dimensional."

Sam let the words sink in. When they did, Mock swore and shoved him. He heard a snap somewhere: a reward for his efforts in lying. He felt no new pain. It must've been Mock, poor, decrepit Mock, who spat, "Paraprime. It's all a joke to you."

Sam snorted. "At least my jokes aren't as stale as your insults. Hard to be innovative these days." When a nameless, one-armed, hairless freak attacked him randomly on the streets one day, tearing out his left eyeball and the roots of some of his hair, she'd spat the insult at him. That was a few months after the Centennial, when jealousies and resentment over intactness and priming had reached new heights.

"I helped you keep your job."

"I've paid that off. With lacca."

"I fed you."

"Once. And appetite suppressants don't count."

"How many years have you been alive?"

"This shit again."

"Ten years fewer than me."

"Fuck off."

"And do you look it? Nope!"

Sam turned and trotted down the bridge, wearier of Mock's unchanging rhetoric about who deserved death and who didn't than he would care to admit. Why did it matter who suffered the longest if they were all suffering? Why did it matter who looked worse if they were all living carcasses?

He must've given a good performance, because Mock stayed on the bridge, resorting to chasing with his voice. The reasons Mock deserved death more tore through the silence of the evening: he'd been born during the Depression, his parents had abandoned him, he'd been poor

all his life, never finished school, drifted from place to place, suffered through wars, battled addictions, lost possessions, lost jobs, lost organs, lost family, seen them get blown up, on and on. By the time Sam reached the crowd of moving bodies on the river walk, Mock's yells had turned back into oily, desperate pleas. He didn't need to turn back to know that Mock was on his knees. Just when you thought you couldn't lose any more, you did. Always.

On the river walk, Sam only slowed when he neared the wide, black screens installed above the port. When the mournful tones of Inoculation's "From Whose Bourn No Traveller Returns" descended from the speakers lining the walkway, he stopped before the closest screen. He needed a reminder of why he was trying tonight, why he was making an effort.

The black faded to a white blur, the white blur to a clear close-up of a set of lips as succulent as passion-fruit. When they parted, a gentle voice rang out: "The Obitus grants silence, peace, and rest."

As if pulled by a collective string, all movement around him halted. Heads turned in time to catch the camera pulling back to reveal Killjoy Frederick's small, pointed nose, white-blue irises, wavy blonde hair, and skin as rich as frosting. No matter how many times Sam had seen this promo, each time was like the first. He was sick of everything but this. Symmetric like a snowflake, Killjoy Frederick looked the same as he had when he first unveiled the Obitus to the world in 115 AA.

"It offers wholeness and respite," the angel of death lulled now as he did then. The strange weight of his soft voice put Sam's legs to sleep. The camera panned out further, and Sam breathed in heavily along with others at the port as Killjoy Frederick took off his robe next to a coffin-like capsule against a shining white backdrop. With the robe at his feet, he opened the capsule and climbed in, his shimmering chest and limbs, as hard as ice, catching the light in the process.

Immersed in the milk-white foama lapping mildly in the capsule, Killjoy Frederick continued: "The foama soothes and protects the fragile body as it hibernates. Once the Obitus is shut and the caros is set to the preferred length, the neurowaves ensure dreamlessness." A dipped hand resurfaced to gesture at the ballet of lights swimming in the outer glass layer of the capsule. "You're here, and yet you're not."

Sam sighed at the sound of his favourite line. He half-expected to have tired of it by now. Someone a few feet away began to cry.

As Killjoy Frederick lowered his shoulders, neck, and head into the foama, the camera zoomed in on his face. It captured the gradual lick of the milk-white froth against his even forehead, his long eyelashes, his lean cheeks. Before his satiny lips disappeared, they crooned, “Killjoy Technology can bring you death for as long as you wish.” The words echoed in the wintry air, gathering impact.

As the screens faded from the image of the chalice logo back to black, white letters spelling “Obitus” hovered dimly across the surfaces, as if to haunt the bodies watching like phantoms. Even the violins in Inoculation’s tune slipped out of reach as quickly as they had come. Sam wanted to sink to his knees, but he took his hands out of his pockets instead. All of his fingers were still in place. If he played his cards right.

The night sky trembled with falling snow. Here and there bodies began to wake from reverie and resume activity. Before he willed his legs to move, and so reduce the distance between him and Frederick and oblivion, Sam caught a snowflake in his open palm.

Making sure he wasn’t being shadowed, Sam sneaked into the old, abandoned smokehouse through an unlocked side door, the one marked with an image of a broken branch. Once inside, he slipped to the vintage phone booth in the back, as per the instructions given to him by Gael. Stepping in, he picked up the receiver, revealing the lens of a surveillance camera, and keyed in the five-digit code that Gael had relayed. After a few minutes had passed in the sly, quiet noises of the once-famous restaurant, a wall of the phone booth slid open. He placed the receiver back and strode into the small, dark room. When the door slid to a close behind him, there was complete blackness. Unable to see his body for the first time was like existing as mere consciousness, a thought in the gloom.

A door in the floor slid open, filtering in blue light chaperoned by Mutelate’s macabre vocals. Sam, his broken shell of a body reappearing, ambled to the opening and descended the stairs, one step at a time.

Booths, some open, some closed with silhouettes against frosted glass, lined the walls of the dimly lit underden. In the centre of the den was a bar stocked with chem drinks of every

colour. People stood or sat around the bar, chugging gel shots and the accompanying chaser-rinse or fogging up the den with their skipkes. Sam had been to another one of these underdevelopments before with Olivier. It was some time ago, on the other side of town. More elusive and prohibited than the undermarkets, underdens became available after the introduction of the Obitus. Word was that death could be similarly simulated in the booths, but for a much lower price. Sam had been severely disappointed. The fumes released into the booth had paralyzed him, but could not quite knock out his consciousness. After all the effort of finding out the location of the underden, securing the latest code, and travelling to it without being followed, he had been awarded with something less than sleep. The underden folded soon after their first visit: the Killjoy guards had been informed of its location. More opened elsewhere, but he had lost interest by then.

Sam kept to the booths. He walked past each one, lingering before the ones with open doors, looking for Gael, the ragdoll who could bring him closer to Frederick.

“Sam.”

