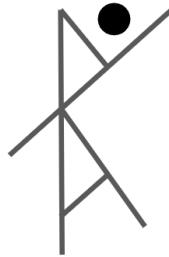


E.T. GUNNARSSON

Forgive Us



A BOOK BY BRAGI PRESS

Memory

8:46 PM, December 31, 2099

Silent, empty, and cruel. This was the nature of the wasteland.

The wasteland was a vast expanse of ruins, sand, and dying life beneath a polluted sky. This was the new world. It was created by humanity in 2079, and it was the world that they now had to brave to survive.

The downfall of the old world happened slowly. Humanity did not know it, but their cunning and technology became their undoing. In the great battle between Mother Nature and humanity's dominion, there was no winner.

The sound of a thunderous engine erupted throughout the eerie wasteland as a motorcycle sped along the ancient roads. Upon it was a survivor, alone and braving all odds. His name was Oliver, a thirty-six-year-old man who had grown up in the old world.

Oliver was a refugee from the wild and untamed lands near the Rocky Mountains. He fled East, guided by the hope that the East would be better, though he could feel in his gut that it wouldn't be. The only solace he had were stories from traveling caravans and survivors who spoke of growing settlements in the East.

Oliver was pursued. Not by man, not by beast, but by time. Starvation, dehydration, exposure, all of these were barely kept at bay by luck and experience. His current and most dangerous pursuer was the weather.

The pollution haze above blocked out the sun. As night approached, the world slowly became pitch black and freezing cold. The darkness parted before the headlights of his motorcycle, yet Oliver felt vulnerable.

Parallel to the road were telephone poles, some of which had tilted or completely fallen to the ground. The surrounding wasteland was desolate and empty, occupied by rocks and sand dunes.

Oliver wore an old-world smart suit that was on its warmest setting. He also wore a coat made out of animal hide over his smart suit. He had traded for it a while ago, and it had saved him from freezing to death many times already. Still, he shivered.

A gas mask covered his face. It was vital for survival in the wasteland; without it, the toxic air would corrode Oliver's lungs. It was old and worn, created in a factory in the old world. Still, it worked much better than the makeshift masks that most people wore. Finding filters for the gas mask was easy; they were everywhere.

There was a grim face beneath the intimidating gas mask. Oliver's brown eyes reflected a man whose past was full of pain and hardship. Through the visor, they seemed tired. The light that most people have in their eyes was dim in Oliver's. He also had deep curves between his brows and fatigued laugh lines. His skin was dark and covered in colored blotches, irritated and damaged from the wasteland air.

Oliver focused on his current task: finding shelter for the night. Such searches were often painful since he had to be picky about the buildings he used. Some were too unstable to hold up against the wasteland's extreme weather; some were too hard to get into, others occupied.

He paused at a fork in the road, gazing down each path. After a few seconds, Oliver turned the motorcycle right and sped off. The sand-covered asphalt in front of him rose into a hill. Oliver followed the road and arrived at a parking lot. In front of him was an old, wooden church that was leaning to one side. A few cars sat parked in the parking lot, their paint stripped by sandy winds and their frames rusted out by time. The church itself had shattered windows and holes in every wall. Oliver had to make do. It was too dangerous to search for better shelter with night fast approaching.

The thunderous engine cut out as Oliver parked and turned off his motorcycle. The world became silent again. Only faint wind could be heard in the absence of the engine's power. Oliver turned on a flashlight that was attached

to the side of the gas mask. Next, he grabbed his gun off the back of his motorcycle. Holding it with two hands, he turned toward the church. Oliver's boots met the ground with quiet clicks. These were combat boots, tough and made for smashing jaws.

He swallowed nervously. Though anxious, Oliver felt safe with his Railshot Rifle in hand. It was beautiful, a flawless combination of a railgun and a shotgun. He checked the top port of the gun before entering the church. The gun had plenty of scrap metal in it, ready to shred flesh and bone instantly. Next, he checked the round blue energy meter above the trigger. Oliver felt sure there was enough charge to keep him safe.

He moved toward the entrance. The flashlight pierced the darkness, allowing him to see the gnarled and twisted vines covering the church. They looked so dry that it seemed like they would crumble to dust if Oliver touched them. The twin doors that blocked off the entrance to the building posed no challenge. One was hanging weakly from its hinges, while the other had broken off and now laid on the floor.

Step by step, he entered the church, walking over a fallen door and looking up into the steeple. The lonely church bell still hung far up there. It was rusty, kept in place by a few frayed ropes, gently moving back and forth. Each time the wind gently moved it, Oliver heard a distant "ding" from the steeple.

The bell seemed so lonely. It was a reminder that this place was once the center of a community. Where were they? He assumed that they were all long gone, lost to the last twenty years.

