

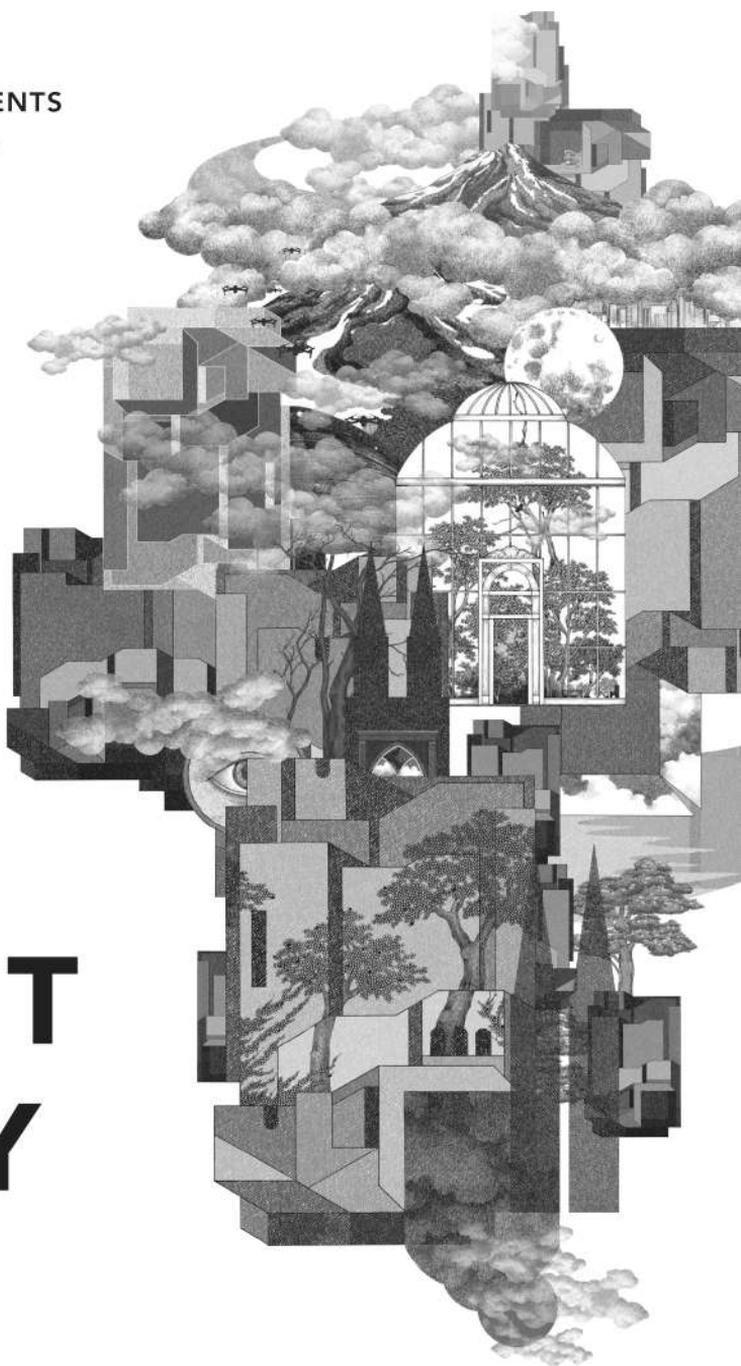
FEATURING  
REAL PEOPLE & EVENTS  
FROM THE SOLANA  
BLOCKCHAIN

NOW AN  
NFT COLLECTION  
OG ATADIANS

"A masterpiece  
I enjoy reading before  
I upload myself."

HGE

# THE LOST CITY OF ATADIA



PUPPET  
REALADORKABLE  
MANDY M





*A Novel*

**THE  
LOST CITY  
OF  
ATADIA**

**PUPPET  
REALADORKABLE  
MANDY M**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
BIRDGERHL



© *Atadia*

This translated novel is part of a much larger, collective effort to reinvent the credit system and commerce analytics on Web 3.0 and beyond.

Trust and Reputation. Profiling Data. Credit Scores. Consumer Preferences.