He doubled back to the booth that had appeared empty. There was Gael, so thin and in a hooded coat so dark he had escaped Sam’s notice. Gael took off his hood and straightened up in his seat, a smooth black plastic hollow that extended in a curve around the booth in a semi-circle. The dark, loose lips on Gael’s collaged face smiled, pulling the pale, lined patches of skin on his cheeks to his ears. His nose was brown and sun-spotted, and the skin graft on his forehead and around his eyes was creased and too thick or long for his face. It seemed glued onto him like fabric. Sam imagined ripping the skins off to reveal a face as diminutive and evil as a Childlike’s, as the host of “Hidden Among Us” had done to the changeling found living under the floorboards of an old church in Vancouver in the latest episode.

“Thanks for meeting me,” he said as he sat down across from Gael.

“Thanks for meeting here.”

Sam shrugged. “Not my first choice.”

Gael got up to close the door of the booth. Sam took in the rest of his body: veiled neck, gloved hands, paper-thin pants, and round boots too large for such a frame. These were all mentioned as possible means of disguise in the latest episode. The first time Sam had met Gael with Olivier all these details had gone unnoticed. It’d been on the front steps of a temple in the summer of 140 AA, back when Olivier used to attend the services with him. Olivier and Gael

were old friends who'd lost touch after the Centennial. Within minutes of hearing Gael speak elusively of what he had been up to and observing his frequent, darting looks, Sam had written him off as a wacko conspiracy theorist, paranoid, devil doll's advocate-type of person. Sure enough, the only other time he'd encountered him again, Gael had dropped hints that he suspected a strong link between Recon, Inc. and the Centennial explosions. Sam remembered how he had tried not to laugh when Olivier told him that Gael was probably on a Killjoy black list. The yellow list barring the use of Recon products, maybe, considering his stitch-and-skin medley. One had to be as threatening as a Childlike to end up on that list, and Gael, to Sam at the time, was not. Now Gael's nervous nonconformity made sense. Apparently Olivier and Gael had been friends since the year of the Rising. Apparently they'd risen together at the age of nineteen. Sam knew now that only one of them had risen as an adult; the other was a sneaky, lying Childlike soon to be abducted and traded for an Obitus.

The door locked with a click.

"Not as many chances of being heard or seen," Gael said.

"You're not worried I'll snitch to the Killjoys?"

Gael smiled. "The code changes regularly. In fact, to get rid of your tail, I had it changed after you came through."

Mock. "Hard to throw off, that one."

"Plus, that's a lot of effort for minimal reward."

Sam raised his eyebrows. Another reason he had lost interest after that disappointing first visit to an underden was because the rewards for trading underdevelopment secrets with KJT soon went from hefty to a tube of lacca, if you were lucky. Once the Killjoy guards found out that the booths couldn't possibly simulate death as effectively as their Obitus, they also lost interest.

"And...I don't know. I think you're more honest than Olivier says you are," said Gael.

"Why?"

Gael cleared his throat. Sam was sure he heard a strange, electronic warbling under the sound.

"Never mind. So. You want to join the undercause?"

"Is he still living with you?"

Gael blinked at him. Olivier had left him about this time last year. Sam had sat there in their living room, watching another part of him go. Another fugitive that he wouldn't bother to chase. *Déjà vu* of a *déjà vu*. Or did he mean *déjà fu* for "fugitive"? When Olivier had finally decided that he was leaving, Sam hadn't been surprised. One of them wanted openness, honesty, and the other didn't see the point of sharing. One grew out of his fixation with the Obitus, and the other hadn't. When Olivier said he was going to be staying with Gael, Sam had nodded. Of course, the small percentage of people who still made an effort, who still made gestures, who naively believed that things could change and be better, should stick together. Gael was also much suited to Olivier's personality, his interests, and—at the time he'd thought—his age. Sam and Olivier had more than fifty years between them, although two-seventeen and one-sixty-two weren't that much different at a certain point.

"I don't think that's for me to ans—"

"That's fine," Sam said. "First and last time I'll ask."

Gael sighed. "I'm sorry."

"I said I want to help, not join." It had taken a week to get in contact with Gael. First Sam had to dig up the plastic card that Gael had given him when they first met. Then he had to imprint a request to meet up on the card, along with his thumbprint. After a few days of waiting and staring at the card, almost sure it was defunct, Sam saw his own markings fade, gradually replaced by two lines of instructions, an address, a date and a time, plus a code. "And I want something in return."

"So, more like a one-off thing. A trade."

"Yeah."

"What kind of help are you offering?"

"After the Silence, the KJT systems had to have security enhancements. I have access to some of the new codes. Very peripheral installations, though," he lied.

Gael brushed this off with a quick hand motion. "We weren't involved in that."

When Olivier first got involved in Gael's projects, he had said they were dealing mainly with undermarket imports, sometimes underden materials. It was true he never mentioned system hacking or, worse, Childlike liberation.

"Except Olivier used to say that oppression was loud, and silence was strength," Sam replied.

The ends of Gael's lips curled up briefly. "Hypothetically speaking, if we were interested in your offer, what would you want in return?"

In response to this question, Sam curled his fingers, ready to lay down his cards, except a strand of doubt, curiosity, or whatever it was, was tickling him, scratching against his skin. First he wanted to know why Gael thought he was honest.

"Why do you trust me?"

Gael shrugged, before pausing to think. He seemed to decide to share his thoughts when his strangely shimmering, amber eyes locked Sam in place. He confessed: "I guess you remind me of someone who also became a mess after the Centennial. Physically and emotionally. As I tried to piece together my sister's face through her screams, the full weight of living and rotting in a perpetual hell struck me. Day by day, I sewed our lives back, and for what? More of the same. But then I found the undercause. Or the undercause found me. There is meaning once you make meaning. Life is about adaptability. I see the draw of death, I do, but what comes easy is also less meaningful. A meaningful life is so much harder and more elusive than even death. If I can believe that, so can you. I think you're starting to. Change is possible."

"People don't change," Sam scoffed. "If I change, I'm not myself anymore."

"Those who don't like change are usually the ones benefitting from stasis."

"What are the benefits? How is the curse of forever beneficial?"

"Forever was never really a gift. We shouldn't have needed the Centennial explosions to see that. The real gift is our capacity to make meaning out of everything."

"You mean nothing."

"Same thing."

Sam tried not to laugh.

"So, what do you want in return?" Gael asked.

"An Obitus."