The interior of the church was desolate and destroyed. The hard, wooden floor inside had a layer of sand and pebbles. Each time Oliver took a step, a quiet crunch followed.

There were broken benches and piles of rubble everywhere. Oliver wondered if any ghosts still sat on those benches. Were they at peace, or were they suffering? Many parts of the walls and roof had collapsed upon the altar and benches lining the church. Oliver looked around cautiously, taking in the looming structure.

Here was once a holy site that held peace, now defiled by the wasteland. To Oliver, all of it was just firewood.

The place was empty of any living presence. The only recent trace of human activity was a single piece of graffiti over the altar. Oliver examined the graffiti, stepping upon the altar to wipe some dust off of it.

“GOD HAS ABANDONED US!”

Oliver frowned and stepped down from the altar, turned around, and started to gather pieces of wood. The graffiti was unsettling. Oliver breathed uneasily as he moved around. Once he grabbed enough pieces, he formed them into a campfire at the center of the building. Oliver took off his backpack and laid it beside him. It was an old, rugged backpack that held most of his belongings. There were some holes in it, and its fabric was so worn down that the once blueish fibers were black and dirty. The backpack held a bedroll, food, gas mask filters, incredibly precious bottles of water, and bags of scrap metal.

He dug inside the backpack and pulled out a tesla lighter. It was old, given to him when he was younger. On one side was a company logo that was almost invisible from wear. He flipped the cap open and turned it on. Arcs of energy formed between two metal rods, the arcs humming and dancing.

Oliver lowered the lighter down to the campfire. First, there was smoke, then after a few moments, a small flame appeared. Oliver nurtured the flame until it engulfed the small campfire. Once it was going, he unstrapped the bedroll from the backpack and laid it out beneath a bench near the fire. Oliver felt happy as he basked in the warmth of the fire; his shivering slowly stopped as he turned off his flashlight and sat down.

The church creaked and moaned from the rough winds outside. The sounds made Oliver uneasy. He stared at the fire, his face wrinkling in thought as he contemplated the church. People still clung to Christianity in the new world, though their beliefs had changed over the past two decades.

Many were afraid of old churches. Some said that God had punished humanity for their sins. Sin was thought to be the reason why the world was like this now. Many believed that the Devil lived in old holy places like this church. Oliver didn't believe in all those stories, but the idea still crept him out. He imagined the evil, horned demon dancing in the shadows with the flickering flame, laughing at his ignorance and plotting to steal his soul.

While warming up from the heat of the campfire, Oliver gazed at the device

on his forearm. It was a Smartwrist, similar to a smartwatch from the early 21st century. He turned it on and checked the time. It was nine o'clock, three hours until midnight. New year, new century, same problems. People used to celebrate the new year, drink, and make merry. Not anymore.

With nothing else to do, Oliver decided to eat dinner. He grabbed the backpack and dug through it, procuring a vial with a full meal inside of it. Processed cubes of synthesized meat and vegetables composed the meal, food from the old world. He frowned bitterly under his mask as he looked at the vial. Oliver unscrewed the lid, quickly lifted his gas mask, emptied the vial, and put his mask back on in one swift movement. Instead of throwing away the vial, he put it back in his backpack for later use.

Oliver looked like a chipmunk with so much food in his mouth. Stuffing too much food into his mouth was a bad habit Oliver had; as a matter of fact, he used to be called "Chipmunk" by his family. The artificial food tasted like stale popcorn. Oliver's metal teeth chewed through the stuff easily. While he was eating, Oliver thought about his last visit to a dentist in the old world.

He remembered having his teeth pulled out to be replaced by 3D-printed metal teeth that wouldn't break or decay. The pain from the procedure was brutal and lasted a few days after the surgery. For many, it was once a rite of passage, marking the transition from teenager to adulthood. Everyone went through it, and, in Oliver's opinion, he was happy to have metal teeth. Suffering tooth decay from the inability to deal with his hygiene was the last thing Oliver wanted. They looked like real teeth anyway and didn't turn yellow.

Oliver's gaze shifted to the doorway of the church. Outside, there was the darkness of a polluted world. There was no grass, but there was still some life, mostly brown, dry, and barely alive. The winds were blowing fiercely as always. A blackish color tainted the air, and waves of dust sailed over the ground with the tremendous force of the wind.

A discontented exhale left his lips as he closed his eyes. Oliver tried to remember a time when the sky didn't constantly have a dark haze over it. Growing up in a cramped apartment, Oliver heard stories of when there were still green fields and blue skies. He believed the stories only because he had seen pictures that captured those forgotten times, though some doubts

lingered in his mind. No matter how hard he tried, he could never recall a bright, sunny day. All that came to mind was the sky darkening as time passed.