Familiar concepts IRL but nascent within the new internet, and this is where Atadia comes in.

Atadia began as a book, blossomed into pencil-drawn NFTs, and has since evolved into a solid community. As a company powered by data science and crowd-sourced knowledge, we build user profile data infrastructure of the new era of the internet.

*www.atadia.io*







*“An adventure through the technology at our door to understand freedom, and how urgent it is to build a good Atadia.”*

Forrest Galt

*“The Lost City of Atadia serves as a powerful warning of when politicians realize that algorithms control the world and can reprogram people in a subtle way.”*

RaviMonke

*“A masterpiece I enjoy reading before I upload myself.”*

HGE

*“A thoughtful and beautifully written story that uses a dystopian future soaked in the brine of too much technology as a perfect counterpoint to express that what really matters is each other.”*

Mercury Prime

*“Data is a powerful tool and the story of Atadia shows the potential dangers of centralizing this vast information. A heartwarming story that brings in cultural references from our decentralized ecosystem. Entertaining, thoughtful, and engaging!”*

Primitive



# FROM THE AUTHORS

Atadia is more than just a book.

Depending on when you're reading this, Atadia could be a whitepaper. It could be a community of tech evangelists, a decentralized startup, or even a listed company.

Give it some time and Atadia might just become its own city state. Who knows.

Originally written in Thai, *The Lost City of Atadia* is my first published novel and it was accompanied with 450+ pages of nonfiction content on how data science can go right or wrong on humanity.

This English edition includes more degen culture as well as our beloved frens and long-term holders.





# PROLOGUE

It is the year 2054. Atadia is a society built around data-driven algorithms that promise to streamline humanity and bring prosperity to the masses. However, this dream quickly evaporated following the rise of popular autocrat Detha, who championed extreme centralization, turned the city's algorithms against its citizens and carved the ex-utopia into a surveillance state. In Detha's Atadia, algorithms followed people's every move, listened in on their private conversations, and persecuted protestors with devastating efficiency.

The Lost City of Atadia is the tale of popular dissent and grassroots resistance to centralized tyranny—the story of a group called “The Protectors,” whose members fought to free Atadia from oppression and renegotiate humanity's relationship with technology on humanity's own terms.



# CHAPTER 1

## ESCAPE



*“She couldn’t remember seeing such a place,  
but she knew she’d been here before.”*

### **SANDY**

**S**andy glanced uneasily at the red light on the car dashboard, which furiously blinked back at her while she prayed her dark web-sourced instructions worked. According to a white hat cross-chain traveler who built the dApp for her, the light should have turned green by now, but if it did not within the count of three, she would need to run.

Three.

Two.

One.

The light became bright green and Sandy’s stiffened hands, which had gripped the dashboard for dear life, trembled a little less as the car took off. Her Solana Saga showed a destination, but the car swerved into a narrow alley that barely scraped the sides of her driverless vehicle. It better have been a shortcut. She slumped back in her seat, longing for the



old days when people could still go to places without software watching over them.

Sandy knew she was on borrowed time. The dApp had bought her about half an hour to take the car wherever she pleased before surveillance drones would put a stop to her escape plan. She relaxed as the car cruised smoothly through the path, steeling her nerves before the tough part of her journey would begin.

A putrid stench seeped into the cabin and she scanned her surroundings, realizing that this was unlike any alley she had encountered before in Atadia. Sandy had never been on this road until now. It was

cloaked in deafening silence, nestled between two skyscrapers whose shadows plunged the space into darkness. It was a rare sight for her: even at night, the Atadian skyline was never truly dark. Like guardian spirits, holographic animals would dance in the night and illuminate the sky itself. Well, almost every inch of it. Sandy didn't know if she should be worried or relieved that she could no longer see the monkeys, apes, foxes, and raccoons that graced the cityscape.

“Stop, stop the car!” she yelled, looking up just in time to notice her vehicle hurtling towards a mother and child in the middle of the road. The hairs on her skin were raised and Sandy could feel her heart pounding out of her chest. The smell of burnt tires filled her nostrils as the car came to a screeching halt.