Gael frowned. "Why and how would we—"

This time, Sam launched himself forward without hesitation. He saw Gael's eyes widen before he slammed his head against the seat with a loud smack. Gael's body crumpled to the ground like a ragdoll. Sam kicked his stomach to make sure he was unconscious. So much for Gael's trusting him.

Unravelling the cord stashed in his coat pocket, he tied up Gael's hands and feet with it. Then he reached for one of Gael's legs, scrunching up the pant fabric until he could feel the hardness of a long, tapered pipe instead of flesh. A sense of triumph that he hadn't felt since getting Recon surged within him.

"We're not the same," he muttered to the bruised and unmoving changeling. It was true that Sam appeared closer to his prime than most others, due to Recon, but at least he didn't hide his identity with cloaks, vocal adapters to simulate adult voices, and stilts. Childlikes deserved to be captured and imprisoned. Why couldn't Olivier see that? Why couldn't his family see that? Sam's family never forgave him for what he did to his grandchildren in 37 AA. If *he* hadn't done it, someone else would've, and then someone else would've benefitted, gotten Recon, gotten primed. It made perfect sense to him, but all the time in the world would not make them forgive him. He never shared this secret with Olivier.

"People don't change," he said, more to himself than anyone else. Olivier understood that he could never change, never be open, never make an effort, and he would also understand his reasons for taking Gael. Sam lived and breathed for Death. All he wanted was to be one with nothingness.

Eager to leave the underden as stealthily as possible by roping the Childlike around his body under his winter coat, he grasped onto both of its legs to pull the stilts off. When his hands felt the different sizes of the legs, one solid and pipe-like, the other fleshy and knobby, he felt a pang in his stomach. He snatched the veiling scarf off of the ragdoll's neck. The neck did not betray any signs of having been torn open to house an adapter device. How? He was sure he'd heard a warbling in his voice. With shaky hands, he rolled up the pant legs, not believing, not seeing the absence of children's feet attached to stilts and the presence of a distal stump next to an intact, adult leg. The sight jarred with the images of exposed Childlikes he'd seen on the show.

Gael stirred, emitting a low, staggering moan. All at once, the noise and movement injected themselves like fire into Sam's veins, tingling panic, twisting his innards. Something was pressing, forcing him to connect the discrepancy between images and the betrayal of family with the closing of Frederick's white-blue eyes in his mind. Something was laughing at him, a manic, desperate laugh, for trying, for making an effort. Something wanted him to link the absence of a Childlike to the absence of an Obitus to the possibility of change.

But his immutability was stronger. Like a mask revealing a mask revealing yet another mask, the cycle of life and retrogression continued. If he did it in the past, he was bound to repeat it, he thought. So be it, so be it.

Before he realized what he was doing, Sam had bitten down on the traitorous leg, trying to sever it through the treachery mess, trying to get his broken, fugitive hands on a Childlike, trying to play his cards right, so he could get an Obitus and reopen those eyes, the gateway to silence, peace, and rest.

Instead of white-blue, Sam saw burning, howling amber.

*

“In my dreams Frederick’s whole body is bare. His able arms do what I want them to. I watch as he cooks me dinner in a white-tiled kitchen. I watch as he kneels on the marble floor and sucks me off. I watch as he cleans me up, slow and meticulous. Sometimes he picks me up and lays me in the Obitus, sending me to sleep with a passion-fruit kiss. Sometimes we lie in the Obitus together, our bodies interlocked, enfolded by foama. It nourishes our immortal, fragile shells, tightening, reversing. In the dreams, I have two eyes, my hair is full, my body patchless, my fingers soft and intact, my skin my own. In the dreams, we are entombed together, unseen. The foama shrouds us. The lights waltz above us. We die like this, dreamless, for as long as we can afford.”

Maskwa

165 Anno Aeternum, Age of Covet

Standing on tiptoe to catch the morning light from the only window in his modest studio, Maskwa read the directions on the polymer plastic Shrinker: “Place head in shrink bag with opening facing downwards, turn the knob to 1 to apply sealing, turn the knob to 2 to apply heat shrinking. Wait. If unsuccessful, turn the knob back to 0. Discard bag.”

As instructed, he placed his head into the cheap, undermarket product. From inside the bag, the apartment looked filmy, as if preserved. A jolt of excitement skipped along the surface of his body. Climbing up onto a chair, he felt for the knob with his finger, turned it to 1, then 2, and waited. As the plastic film pressed into every nook, melted against every grafted inch of his face, stopping up his nostrils, his mouth, he had the sudden urge to take it off. Not because he wanted to live, as the instinctual racing of his heart and desire for breath might have suggested, but because the covered, writhing face of his sister, Wina, shot into his mind. He wondered if he appeared as she did that day decades and decades ago. Is this how she’d felt? He gripped the chair, feeling his brain balloon out of the confines of his head. He was going where she could never go.

The thought hurt more than the constriction of his chest from the rapid depletion of oxygen. For a moment, he lost sense of where he was, felt himself buckling over, hitting something, maybe the floor. No breath, no breath, no breath, he screamed inside his head, flailing and clawing, reaching out to no one. He felt the darkness squeezing his consciousness, bending the shape of his face. This darkness had an end, an end, an end.

He was going to throw up. The darkness was spinning. He tried to hold onto the floor, anything, kicking his legs out so he could emerge above water. Every time life ordered him to end the agony, he drew his arms away, far from his head. After a while, a year it felt like, one of his arms betrayed him by twisting the knob back to 0, releasing the Shrinker’s choking embrace.

The abundance of air all at once was glorious, more than anything he had ever known, more than he wanted to admit. His lungs expanded, open, vulnerable. The tight cap on his head popped off. He slipped the shrink bag off of his head, gulping in air as if his life depended on it. The interiors of his studio twinkled back into shape and colour around him. The taste of air, of life, the feel of his nostrils enlarging and contracting, and the feel of his chest heaving, desirous for survival, gave him a different kind of pain. He was still here. Why?

He beat his chest with his arm. Both deserved punishment. But the throbbing only made him more desperate for breath. Thiago, the vendor selling the Shrinker, had said that he overheard about someone dying this way.

“How long do I wait for?” Maskwa had asked, after listening to the vendor string another tale about a friend of a friend who’d discovered that someone in another province had ended the curse of forever.

“What does it say on the package?”

“It doesn’t.”

“Seven to eight minutes, max,” Thiago had assured him, taking the money from his hand, placing the Shrinker there instead.