He struggled to remember a day when he didn't have to wear a gas mask to go outside. Oliver recalled that every indoor space had a sort of airlock before anyone could enter. He would walk in, have doors closed behind him, then have the room completely emptied of air and refilled with filtered, clean oxygen in a few seconds.

Oliver checked the time again. Two hours until the new year. He put more wood on the fire to push the biting cold away.

A pained moaning interrupted the peace as the sparks and flames engulfed the new fuel. Oliver let out a startled gasp, holding his breath and looking toward the sound. Far away outside the church, Oliver could hear footsteps approaching. Oliver barely made out the shapes of figures in the darkness outside, human shapes with extra arms, faces, and body parts fused into them. They were human mutants, the fiendish nightmares of the wasteland.

Oliver hastily stood up and snuffed out the fire in front of him with a boot before laying down flat. He reached out for his weapon and held it, his heart throbbing with dread. The noise and the moans were the worst part. The faint silhouette of their horrid, mutant forms was all Oliver could see in the darkness as memories of being chased, attacked, and more slowly crawled back and made his skin feel cold. They came close to the church, horribly close. Their footsteps and hoarse breathing filled the air.

Oliver heard bodies brush against the sides of the church as they walked past, their footsteps passing slowly and beginning to fade. Oliver carefully stood, proceeding to investigate the church. Had he been seen? Did they know he was here? Nothing. Nothing seemed to be hiding among the ruins, and he heard no more sounds outside. A relieved exhale left his lips as he returned to the fire and knelt beside it, trying to start it again.

Abruptly, footsteps quickly approached from behind. Oliver swung around with his gun ready as he heard them. At the same time, something his size crashed into him, causing him to see stars.

It knocked the gun out of his hands and sent Oliver to the ground. He landed with a pained grunt. In an instant, his knife was in his hands. Despite his

surprise, Oliver immediately retaliated against the figure he could barely make out.

The beast shrieked as he plunged the blade blindly into its body. Its arms thrashed, mouth gnashing at Oliver. He stabbed again, then again, the thing falling on top of him. Its shrieking grew higher in pitch, a rough hand striking Oliver in the head. The strike made him blink, stunning him but not stopping him from stabbing.

With a tremendous kick, Oliver threw the creature off and began stomping the monster into the floor. Every smack made it squirm less, its whole body growing still after a while. As he stopped, Oliver heard a rasping breath from it. He stomped again out of spite. Oliver wasn't going to give it mercy. He lifted his mask and spat on the dying creature. As he did, he caught a whiff of its rancid, sweaty smell.

Oliver listened to the creature as it occasionally let out pained squeals. He started the campfire again, the flame slowly growing from the church's dried, ancient planks. In the light, Oliver could make out the creature dying before him. It was a mutant, shaped like a human with a face fused partly into its shoulder. A useless limb extended from its belly, while a stunted leg dangled from the calf of its right leg. Stab wounds covered its body, blood seeping from each.

Oliver relished its suffering. He watched it trying to fight again, weakly twisting and squirming. It growled and gurgled, painfully bleeding out. After five minutes, it gave in and collapsed completely. Once the mutant was dead, Oliver remained wary of any more creatures. Fortunately, none came to avenge the mutant that he had just killed.

Oliver felt a stinging sensation on the side of the head where the mutant hit him. He rubbed it, causing his face to scrunch as he winced. It must've been another mark.

"That's going to bruise," he whispered to himself.

His skin was rough and covered in scars, damaged from the toxic air and the violent wasteland. Even if it did bruise, it wouldn't stand out.

He checked the time again — only forty minutes to midnight. The wind outside began to batter the creaking church. The structure's stability was

questionable, but there was no option to find shelter in another building. Oliver moved his bedroll under a bench and got inside of it, keeping his gun close at hand.

He played games on his Smartwrist to pass the time. Oliver felt a sinking sensation of emptiness when his thoughts dwelled on these games. In his youth, games and social media were a major part of his life. Oliver had followers, friends, and people that he still kept in touch with years after losing face-to-face communication. Sometimes, Oliver had met his old friends in virtual worlds. The thought caused his fingers to meet the port where the VR chip went, the object that connected the Smartwrist to the VR equipment he once had.

The world felt more desolate than it already was when these thoughts of loneliness came to him. He remembered virtual games too and how many hours of his life he lost to them. Gaming was a happy memory that made him smile when thinking about all the friends he had made, especially those from strange places. Now, survival was lonely and harsh. Whenever humans met one another, it was either shoot or run.

The last thirty-five minutes passed in the blink of an eye, and before Oliver knew it, the last minute before New Year arrived.

As the last minute dwindled, Oliver released a relaxed, drawn-out exhale. He counted it in his head, one Mississippi, two Mississippi. Oliver mumbled it under his breath until the last ten seconds. He turned off the Smartwrist and lifted both arms in the air with spread fingers.

“Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one... HAPPY NEW YEAR!” he whispered as loudly as he dared.

The year was 2100, and Oliver was still alive.

Guardian

7:32 AM, May 13, 2154

Rose sat with her toy rabbit in her arms, watching London from her seat on a decaying, rusty car frame. The rabbit was an old, worn, hole-filled toy with stuffing leaking out of it. Rose didn't mind its age, hugging the old toy and taking comfort in it. The rabbit once had a baby blue color but had since been worn down to a gray color. There were stitches in it, keeping its one remaining ear together.

In front of her was London, tending to a campfire and cooking breakfast. He was a rugged forty-five-year-old man with aching joints and tired eyes. Their breakfast was impaled above the fire on a makeshift spit, a skinned and gutted mutant animal. It resembled a squirrel, except it had rough skin with patchy fur. It was missing a tail, had a second deformed face on the right side of its head, and had a stub for a right hind leg. It wasn't a pretty animal, but it was protein once the fire purged the diseases it carried and seared its flesh to perfection.

"London, what is that?" she asked curiously, tilting her head.

London turned his gaze to her, pausing to think while letting out a "hmm" sound. Rose was around the age of nine and was curious about the world around her. She was especially interested in the old world. London always gave her books on the topic. He was also fond of stories describing what life was like seventy-five years ago, in a different age.

"Well, the books I've shown you might say that it's... a squirrel? Or a rabbit? Maybe a groundhog. I don't know, old-world books only talk about old-world

animals, Rosey,” he told her.

“It has to have a name!” she responded and crossed her arms.

“What would you call it?” London asked, raising a brow.

“Uh.... How about a Sqabbit?”

“Eh, I don’t like that name. I found it near the hole where it lived.”

“Oh! I know! Ground chiprabbit!”

London let out an amused chuckle and shook his head. He lifted the spit and examined the cooked rodent, its flesh slightly burnt and rendered completely safe by the fire. Casually he procured a knife and began slicing it, separating meat from the bone.

“I like Sqabbit better,” he said.

“Hey! You don’t like my names,” Rose pouted.

“I do! Better than what I can come up with. I just call it breakfast.”

London gave Rose a handful of sliced-up meat. She took off her gas mask and pulled down her patchy hoodie; her short, strawberry-blonde hair flowed freely as she ate. London taught Rose to eat quickly, to put the gas mask on when she needed to breathe, and then eat again. It was the only safe way to eat, and London did the same. His hair was barely visible since it was so closely shaven, though there were some apparent gray hairs. He made sure that they always had short hair, keeping Rose’s hair at her neck and typically tying it up.

Their meal was satisfying, though there wasn’t enough to fill them up. Hunger was a prominent, horrible feeling in the wasteland; a catch like this was a lucky and rare one. Rose despised synthesized food, so she was grateful for real food. Their bodies reflected the wasteland’s harsh conditions; both were a bit bony from years of going consistently without a full meal. Even though food was always a challenge, London did his best to make sure Rose ate more than he did to grow unhindered. Keeping her fed was one of his greatest worries.

Once finished, they secured their gas masks tightly and saved the leftovers, no matter what they were. London walked over to her and began to tie up her hair, making two small buns of hair that were hard to grab.

“What do we say, Rose?” London asked after the meal was over.

“Thank you,” she said a bit reluctantly.

London finished tying up her hair.

“I know, manners are hard,” he remarked.

“Why do we have manners?” she asked in a fussy voice.

“Well, Rose.... Manners are from the old world. It made you a better person to have manners, and people liked you more when you had them. People didn’t like it when you chewed with your mouth open or weren’t respectful when asking for things. It doesn’t change now, Rose. Always be respectful.” he explained.

“I think they’re stupid.”

“I don’t care,” London said, laughing at the reaction he saw under her mask.

Rose’s lips tightened in annoyance as she tried to come up with a response. London watched as her face turned a faint red color through her visor; her expression was the funniest part for him. She finally came up with a response and attempted to use it. Before she could, London cut her off.

“Come on, get your stuff. We should get moving,” he said, gesturing to her little backpack.

Rose grumbled and did as London ordered.

Between both of them, there were very few items to be found.

London wore clothing that covered him from head to toe, made from the hides of wasteland animals. Across it was scrap armor, created with the rusted metal of old-world items such as shopping carts. He also had a worn, old-world gas mask with a slightly cracked visor. On London’s back was a patchy backpack. It was full of food, water, general supplies, and had a bedroll on top. Some other things also hung off the backpack, like the frying pan he had just used. The most important things London had in the backpack were books.