The car should have stopped on its own, but the dApp had overridden the safety protocols. The headlights illuminated the child's face, frozen with fear. He was maybe five or six years old, just like her brother Pun. She hoped she had done the right thing by leaving him at home with her parents. She couldn't bring him with her and risk his life right now—she could only hope that he knew that this was for his future as well. Sandy clutched her pendant tightly in her hand. It was one half of a glass shard, the other belonging to her sibling. She forced herself to put down the small remaining connection with her brother and tamed her thoughts with the conviction that they would soon be reunited.

“What the hell?” the woman raised a fist, shouting in protest as the boy burst into tears. “This street's for pedestrians only. I'm reporting your car!”

Sandy barked at her car to leave and it accelerated, narrowly missing the woman again. The child's cry of fear still filled her ears and she hoped this near-miss would be the last. Suddenly, a mysterious bright red cybernetic motorbike appeared out of nowhere, drifting into a stop on a narrow lane right next to Sandy's car.

“Hop on.” She recognized that voice. It was the Traveler who

introduced her to this ride-share dApp. With one cursory glance, she swiped her Saga from the dock, shutting down the dApp that had brought her this far, and watched the car disappear into the distance as she joined the Traveler on a much cooler ride.

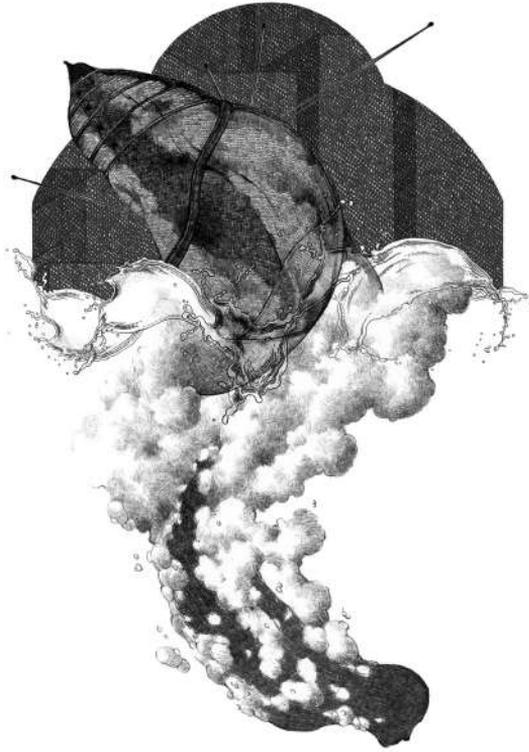
Thankfully, the rest of the commute ran through the decommissioned ring road that encircled the city. Her father had mentioned that it would be turned into some sort of mixed-use development for low-income families, complete with parks, malls, and apartments. A new city built to contain those the government deemed unworthy of the city center.

The road finally brought her to the Oasis, her true destination, early. Before she could properly thank the Traveler, he was already gone, leaving her with just a short DM: “Got some 1/1’s to sweep for my son Tim. Good luck tonight.”

Sandy looked around. Under the cover of darkness, the Moon as the sole source of light, the lake by Atadia’s oldest public park seemed as foreboding as the gates of hell. But just like Dante had Virgil as his guide, a stone etching on her left was exactly where the information had told her it would be.

“Bonk!” she mumbled, stepping gingerly into the lake in an expensive new outfit she had prepared to commemorate her trip. Her mind had been too preoccupied with escape to anticipate the nearly-frozen water, with its little icicles that pierced her skin like a thousand tiny daggers. Amidst the void, the only sounds came from her chattering teeth and her rubbing her numb hands. She fumbled around for the giant kelp she was told to look for. When she finally got a solid grip on it, she dove. As her body plummeted into the depths below, Sandy couldn’t help but feel like she had done this before.

After what felt like an eternity of descending into the water in complete blindness, Sandy’s frigid surroundings turned warm and small vines began to envelop her, safeguarding her from harm. She opened her eyes without thinking and realized that the vine was pulling her up instead



of down. The water became a brilliant turquoise and sunlight bathed her skin. She emerged, gasping for air at the mouth of a pool inside a cavern.