The clock told him that he’d tried to die for twenty-three minutes. He sat up, resolved to stop visiting that fraud of a salesman. Thiago had already sold him ten different Releasing products. All entrenched with far-fetched and too-good-to-be-true rumours of death. All garbage. All lies. What did he expect?

He felt the puckered surface of his face, the grooves and sutures where one patch of skin met another. At least nothing had torn. He was spending all his precious earnings on Thiago’s Releasing merchandise these days that he would not have been able to spare any for thread, which cost an arm and a leg these days.

No more visits, he told himself, especially as Thiago made an alarming comment about his voice the other day. No more visits, except he’d mentioned something about a new product coming in next week. Some kind of vapour. If used at midnight, with the right conditions, it could kill hundreds of people. Hundreds. Maskwa could see a field of people lying next to one another, lined and spread like petals. He could be there, among the dead, undistinguishable, unhidden, and equally lifeless. Wina, his cousins, his parents, too.

Lies. That’s what Thiago sold. Maskwa pushed himself up from the floor so he could trash the Shrinker. It reacted to his violent motion with a pitiful ringing sound as it hit against the sides of the bin.

And yet, he admitted, some lies were rooted in truth. The truth in this instance involved an interruption of a live recording of “Hidden Among Us” last month. Killjoy Cynthia had just stepped off of a defunct food truck where they suspected a Childlike was squatting when three people clothed and masked head to foot in green ran towards her. They’d been holding the

severed head of an animal, a real one with a shape and a hide. It had taken Maskwa a few seconds to remember that the animal with a small, dark snout, flat, large ears, and beautifully curved, symmetric antlers was called a deer. The three had only managed to cry out that the animal was dead, that the curse was lifted, while brandishing the majestic trophy at the host, before the Killjoy guards tased them to the ground and the camera pulled away from the scene. The KJT stations had reported it as a prank, but they could not suppress what everyone else saw: the deer's unblinking eye dulled by absolute lifelessness.

The image had given Maskwa a feeling of comfort, desire, and hope far exceeding anything Killjoy Frederick could give frolicking about in the Obitus. It was like hearing a strange new song imbued with familiar elements, evoking forgotten memories: an ache there, a jest there, a lingering smell of burnt wood on fabric, and the warm, prickly texture of sun-bathed grass. It'd reminded him of the hope he'd had on the Centennial, something he hadn't felt since the implementation of the No-Kid policy. Excitement over the potential end of a life of self-hatred, solitude, and concealment had coursed through his veins when he'd severed them on the day forever turned a hundred. How long had he let himself bleed? At least when his arms were gushing fire, he couldn't think about anything else. He didn't have to decide which was more tenacious: pain or life.

The image of death in the eye of the deer must have had similar effects on others, as people everywhere began to conduct suicides, reminiscent of the year of the Rising, although now they were being called "Releasings." These had a different purpose but the same success rate of zero percent. On good days he believed the rate was higher—why would mortality be possible for that deer but not for other sentient beings? If only he had access to some ants, flies, or weeds—a rarity at undermarkets now, he could pull them apart, watch life finally surrender its tyrannical grasp, and have some proof.

His stomach grumbled in agreement. He stifled it with another appetite suppressant. For so long he had been hiding from others when really the enemy was his own body. It hungered when he had no desire to eat. It fought for life when he sought death. It showed him a Childlike risen at eleven when he felt as old as a relic.

Well, he was going to win this fight. He was going to annihilate his traitorous body, tear it beyond recognition. Grabbing the rope noose that he'd bought last week, Maskwa leaned the ladder in his studio against the wall, under a ceiling beam. It could happen anytime, via any

method; that was what the tales told him and what he believed (on a good day). He had to keep trying, like catching those slippery things in lakes more than a hundred years ago.

Before climbing the ladder to perform a classic, a vintage, he touched the line of stitches around his neck. If the stitches opened from the pull of the noose, there was a chance his head would sever from his body. He could already hear the rip of thread, the tear of flesh, and the clatter of the vocal adapter against the floor as it tumbled from inside his neck. If the stitches stayed intact, he would be strangled. Either way was productive.

Maskwa climbed the stairs a step at a time. Short legs made everything slower.

When he reached the top, a loud bang in the hallway made him lose his footing. He clung onto the ladder with his arms. Yells followed the bang, accompanied by several running footsteps, a woman's piercing shrieks, and ugly, violent pounding that seemed to have reached through the walls and broken his chest, rocking his insides. The chaos of pursuit. He'd heard these noises through the floor boards a few weeks ago. The floor against his cheek had been cool as he lay there, listening, frozen, wishing the ground would crack into a cold, dark sea and drown everyone in the building. The noises, like a language, told him that they hadn't found anyone. They never did. In the last twenty years, since the Silence, these noises had become commonplace again, but never like they were during the Round-Up. There wasn't anyone left, except him. Normally he would've taken any commotion as a sign to leave—he was an expert at disappearing, but he had a feeling he didn't need to this time. He was going to die before then. The real kind of disappearance.

Leaving the rope on the ceiling beam, he hopped down the ladder, latched his stilts to the end of his feet, slipped on longer pants, and crept to the door. He had trained himself to do this as quickly and silently as if he were the hunter instead. As soon as he glanced through the eyehole, he felt his heart topple out of his chest. There were eight, nine, ten Killjoy guards in their black utility uniforms, helmets, and balaclavas stationed in the hallway, crouched or upright with guns and tasers at the ready, aiming at Mr. Tavare's apartment across the landing, the door off its hinges and flat on its back. No matter how many times Maskwa had seen such a scene, every time was like the first, as if a hundred and twenty-some years had compressed to the present and they were coming for his family again, coming to round up the children.

Something was wrong. The noises were changing. The scream had amplified into a wailing cry. How? Mr. Tavare had no children. His wife was not a Childlike; neither was he.

Maskwa leaned closer to the eyehole. There was no mistaking that sound. His mother had wailed like that when the guards had stormed into his parents' house in 37 AA, breaking down their door. It had been a holiday, a rain-soaked, dreary Family Day. His mother had thrown herself in front of the cabinet hiding Wina. His father had stood below him, his quivering hands to his sides, moments after helping him up into the ceiling. Who were the guards going to find? It had been a game of chance, of what-ifs. Through a crack, Maskwa had watched the guards beat his mother away, bag up his sister, and drag her from the house like garbage.