He also had a pistol built from wood, metal, and old plasma pistol parts. It was sturdy for being made of so many different parts but still inferior to factory-made pistols. His main weapon was a bat, with a taped-up handle and plenty of mean bits on the shaft. There were screws, nails, and a metal chain wrapping its length in pure, punishing pain.

London put his backpack on and helped Rose gather her stuff before he snuffed out the campfire.

Rose wore clothing similar to London’s but tailored for a little girl like her,

such as an old-world hoodie and a gas mask. Finding gas masks for her size was hard, so she had a makeshift one, which was arguably in better shape than London's. Rose's little backpack carried fewer things than London's and also had some books.

Her weapon was an incredibly sharp knife made from some wood, tape, glue, and a piece of metal crafted into a blade. He had been trying to get her a gun, but it was difficult to find something in working condition.

"Hey, Rose, when we get somewhere safe, do you want to practice shooting again?" he asked.

"Yeah! Guns are a little scary, but they're fun!" she replied enthusiastically. London cracked a smile.

"What are the rules, though?" he asked.

"Oh... uh... it's not a toy!" she began to list, "Use it for defense and hunting. Don't waste ammo. Know where your finger and the trigger is. Keep it loaded, and keep it clean."

London nodded his approval and began to walk down the road with Rose at his side. She held the bunny in her hands and skipped beside him. Today, the wasteland winds blew softly with a delicate touch, the pollution haze giving way to some sunshine. Due to the haze, the world was always a sickly gray or brownish color; London hated it. He knew it wasn't always like that.

He didn't like how dreary and barren it was, how still and unmoving the world's decaying ruins were. London hated it because Rose had to grow up in this world. There were other survivors out in the wasteland, but many didn't accept people into their groups or were distrustful.

The asphalt road beneath their feet was cracked and sinking into the embrace of the earth. Occasionally, there was a weed that feebly clung to life through the cracks, small things that were frail. They also passed the ruins of collapsed buildings and occasional billboards too. As the pair followed the road, they passed the rusty shells of cars that used to run by themselves. Their engines were run by the thing that brought so much pollution and destruction to the planet.

"London?"

"Yes, Rosey?"

“You told me about cars, how they used to take people around. How did they move?” she asked, looking up at him.

The answer was simple, Ignium. London thought about all the books and experiences he’d had throughout his life with Ignium. He read that it was invented around the late forties and widely implemented around the early fifties. It was energy cheap as dirt, easy to make, more efficient than other energies, and easier to manipulate.

Ignium became widely used and replaced electricity, even opening up a whole new field of science focused on Ignium and its strange physics. Gradually, Ignium replaced everything in terms of power and energy and was used in everything and anything. Ignium soon appeared in cars, devices, weapons, houses, everywhere.

“Well, in the old world, there used to be this kind of energy called Ignium. Remember when I told you about electricity?” he began.

“Yeah, I do. It goes zap!” She said with a giggle.

“Well, Ignium was the ‘new’ electricity back around 2050, a hundred years ago.” he explained, “It was easy to make and easy to use! They used it in everything, like in cars. I use Ignium to power some of our things, like my pistol,” he told her.

“Cool!”

London frowned as he remembered its downside. It was toxic, a heavy pollutant much worse than most pollutants. Scientists discovered that in the early sixties, but massive corporations, governments, and more depended on Ignium. They covered up any research that painted Ignium in an evil light. By the time the results became clear of what Ignium could do to the planet, it was too late to stop using it.

“Don’t be too excited. Ignium is also toxic. But, with our gas masks, we’ll be okay.”

“Are you sure?” Rose asked.

“Yes.”

As London walked, he touched his gas mask lightly in contemplation. People had to wear gas masks in the late sixties, and they became a fashion. Research put into gas masks around this time made them exponentially better. It was the

reason he only had to replace his filters every week instead of every few hours. London recalled reading that the mid-seventies was when many buildings had air filtration units installed inside of them.

“I’ll teach you all about Ignium some time, Rose,” London said.

“Really?” she asked with an excited bounce.

“Yes, if we find someplace safe. Hopefully, an old-world bunker,” he said.

London didn’t tell her Ignium’s entire history yet, though he was nearly an expert with how much he knew. London recalled that from the forties to the seventies, civilization aimed its focus on innovation. With Ignium leading the way, technological progress exploded, causing the world to change quickly.

Tremendous progress in agricultural and medical technology made the population skyrocket. As the population grew, so did the consumption of resources and the usage of Ignium. Around the late sixties, resources began to run dry, and with it the stability of world peace. Meanwhile, throughout the sixties to the seventies, heavy pollution darkened the world, making it colder, and destroying it all at once. This destruction created the world that London and Rose now lived in.