Sandy clawed her way ashore, wringing her dress to get it as dry as she could. She staggered into the light and the sounds around her grew louder the closer she got to it. A flame's crackle, the luscious aroma of freshly picked herbs, and a background chatter.

There were people here.

## PUN

There were many things Pun couldn't understand lately. He didn't know why his father moved out of the family home. Nor did he know why he now only got to see his father once a week. He certainly didn't know why his parents were in a shouting match at the dinner table instead of looking for his sister.

No doubt, Sandy wasn't coming back tonight. The stone around his neck remained chilly no matter how much he fiddled with it, twirling it between his fingers in an alternating pattern before lazily letting it come to rest in his palm. When he gazed back up, his parents seemed to regain their composure somewhat.

"Do you agree with the way we're fractionalizing our assets?" his mother Fah asked, an uncertain edge lining her voice.

"I'm fine with whatever," his father Meka muttered back with averted eyes, twiddling the ring in his finger as though it were a fidget toy, suddenly finding the floor tiling extremely interesting.

"What about the custody of the children? How the hell are you happy with self-custody in the current draft?"

"We have to follow the damn smart contract anyway—what do my feelings have to do with it?" he replied, a little more forcefully this time. "I still don't know why you're divorcing and demanding primary custody. You can't be serious. Is it the new zero royalty on asset sale thing that upset you so much? Or is this really about the stupid social credit score? You'd rather you and the kids rank higher because the system said they would if you had primary custody?"

The words seemed to phase through Pun's head—he couldn't understand much of what was said, but it was clear his father was angry. Whatever it was about, he knew his father wouldn't move back in any time soon.

"You're mad," Meka grumbled. "The kids need both their parents!"

How could you think the stupid score would make their lives better than being with us both? With their father?"

"You mean the stupid score that stupid people like you and me built and used to our advantage?" Fah snapped.

They were fast approaching the point of no return. Their goodwill had nearly run out. They had known each other for far too well and too long. They knew how to hit where it hurt the most. A few more ill-chosen words and their bond would be irrevocably broken.

Pun couldn't follow his parents' conversation, but he was old enough to want to do something—no, anything to stop the complete destruction.

"Can you guys play with me?" he said, holding up his Claynosaurz plushies as if they had the power to separate his parents from each other.

"I need you both to help me with this. Now?"

## **SANDY**

Sandy turned again before being met with a grand hall as large as her eyes could see. People shuffled in and out of her sight, some eating, some reading, all living their own lives in this unseen world. A boy was wheeled into the hall on a stretcher, followed by a flood of more people on old-fashioned hospital beds. They appeared healthy and conscious, so she couldn't fathom why they would need medical care at all.

The space was vast enough to consume an entire town, with tunnels and passages sprouting in every direction like a tree's root system. A large portrait of a red monke wearing a builder hat hung majestically on top of the structure. The whole place somewhat reminded her of an ant colony with the secret pathways and convoluted tunnels. Sandy shed her hooded robe, which had clung to her skin quite uncomfortably, and took a better look at one of the small passageways. She couldn't quite tell how

far it went, but it seemed impossibly deep and could probably conceal an entire army.

A lonely tear formed at the corner of her right eye, meandering her pale features before dripping gently off her chin. She had found the Protectors, a resistance force only whispered between the mouths of the bravest souls of Atadia. The OGs of the OGs. She first learned about them from a tale told by an extremely fit Dutch who ran a small library near the Grand Archive. Sandy hoped she was right.

She walked further into the space, delighted to see a market square underground and finding the hot food and little trinkets endlessly fascinating. She knew how to navigate this square. She knew which shop she would find if she turned a little bit to the left. She couldn't remember seeing such a place, but she knew she'd been here before.

"Welcome back, Sandy," a raspy voice called out to her.

## **MEKA**

The dinner was a disaster. It was supposed to be a chance for the whole family to get together, to celebrate Sandy becoming an adult. He knew his eldest child was not content with her limited rights as a child, but she of all people should understand that the city's algorithm knew more than anyone could hope to. Sandy had been working since she was thirteen, but so had everyone. She's always complained that she didn't even get a chance to vote in an election or a referendum, but how could a city leave its fate in the hands of children who didn't know any better? He kept telling his daughter to be patient. She just needed to turn eighteen before she could cast her vote and do as she wished.