Like the sack of kicking mass he saw now in the hallway. Someone had held onto the ends of the contorting bag, and was being hauled along from the apartment. It was Mrs. Tavare, wailing, her face scrunched up in misery, her hair damp and bloodied. Why? Why was his neighbour being taken away?

A guard smashed Mrs. Tavare back against the doorframe with a baton. In that instant Maskwa saw his own mother's face, withered, blue, red, unreachable. The pain he felt became a shudder, a sob, stumbling from his mouth, as loud as it was conspicuous.

It drew a covered face to his eyehole. He took a step back, froze, the hairs on his neck and arms reaching upwards. The goggles lifted to reveal a pair of eyes, impenetrably white-blue, blinking rapidly. The eyeballs swivelled, trying to see into his apartment, his hiding place, his fear. For a second he thought he saw his own reflection in the pupils, warped and diminutive, while beads of sweat tickled their way down his back.

Then the eyes were gone. Maskwa waited for movement, for the shuffling of feet, for the creaks in the floor as the guards advanced toward his door. There was nothing. Only a quick burst of command, the scuffling of boots, and some scraping of metal as the guards filed out of the building. With Mr. Tavare, presumably.

Maskwa knew why his neighbour was being taken away. Mr. Tavare must've had some relations to a Childlike, and someone knew and betrayed him. A week after Wina's abduction, his mother had told him, in the shed in which he was hiding, that his cousins had been taken too. Older than Maskwa, they had risen just a few months short of sixteen, the cut-off age as stated in the No-Kid policy. They could've passed for sixteen. Their birth certificates had been altered, even. But someone in their family had betrayed them.

"You need to go." His mother had shoved a packed bag towards him in the shed.

"Don't let us know where you are," his father had urged.

“No contact. Not yet.”

“Don’t go out in the daytime.”

“Stay hidden.”

“What about Wina?”

“Be safe. Go.”

And he went. He abandoned his job in the warehouse, his cozy home, his family, his friends, although by then, his friend group had diminished as quickly as his co-workers’ and bosses’ trust in him. No one believed the words of people who looked like children. For two to three years, moving only with the shadows, trying to make himself seem taller, he never stayed in one spot for too long. He rotated between squatting in the empty aquarium and hiding in the abandoned conservatory, eating anything he could get his hands on. He never went too far either, always able to let his mother catch a glimpse of him at the undermarket close to his parents’ place. Her expression told him that she recognized him less and less, as he sewed more and more patches of cheap, synthetic skin onto his own in order to pad up his small face. Once he had towered over her shrunken frame with the stilts he had on, and she had walked right past him. Being squeezed by the Shrinker for a day could not be worse than the feeling of being treated as a stranger by someone who gave him life.

In 40 AA he became truly estranged. When he failed to see his mother at the undermarket for several weeks, Maskwa sneaked into their old house, against his better judgement, and found everything intact: no violence, no fight. No parents. It was a house inhabited by stillness. The only logical explanation was that they had been taken for questioning. The guards had come.

And what they took, they kept. His parents never returned.

Maskwa sat down quietly, staring at the door, the only thing between him and what could’ve been everlasting imprisonment. It could’ve been him. It was a horrible thought, but he couldn’t even risk going across the landing to comfort Mrs. Tavare. It was not safe. He should’ve left weeks ago.

A glint on the floor caught his attention. It was a plastic card of some sort, all black, with gold-green lettering. Certain there were no more noises in the hallway, he crawled closer to the door, picked up the card, cool to the touch.

The lettering indicated, “Six p.m., Broken Branch, Undermarket 54. A new Releasing product. One percent success rate. Limited supply.”

Did Thiago send this? How did he know where he lived? This was a trap, Maskwa thought. Thiago must've given weight to his suspicions and followed him home.

But Broken Branch was not his stall. Maskwa knew it was the guard, the one with irises as glacial as Killjoy Frederick's. Why didn't he break through the door with the rest of the guards if he'd wanted to capture him, though?

The more he stared at the word "Releasing," the more it pulled against his fear, unravelling the decades-old tapestry. There was just no resisting the strength of three syllables to rewrite a pitiful existence, or the power of an image promising eternal rest. No more running, hiding, disguising. He pushed himself up, pocketing the card. He would be at the undermarket at six.

There was a wall pock-marked with graffiti at one of the many entrances to Undermarket 54. In the far corner of this wall was a one-line chalk expression of a memory, which said, "She had sat on the edge and let herself fall, thinking he would catch her." Maskwa glanced at the writing every time he went to the undermarket. He didn't want to, but his eyes sought the scrawls anyway.

After his parents were abducted, he began to leave scribbles of childhood memories on any surface he could find. If his parents were ever released, he deduced, they would see the messages and know that he was safe. By 50 AA, his hands continued the ritual even when he could no longer see the point. They scrawled anecdotes after anecdotes on concrete, plaster, granite, with no hope of a response. He watched his fingers correspond with ghosts. His arms spun tales for no one. Sometimes he was sure that if the memories and images could be carved into something material, then they must've happened. Sometimes he wasn't sure.

"Are you here for the thing?" a hushed voice sneaked by Maskwa's ear. It brought the noises of customers bargaining with vendors and going to and fro at the market back to the present. He looked away from the memory on the wall. Instead of searching for the owner of the voice right away, he pretended to look at the display of vintage knickknacks and dull army knives at the Broken Branch stall.

"Depending on the thing," he muttered.

"One percent is more dependent than zero."

Maskwa faced the speaker, who had short, dirty hair, tinted glasses, and the usual facial pastiche: one eyebrow, a long curl of red-threaded stitches from her forehead down to her chin, with the skin on one side much darker and more crumpled than the other. Before she lowered her glasses and made eye contact with him, his toes had curled over his stilts, ready to flee. He knew what he would see: white-blue, like water trapped under ice.

“Don’t be scared. I’m alone,” she said.

“You’re a guard,” he hissed.

“Sometimes I work for the underdevelopments.”

It was a known fact that Killjoy guards did not look primed; they did grunt work in exchange for Recon one day. But it was impossible to imagine one who wasn’t dedicated to preserving the Sangraal mandate of perpetual youth and beauty, which meant keeping the underdevelopments in tow and removing anything from view that was deemed hideous and harmful, like himself. Maybe they were switching tactics. This was a trap, Maskwa thought.

“Well, you’re never quite alone here,” she continued, glancing around her. Although six was the busiest, and so the safest, time at the undermarket, she seemed to be referring to the Killjoy guard standing at the main mouth of the market rather than the market-goers. “Only one today.”