With such massive populations and over-consumption, nations went to war for resources. These wars were bigger than any war that had ever been waged in history, a war that ended with the downfall of man. After all the nuclear, bio, genetic, and chemical warfare, most world governments fell apart. Law and society followed, leaving the remainder of the population to collapse beneath hunger, sickness, and anarchy. In the end, the remains of man and a toxic world were all that was left. This was the world London grew up in, and this was the world Rose was growing up in.

London readjusted his backpack as they passed the ancient remains of an automobile power station. Rose looked over at it, taking it all in for a moment. The main building resembled an ancient gas station, though it was collapsed and covered in sand. The pumps were outside, but instead of gasoline or electricity, they pumped out Ignium.

“What do you think a bunker would be like, London?” Rose asked.

“Well, maybe there’s a bunker deep underground in the East. People went to bunkers in the old world to survive. There’s probably food, water, clean air,

hot showers, everything. Maybe there would be books, too?” he explained.

“I’d like that; what do you think a shower is like?” Rose asked with a thin smile under her mask.

“I don’t know... I know it’d be warm. Maybe it’s relaxing. Wet too.”

Rose giggled at his response.

The most London ever had regarding a warm, relaxing bath was a tub of cold water a long time ago, and he could scarcely grasp it in his mind. People in the old world always had hot water, and London was envious.

The pair continued wandering along the road. London knew his way around the world, using methods like determining the sun’s position to know which direction he was going. They always headed to the East. Long ago, he read about old-world bunkers and was told of their wonders by someone, and it became his life’s goal to go to one. When Rose came into his life, that goal intensified with the intent of protecting her.

London contemplated the fact that Rose had never had a place to stay and call home. His expression turned to a frown, and his doubt blossomed. Could he find an old-world bunker? Could he protect Rose? Could London teach her to survive? Could he even get them to an old-world bunker? These thoughts turned London sour when they came. He shook his head as if he could shake them from his mind.

The further they walked, the more buildings there were. London didn’t like the ruins of ancient man. Dark memories were all that he had of them, and the further they ambled, the more cautious he grew.

“Look! Do you think that place has things we can take?” Rose remarked, pointing at a building.

London looked over to the building Rose pointed over to, another automobile power station. This one still stood, though heavily worn down. Graffiti covered it wall to wall. Surrounding it was a heavy chain link fence with barb wire running the whole perimeter. London saw that the Ignium chargers were gone. Wooden planks covered each door and window, though some ropes led to the roof and the chance of an easy entrance.

“Maybe, do you want to check it out?”

“Yeah!” Rose said, jumping a bit.

FORGIVE US

“All right. Let’s be careful; remember the rules of a new place.” London said.

Bread

11:32 AM, April 13, 2185

Thirty-one years later, Simon ran his fingers through the hydroponically grown potato plant's green leaves, admiring it before moving on. His face was expressionless. There was a focused air about him as he walked down the greenhouse of the Agricultural Sector.

As he did, he looked up through the glass of the greenhouse's roof, gazing past the UV lights lining the framing. He had a touch of a smile, a nostalgic feeling holding him as he looked up. There was the universe and the stars. They were beautiful, all that could be seen through the glass as the greenhouse rotated. He adored all of it, even though he had come here to fix the lights.

He was born and raised on a great space station called the Arcadis Station, which currently was the home of around two thousand people. The space station itself was a gigantic construction by the United States government back in 2077, launched in 2078 into space, bringing hundreds of people on board. These people were called the Raptured, the few saved from a dying earth. The space station used what many other Raptured stations used: centrifugal force to produce artificial gravity. The Agricultural Sector used this gravity to its advantage, specifically built where the gravity was the most effective.

Sometimes, Simon stopped to fix or replace a UV bulb. Strolling to the end of the last row, he turned around with a satisfied smile. Simon hated his position on the space station; most of the Workers did. It didn't matter though, a fine job was a fine job, and that was his solace. Simon breathed in the filtered, recycled air with a relaxed expression.

Having finished his tasks early before the 1200 hours lunch call, Simon walked to the middle of the greenhouse and gazed out into space. With the constant rotation of the Arcadis, one never ran out of views. He stood there and contemplated freedom, admiring the stars as the station rotated.

After a few minutes of thought, Simon's expression soured, his nose wrinkling and smile fading as he caught a glimpse of an obscene sight. Earth, the damned home planet. He remembered when he was younger and still had to attend the Education Sector. Like every generation passing through the Education Sector, Simon and his classmates were taught of a time when Earth was green and blue. They had proof through pictures; his friends had doubts that they were even real.

Seeing Earth now filled him with bitter hatred for the ancestors who destroyed Earth. He looked across what used to be blue seas, green landscapes, and a sky full of clouds. Instead, what he saw was the eternal haze of pollution. It loomed over the planet, dark and sinister. Occasionally, his eyes saw strangled seas and barren landscapes through the haze. That was enough stargazing for now.