"Am I a joke to you?" she'd asked, earlier that evening. "We both know that I'm only a tier one adult. My vote counts for half of yours. Your previous algorithms define people my age as having limited capability. The only thing I'm legally allowed to do now that I'm eighteen

is to drink myself into oblivion, which sounds like a great idea right now.”

With that, she got up, kissed her brother Pun goodbye and left without another word.

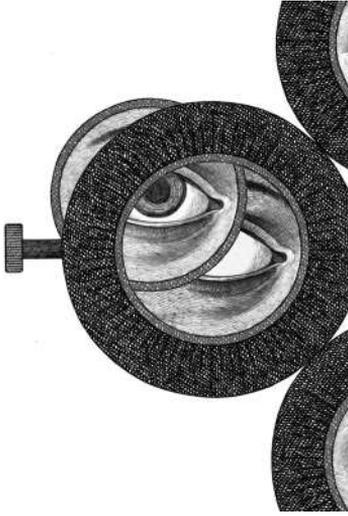
In the past year, Meka had often wondered what went wrong. Whenever he and his wife met gazes, uncomfortable silence filled the void between words where romantic affection used to be. They had once prided their relationship as a testament to free will. Unlike most Atadians, Fah and Meka hadn't met on a dating app. Their relationship hadn't been calculated by an algorithm that spat out compatibility matrices nor predictions of genius offspring. In a word, they were unusual. He'd always thought he made the right choice, marrying for love. Lately, though, he was not so sure.

A simple dinner to celebrate Sandy's birthday was over before it even began. Sandy stormed out before her mother even set foot in the door. Fah blamed him for it and started talking about their custody arrangement. Neither of them saw the young boy watching the whole thing unfold from his seat. In the blink of an eye, Meka too left his family home behind.

In Tensor, the fastest market in Atadia, Meka tapped his foot impatiently within his shoes as he stood in line for a self check-out machine on his way to a new apartment an algorithm had found for him. As usual, when it was his turn, a hologram appeared.

“The Central Bank of Atadia would like to take a survey on the weed-free Atadia policy. Do you agree that non-smokers should receive 5.5% credit back for every transaction? The program is available for anyone who has not purchased weed in one month.” Meka felt the half-full pack of “psychedelic joints” back from his “Puff Puff” days in his pocket. He hurriedly pressed “no” on the floating screen.

“Thank you for your input. Your participation will help improve our monetary policy. The survey result will be out by midnight tonight. Choose The Central Bank of Atadia: your true partner for all your financial needs and a better society.”



Meka didn't think much before he cast his vote. He considered himself a regular middle-class citizen in this city. His voice didn't carry as much weight as the ruling class or the whales scattered all over the city.

"Bullshit," a young man with a shaved head next to him muttered, slipping money directly into the unregistered wallet of another person Meka could only guess was an unregistered cashier. Meka noticed that they both angled their bodies in a way

that would block the store camera from picking up on the trade of weed, froot juice, and gum, but it was none of his business. He turned back to his own purchase but was rudely interrupted by another message. "Your Magic Banana Milk and water have been paid, but you reached your junk food quota yesterday and we can't authorize a sale on your Jagoe's cheeseburger or the balloon-shaped bubblegum. Would you like a veggie burger or seaweed chips instead? Best wishes from the Central Bank of Atadia, your true partner for all your financial needs and—"

"I'll take the bell pepper slices," Meka replied, re-interrupting the machine. Rumor has it that bell peppers have the highest health score in convenience stores, and he hoped the BoomerDAO folks were right. He salivated at the thought of the burger he'd get tomorrow.