“Your colleague?”

“Depending on the face I put on.”

He wondered if her comment was a subtle anti-Childlike threat. Habit warned him it was. He had learned from his sister long ago of the power of hiding Childlike-bashing ideas in everyday language. He was about to disappear into the crowd when she said, “You know how to gain people’s trust these days? You give them charge of the pieces.”

She placed a device in front of him on the display. It looked like a remote of some kind.

“Think of the real winners of the Centennial explosions. They should’ve called the show, ‘Blowing Up the Pieces.’ Don’t you agree?” She fluttered the folds of her cloak quickly, but long enough that he saw something strapped to her knee. “How can I chase you if I only got one leg? If you choose to blow me up, that is.”

Was she pretending to be what the Killjoys liked to call a conspiracy-weaving, devil doll’s advocate to gain his trust? The fact that she had not tried to capture him earlier told him

that she didn't suspect his identity. "I don't believe you," he said. There was no guarantee that she was telling the truth.

"I'm not selling a belief. Just a product. If you want it, go into the stall. If you don't, walk away."

Maskwa peered at the vendor, who appeared as if occupied with cleaning a trinket, but moved a little to the side. There was no other person at the stall right now.

"How much?"

"Less than an Obitus. But only one out of a hundred has to pay. The dead one."

So, one out of a hundred, not hundreds, as Thiago fabricated. "How do you make a profit?"

"Let us worry about that."

"How does the dead one pay?"

"You'll see. If you go."

He looked at the guard, the vendor, the woman with the unsettling eyes. "Why me?"

"You've bought ten Releasing products in the last month. The undermarket has eyes, especially for its dedicated customers."

"That makes me trust you more."

She smiled. "No pressure." Then she whispered, "Limited supply, though."

From the corner of his eye, Maskwa spied Thiago a good distance away, lifting new Shrinkers out of a bag and setting them neatly onto his table before locking them under the glass cover. The other day, Thiago had asked if Maskwa smoked, as his voice sounded so low and throaty. Even if it hadn't been a threat or a suspicion, the remark reminded Maskwa of the precariousness of trusting people.

He turned back, catching the symbol printed on the curtains at the back of the stall. What he'd assumed was a split branch seemed more like one half of an upside-down antler. It recalled the image of oblivion in the deer's eye. What he trusted was death, its absoluteness, its capacity to release him from fear. And the agony of life. Of living in pieces.

He pocketed the detonator. "I'm sold."

The woman nodded. She glanced at the guard and waited until he looked away to motion for Maskwa to enter through the curtains behind the stall. The vendor straightened up, turning his massive shoulders, blocking the guard from view. One second Maskwa was by one side of the

display, the next he was through the folds, enveloped by darkness and the nearness of cupboard walls on all three sides.

Maskwa was sitting on the cool, hard ground of the expansive cavern next to small huddles of what must've been a hundred people. Some sat dazed and ponderous in stillness; some wobbled their heads to take in the surroundings; some breathed, chatted, and smiled erratically at one another. The rays of light reflecting off of the rounded glass installed around the cavity congregated in the centre of the cavern, creating a spotlight of sorts. The air was fresh and comforting, a welcome change from the muggy atmosphere of the underground tunnels through which Maskwa and two others had followed Maggie, the guard who'd slipped him the card and met him at the Broken Branch. He'd had to climb down through a manhole in the cupboard behind the curtains and wait for an hour in a musty, drippy shaft before Maggie came down with Tess and Darla, sisters who lived in north Vancouver. Maskwa saw that they also had a detonator. Before moving further, Maggie had informed them of the conditions. Stationed at Undermarket 54, she acquired intelligence from the local branches of KJT, the market's main competitor, as well as clients for the market's new Releasing products. To avoid attracting attention, the one hundred attendants of tonight's event were being led by different guides via different paths. As the nature of the event required secrecy and trust, the option for clients to abort participation via blasting a leg off of the guides allowed both. Once they reached their destination, the clients had to return the detonators. The sisters had agreed to the conditions without missing a beat, and then stared at Maskwa as if scared he would press the detonator in his hands and ruin all their chances. It'd occurred to him then that it no longer mattered if the detonator worked, or if Maggie was telling the truth or not. The sisters believed she was. He already did too.

The subsequent trek down narrowing pipes, past and through turns and openings that began to echo one another, had caused Maskwa's knees and the soles of his feet to throb from prolonged pressure against the stilts. But three or four hours of soreness were nothing compared to a lifetime of pain.

"Is this the first Releasing you've been to?" Darla asked. The sisters were seated behind him, their arms crossed over their knees like carbon copies of one another. Maggie had sat the three of them several feet from the entrance of the cave before leaving again.

“Have there been others?”

“I heard there was one somewhere on Vancouver Island last week. At least one...one was released.”

It was going to be another game of chance, of what-ifs. “With what?”

“I don’t know.”

When they had finally climbed out of the dark, echoing pipes into a grotto, it had taken Maskwa a while to get accustomed to the sight of light and the sound of hushed voices through a narrow opening in the wall. The ghost remains of the echoes had seemed louder than the whispers through the gap. After collecting their detonators, Maggie had explained that they were not allowed to leave until it was over. Led into the crevice, Maskwa had felt like he was walking on one of two paths: one led to perpetual fire, the other to eternal rest. He had nothing else to give up to avoid one and pursue the other. There was only one he deserved.

“Maggie’s coming back,” Tess said.

He turned around to catch her navigating around the circles of people. In the dimness between the light beams, her eyes seemed to have lost their iciness.

“It’s about to start,” Maggie whispered before taking a seat next to them.

Hearing a sudden rush of heightened voices behind him, Maskwa turned to see two hooded figures enter and walk across the cavern to the centre. Illuminated by the overlapping light rays, the first hooded figure lowered their hood, revealing a face charred and cracked from the nose down. There was also a patch of rough skin sewn into their throat. Their hair was red and radiant, their smile warm and generous. When the second hooded figure brought a staff to them, they held it high for all to see. It was an ordinary piece of wood save for its crown of green leaves entwined with white and pink flowers. Maskwa hadn’t seen the vibrant dewiness of fresh plants that weren’t behind a KJT screen since the Big Cache. How had they saved it? How had they hidden it all this time?