Simon walked to the door and opened it. Once outside, he proceeded throughout the complex hallways of the Agricultural System. It was a maze of many halls. On either side, there were greenhouses, each blocked with ID access doors. While he waited for the lunch call, Simon greeted his fellow workers as they passed by him.

It wasn't too long until an automated message rang out across speakers all around the space station. They were controlled by the station's AI named "Genetrix." The Workers somewhat relied on her for scheduling but did come up with mocking nicknames for her like "Naggy" based on her repetitive commands.

"All Workers report to the Nutritional Sector for lunch." the feminine robotic voice said.

In response, a wave of the entire Worker population began traveling to the Nutritional Sector. Simon joined the masses, falling in with the flock. Everyone knew most of the space station like the back of their hand and navigated the complex maze work with ease. They formed lines as they surged to lunch,

behaving almost like ants in the way they efficiently moved.

The Nutritional Sector was a massive place that expanded over the many years the station had spent in space. There were dozens of mess halls split between the populace. The Workers had the most mess halls since they were most of the population.

Simon followed the rest as he entered mess hall four and shuffled down the line toward the food stations. At each station, people scanned their Individual Chips. Once registered, they received a plate, food, and water, and were sent along to a table.

Everyone had an Individual Chip. It was a small chip that acted as a sort of registration for the population of the Arcadis. It was placed in the right forearm and used for many purposes on the ship. Everyone had a number, and it was almost amazing that the Workers didn't address each other by assigned numbers instead of their real names.

The food stations were placed along one wall of each mess hall and provided all the nutrition that the population required. After waiting in line, Simon needed only a moment to receive his portion. A plate dropped down a chute and softly landed in his hands; a machine immediately gave him food and water following the biological statistics provided by his Individual Chip.

It was all boring, artificial food portioned to a precise amount; the water was purified water, recycled from everywhere in the station.

Overseeing all the lines were Peacekeepers. They wore gray, smooth armor along their entire bodies and had full visor helmets. In their hands were tesla batons. Simon had never been in trouble enough to be hit by one, but he certainly feared them. Most Peacekeepers were bored and paid little mind to people like Simon as they watched for troublemakers to beat bloody.

After leaving the line, Simon took a moment to examine all the seats open for selection. A table near one of the gigantic windows looking out to the stars was his usual table. The table was empty, so he was alone as he approached it and sat down.

Once he sat, his gaze became filled with a full view of space. With a content exhale, Simon began to pick at his food. All the food on the station was much like Earth food before the Raptured left.

On Earth, plants were grown in incredibly efficient greenhouse skyscrapers, while the meat was grown in meat farms. All the foods were then taken to factories to be broken down and synthesized into artificial food. Artificial food was healthy. With every aspect of it subject to control, each bite became a mouthful of nutrition and vitamins. The only unhealthy part was the preservatives used to make food last forever, but that wasn't something the people on the space station had to worry about.

The proper amount of food was always created to sustain the population. There was, of course, an extra supply of emergency food. The downside of artificial food for Simon was that it was dull and lacked any natural feeling. He mechanically chewed as he ate. With no smell and barely any taste, his food was just cubes of "meat" and "vegetables." If he was lucky, he might've found some "fruit."

Since the food was so boring, Simon's mind turned to his thoughts. Thoughts gave way to imagination. Simon ogled the view with an entranced stare. Space was his greatest fascination, and he always wished that he was on a colonist ship going out into the galaxy to find new homes for humanity instead of here.

The Arcadis Station itself was one of many vessels tasked with waiting for a time when they could clean Earth and make it habitable again. At twenty-four, Simon was part of the fourth generation born on the Arcadis. To him, returning to Earth seemed like wishful thinking. The Developers, the station's brains, still said that the pollution was the same as it was a hundred years ago when the station took off. This knowledge turned any idea of return into hopeless dreams.

"Hey, Simon!"

The words startled Simon as his friend, Albert, threw himself onto the bench beside Simon. Albert grew up with Simon and was his lifelong friend, even attending the same classes and often the same jobs. Albert looked at Simon with a smile, the kind Simon could only attribute to being his.

"Hey, Albert," Simon said after swallowing his food.

"Are you going to the Thrash Games tonight?" Albert asked, happily digging into his food.

“I was thinking about it. I’m on the fence, might just go to my quarters instead,” Simon replied.

“Don’t be like that, man!” Albert said and tapped his friend’s shoulder with a fist, “It’ll be fun. I heard they might serve alcohol.”

“Alcohol is crap here, Albert.” Simon groaned and rolled his eyes.