“It’s basil!” Darla whispered to her sister. Gazing at the green leaves, he suddenly wished they were sitting closer to the centre so he could catch the forgotten scent of the herb.

The one with the red hair lowered the staff and addressed the crowd, thanking all those who dared to come and embrace the odds. As they spoke, the other hooded figure passed a case to the crowd. Everyone took something from it and passed the case down. When it was Maskwa’s turn, he saw that the case held a dwindling number of thick, pastel-green capsules. His

breath caught in his throat as his fingers hovered over a capsule here, a capsule there. A game of chance, of what-ifs. Who had to lose for him to win? The question tightened its hold on his chest. He snatched a capsule and passed the case to Maggie. The capsule was squishy and bigger than his palm.

“The end of forever is upon us,” the one with the staff said. “We don’t know how, we don’t know why, but only one out of a hundred may be blessed. Let us take those odds tonight and feel, together and once again, the possibility of death, the freedom of absence, the absoluteness of release. Tonight, as one of us achieves oblivion, we shall all give pause to the Everlast. Let that pause transcend us beyond our never-ending suffering.”

The words echoed in the cavern, gathering impact. Somehow the tightness in Maskwa’s chest began to loosen. He let the words seep into the edges of his skin, animating his limbs. It wasn’t just the possibility of death that electrified him. There was something else too, something to do with the cavern, the hundred hearts beating for the same purpose. All had to come together for one death to work.

“Let us begin.” The one with the staff motioned for everyone to break open the capsules. As if drawn by a collective string, hands all over the cavern gripped and pulled at the mysterious objects. Maskwa glanced at Maggie, who gave a firm nod, before twisting the two ends of the capsule away from one another.

As soon as the grey-green vapour billowed out of the openings and reached his face, before he could form questions in his head, the walls of the cave started to sway and crumble, enveloped by the crisp-smelling fumes. Within seconds, the rays of light disappearing into the clouds before his eyes began to pulsate to an inaudible beat. His heart imitated the movements, pounding against his chest as if it were the door separating him from everlasting imprisonment. Turning around, he saw people’s slow-moving faces lifting off as swirls of colour into the swelling atmosphere. He heard someone giggle or sob behind him, a world away. The sound swam from one side of the cavern to the other, like one of those slippery things in a lake.

“What’s happening?” he heard himself say, too loudly, so loudly he felt a hot pain around his mouth, as if the loudness had ripped some of the threads in his face. As the pain increased, his vision cleared, the fumes vanished. For a few seconds, he could see the centre, the figure with the staff, the overlapping lights, the unmoving walls, and recall that he was underground, underwater, above water, in the sky. The clouds were back. He felt a hand on his arm, steadying

his levitating body. The hand belonged to some eyes, white-blue eyes, telling him he was seated. The eyes had a mouth too but the eyes were speaking instead. They told stories of water turning to ice turning back to water.

“It’s coming!” a voice screamed, and Maskwa saw the scream fly up as he landed on the ground, hard, his bottom becoming one with the coolness of the hearth, the hearth that stretched to the centre where a squirming black mass was tied to a board, a card, a platform. Tavare, Tavare, Tavare, he thought he’d said. He squinted and blinked to still the blackness moving and thrashing, its edges beating outwards like a pumping heart, like a bagged ragdoll trying to escape, like a howling, twisting mother twisted by grief.

Let him go, he thought he’d said, but he didn’t, he couldn’t. Let her go. Let them go. Something stung his eyes, hot, hot, hot. It was a message on the wall. It was a cabinet. It was tears, tears clarifying the moving blackness, and he felt the fur in his hands before he saw it, not his parents, not his cousins, not his sister, not a ragdoll, not a deer—

“A bear!”

Someone had sucked up all of the oxygen to spell the letters “b,” “e,” “a,” and “r,” releasing them back, letting them knock into one another as they descended onto the furry black mass, tied and tied and tied to the centre. Questions and outbursts receded and scooped forward in the crowd like a tidal wave, rocking him into feeling this rarity, this animal up close, live and real, as if he were touching it.

The ears, the snout, the beady black eyes seemed to belong to a childhood friend, someone with whom he’d lost touch, but then the friend opened its jaw, sharp, saliva, fangs that pricked and tore more strongly than wistfulness, more strongly than the need for an image, a gesture, a lie, a secret, a story. The precariousness of trust slobbered and glistened, moistening his toes, his fingers, making them slippery in his shoes, his hand shoes.

Across the universe that was the cavern, a chorus of “release, release, release” sang from nameless, faceless figures, wobbling and smiling each verse until it drummed, drilled itself into his stomach, charging it with nuclear power.

The staff with the crown of plants became a sabre, was always a sabre, curved, catching all of the light in the universe, carving a new atmosphere, heralding death. His stomach caught fire, burning a pathway up his throat to his temples, which stretched and pulled from his head. He smelled sweat, tasted bodies in the air, briny on the tongue. He saw a loom, the shadow of a

loom extend and wrap its arms around the bear, tilting its head, the mass of fur, the blackness screaming now, a cry too bright and too loud. A brightness so loud he had to sit his stomach down once, twice, thrice until fingers gripped his hands, fingers white and blue and threaded red.

The sabre rose, the cavern stilled itself into an immovable constellation, and he knew that all the whining, gnashing, clawing would never be enough for the mass to escape the galactic hole until it paid for it with its life. So when the sabre transformed life into oblivion in one swift move and the beady black reflecting his warped, diminutive heart became dull, drained, lifeless, no more, Maskwa released his stomach, upwards and outwards, turning himself out like a bouquet.

Maskwa chewed the bear meat in his mouth. Words to describe the taste surged in his brain: tender, savoury, coarse-grained. Some sweetness was tangled with the peppery, minty scent of basil.

“Feeling better?” Maggie asked. Apparently he had passed out after he’d vomited his shame and disgust on the cavern floor.

“What was in the capsule?”

She laughed. They were sitting by the fire roasting the cub that had been Released so ceremoniously hours before. More than half of the Releasing attendants had left. The ones who stayed were lounging here and there, embracing, sniffing, munching, or exchanging more rumours of deaths.

Maskwa had woken up in the last hour, confused, disoriented. Someone had moved him close to the edge of the cavern wall, which meant that someone had felt his stilts. One look from Maggie had told him that it had been her. Before he could’ve strategized another disappearance, she had brought some liquids for him and helped him closer to the fire to dry his sweat-soaked body. Something about the smell of burnt wood in her clothes and her motherly manner had eroded his will to flee. He’d listened to her talk while his stomach and mind settled.

Maggie had revealed that her real work was for the undercause seeking Childlike liberation. Under the guise of managing underdevelopments, a faction of people all over the country had begun to work together, before the Centennial, to find and free those incarcerated. She was not the only one who had infiltrated KJT; others who did had uncovered information revealing the corporation’s suppression of reports of deaths as early as three years ago.

“So it’s true. The curse *has* been lifted,” Maskwa had said. The phrase had been a wishful refrain in his head for so long that it’d sounded strange articulated and given veracity in the cave. He’d blamed his momentary queasiness for the lack of elation he was feeling. “Why deny it?”

“KJT has a lot to lose by its exposure. They’ve been profiting from the fetishization of people’s desires since the Age of Discovery.”

Maggie had explained that the undercause’s latest project was these Releasing events, where they could spread the news of the end of Everlast, recruit new supporters for the undercause, and expand the community, potentially reaching out to any hidden Childlikes, like Maskwa.

“I feel closer to my Lucy every day. She was abducted in 38 AA. She rose at age twelve.” Maggie had shown him a crumpled, old picture of her daughter, who had freckles and brown eyes. “She’s a lawyer. She likes to sing. We used to harmonize and act silly together.”

Maggie had risen with brown eyes too. In 116 AA, she’d traded her wealth and conscience for death in the Obitus. The foama had cooled her eyes to white-blue. She was only able to afford death for thirty-five years. Upon emerging from the O in 151 AA, she had realized what remained unknown or unspoken of by people: if you couldn’t afford to continue the simulation, then you’d wake and feel as if the simulation never happened. There would’ve been no respite; the nightmare continued, especially as she had awakened to find the world rampant with a second wave of anti-Childlike propaganda, this time as direct as it was acrid. Her own particular nightmare was knowing that her child had been alive, suffering, while she tried to forget and escape.

“So you joined the undercause?” Maskwa had asked.

“Better to try than do nothing,” she’d replied.

Like him, he’d thought. If the aroma of the roasted meat mixed with basil had not wafted towards them, if someone had not shoved a warm bowl in his hands, if Maggie had not encouraged him to take a bite, he would’ve turned himself out again.

“I think the capsule holds different things for different people,” Maggie said now, lowering a piece of meat into her mouth. “That’s the spiritual answer, anyway.”

Maskwa knew that his must’ve held shame, self-disgust, or cowardice. When he had gone to his parents’ home that day to find it as still as it was empty, he had discovered a message on the wall. Not a memory, not an anecdote, but a one-liner message from the guards. It said his

parents would be released if he gave himself up. Simple, fair, concise. His mind had decided what to do before his hands were even ready. He'd forced his hands to shatter a lamp, a picture frame, a chair against the wall until he could no longer see the writing. He had been the one disturbing the stillness of the house.

Because the warm weight of food in his stomach seemed to ground his body on the hearth and connect him to the possibility of a confession, because the fire crackled and snapped, leading by example, he found himself uncovering all his secrets to Maggie.

"It could've been a trap," she said.

The familiar excuse echoed in his head: a trap, a trap, a trap. It almost came out of his mouth again. But his head shook of its own accord and his voice twisted out the words, "What if it wasn't?"

"What if it was? You'll always wonder, but you'll never know."

A game of chance, of what-ifs. What if he had hidden in the cabinet instead? What if he had given himself up? It turned out that the longing for the people he had to lose for him to win was as tenacious as either life or pain.

"Are you okay, Maskwa?"

He hardly registered Maggie's hand on his shoulder; his fingers itched to write. Transferring his guilt to a material surface excised it from his body—or did it make it more real, more lasting? Once again he saw the image of his own reflection, warped and diminutive, in the eye of the cub. No more.

"M-my sister's name is Wina," he blurted out. "She rose at eight. When she was abducted in 37 AA, she had been a few days away from getting her first book published. It weaved together Cree mythologies, our childhood memories during the Age of Discovery, and what it meant to be judged and ruled by one's body in our political climate. She believed that it could change people's ideas or opinions. I'm not sure that it would've. It might've been too late."

Maggie nodded. "Can I tell you something?"

"Okay."

"My first time at an underden was a few months after dying in the O. There was a woman next to me at the bar who started telling me all of her regrets. She rose at ninety-one, so it was a long list. But I stayed and I listened. The next time I was there, the same thing happened, but with someone else. The man had been homeless for two hundred years and still believed that

God had smitten the whole world with suffering so that everyone could get a taste of his desolation. The third time there I was transfixed by every word of someone who had had his limbs stolen. He said he could always feel, remotely, the coarseness of a surface against his palm or the heat of someone's flesh between his thighs. He was living multiple lives simultaneously. Everyone was in the midst of some kind of survival, in a way."

"I don't understand."

"I had gone for the booths, but I got drunk on people's words instead. It was what they said that moved me to action. It was their stories that gave me strength to seek out the people behind the Silence, a gesture as bold as any story. As long as there are stories, I don't think it's ever too late."

"But stories harm as well as heal."

"True. I guess, however they're adapted or used, whether they're true or false, stories make us act, make us feel, make us..."

"What?"

"That's it." She shrugged. "They make us."

Maskwa thought of his need to hear Thiago's fanciful tales week after week. The hope they gave him was different from the kind of hope that bloomed more quietly from the Silence. Whereas the image of death in the eye of a deer signified everlasting release, the black screens of the Silence signified that he was not alone. The gesture had led Maggie to the undercause, and Maggie had led him here, to a cavern of heartbeats pumping for the same reason, where he could imagine an end to hiding, running, disguising.

Maskwa chuckled.

"What?"

"You weren't lying. One of us was released, and paid for it with its bountiful meat."

"One percent success rate."

It was strange that he felt neither duped nor disappointed by what happened. "Can I tell you more about Wina? And my parents?"

Maggie put down her bowl and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Of course." Then she whispered, "Only if it's interesting, though. Some stories can also be *very* tedious."

*

In 2 AA, Wina climbed onto the top of an armchair and sat at the edge. She wanted her older brother to catch her in case she fell.

“You won’t die if you do.”

“I’ll hurt my head.”

“But you won’t die even if you do!”

“So what’s the point of falling?”

“You make no sense.”

“Just catch me anyway.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, you will? Or okay, you won’t?”

“Why don’t you fall and see.”

END