Simon was right; alcohol was terrible on the station. So rarely was alcohol served that Simon doubted that they would serve it at the Thrash Games tonight. He never drank it anyway. It was a waste of time in his eyes, and most of the alcohol came from the station’s black market. No one could really trust that market.

“Bah, you’re no fun,” Albert said, dismissively waving his hand.

“I know,” Simon replied with an amused smile.

They paused for a moment to eat.

“You ever gonna sign yourself up for the Population Maintenance Program?” Albert asked with a smug half-smile.

“No, why?” Simon replied.

“Aw, c’mon. The Developers would love you. You’re the perfect example of a Worker,” Albert told him.

“We’re all genetically modified, Albert. All of us are ‘perfect’ examples,” Simon said, rolling his eyes.

Everyone on the ship, including the trio, was genetically modified from gestation. Every person was grown in a lab through in vitro fertilization. Because of this, none of them had genetic diseases or very few genetic-related issues. They were also modified to function better, though there was a regulation for the Developers to keep true to the human form.

“It would be fun. I hear all sorts of rumors about it,” Albert said.

“Rumors are not facts,” Simon replied, slapping the table with his palm.

Before they could carry on, another person joined them at the table. It was Thaddeus. He was massive compared to most people, a muscular powerhouse often tasked with heavy labor. He was a friendly man, and as soon as Simon met him, they connected.

“Hello, guys!” Thaddeus said, his voice powerful and deep.

“Hey, Thaddeus, anything new?” Simon asked.

“No, just the normal heavy work,” he replied.

“Are you gonna watch the Thrash Game tonight?” Albert asked.

“Yeah, are you guys?” Thaddeus said.

“I am. Simon’s still on the fence.”

“You should go, Simon. It’ll be fun,” Thaddeus stated.

“Well, sure. If you’re going, I’m in.” Simon told them.

They began eating together, Simon daydreaming while Thaddeus and Albert indulged in rumors. Rumors were a part of the Worker class’s culture; it was often that you could find a quiet conversation regarding rumors between two Workers during their off times. Simon didn’t care for rumors. Most were untrue or too risky to talk about.

The conversation became hushed as Albert lowered his head and spoke.

“Did you hear that the Leaders eat real food?” Albert told Thaddeus.

“Really? Not like this synthesized shit? Like real food?” Thaddeus asked with slight amazement.

“Yeah, the three Workers that spoke about it got sent to the ‘Deck.’” Albert whispered.

The Deck. The harsh prison of the Arcadis. It was formally called the Behavioral Mending Sector, which was a fancy name for it given to it by the Leaders. It was a prison area attached to the ship where the artificial gravity didn’t work. There, no gravity was torture. Each cell was similar to solitary confinement. Prisoners seldom were given food and water, and there were also no toilets or showers.

Being sent to the Deck was equivalent to a death sentence. Being sent there the first time came with the removal of identity and proof of existence. The second time meant getting shot out into space. Law was strict in a place like this, and for good reason. Even so, most of the Workers still thought the punishments were too harsh.

“Bullshit! The Leaders eat what we eat, and you know it.” Simon asserted.

“Keep your voice down!” Albert hissed.

“Want to get us sent to the Deck?” Thaddeus asked.

“Bah, bullshit. Almost as dumb as last week’s rumor about Earth being habitable again. You can see the whole thing outside the window for crying

out loud.” Simon said with a reluctantly low voice.

“You like to eat what they tell you,” Albert stated.

“I don’t eat nonsense.” Simon retorted.

“Who knows, Simon, lies are easy to swallow,” Thaddeus told him.

Simon snorted.

“Yeah, that’s why we talk about rumors day and night,” he said.

They paused for a moment, then Simon continued.

“Why can’t we talk about anything interesting? Like the universe, Earth’s history, the colony ships going out and exploring?” he asked both of them.

“He’s right. Why don’t we?” Thaddeus followed.

“Never really put thought into it,” Albert said with a shrug.

Before they could carry on, the commanding, robotic voice of Genetrix echoed throughout the station.

“All Workers report to the appropriate Tasking Stations for their assignments,” she said.

“Well, that was lunch. See you guys at the game tonight.” Thaddeus said, standing up and walking away.

“See ya. Simon! Ay, Thaddeus, wait up!”

Simon waved to them before he stood up. He had eaten his fill of food, a perfect portion as usual. He put his dishes away in a machine that zipped them away for cleaning and reuse, afterward going to a Tasking Station. The Tasking Stations were little consoles specifically located where the Workers resided, automatic machines that would scan the Individual Chip and assign a task for that person.

He joined the lines flocking to the Tasking Stations, waiting patiently. As soon as Simon got to one, he scanned his forearm and waited for a moment. The machine lit up and assigned a task.

“Worker 4221, Oxygen Maintenance Sector, filter cleaning,” it told him.