"Would you also like to trade in your lottery for shares in HGE Industries, the conglomerate that produced almost everything in and outside of this purchase? If you trade it today, you can enter into a Famous raffle for a chance to go on a HGE factory tour. We've heard the floors are especially clean there. And yes...this just came in...apparently you are also eligible for a free financial management course for single

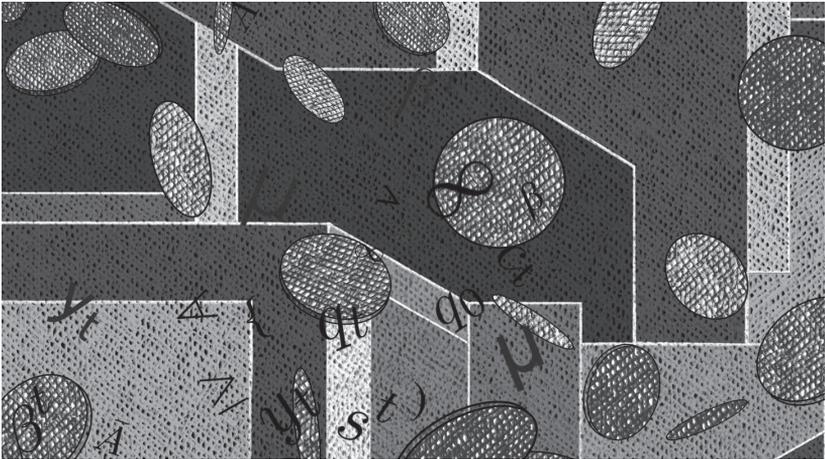
men,” the speaker continued while a small robot bagged Meka’s grocery.

“Single men?...quick mfer...” he said to himself. Soon, he wouldn’t be able to see himself as a husband and a family man anymore, especially now that Atadia had classified him as something else.

The system was oblivious to his own turmoil. The screen continued its meaningless messages cheerfully. “Thank you for visiting our store today. Your purchase has improved Atadia’s GDP by 0.000003 percent. Because you chose to buy from a sustainable producer today, you’ve received a 0.21 \$ATA social discount.”

Meka ignored the rest of the message and walked up to a group of teenagers in the long-abandoned parking lot. He knew what he was here for. Clearly, the flock of vultures in human clothing had been circling the area all evening, waiting for a perfect prey like him. It was a strange sight, seeing this many young people at once. There have been reports of missing teenagers in Atadia as of late. Thousands of them had seemingly vanished overnight.

“Put them in the cart, send us the \$ATA and get out of here,” the same young man with the shaved head from the till said nodding to an old shopping trolley. Meka dutifully put the milk and peppers into the



cart, transferred the unfamiliar currency to the man, and left the alley, content with a cheeseburger in his hand.

“Why did you let him walk away? We could’ve gotten much more out of him,” a small teenage girl in a rag of a dress asked. Her hand was busy twirling a pocket knife like a snake between her fingers.

The young man was unimpressed. “Did you not see his WoW-R2 ring? And that eclectic Branche cloak? We couldn’t get away with murder when he’s so well connected.” He snatched her pocket knife and started sharpening the blade on a leviathan robot. “Besides, we’re only a few \$ATA away from leaving this hell hole.” He reached his arm behind his shoulder and threw the knife straight onto the back of the neck of a Salaniman in a cheap suit who was just leaving with his own trade.

The man fell down, but the system continued on.

A hologram popped up in his place, confirming his current assets and savings.

“There we go, 120 was his final \$ATA...add another 2158 \$ATA from his burner. What’s with all these degen mints from the Jabur era?” He shook his head, turning to the rest of his group. “This right here is our ideal target. Cheap clothes, sweaty back, weak hands, a bit of belly fat and frayed nerves. This man won’t have any sophisticated holograms looking for him. It’s almost too easy to steal from him.”

As he spoke, a few other people pried the victim’s mouth open and stuffed his mouth with digital vines. The leviathan pet robot blinked a few times before opening its eyes and slithering down the vines into the dead man’s mouth. Within seconds, all his personal data and tokens were completely drained.

“With his savings and his health data we just dumped on a DEX added into our current pool, we could get ourselves nearly a hundred years of CryoStake,” the young man said, his eyes following a few people struggling with disposing of the body of their victim into the huge water treatment pool just below where they stood. The body disappeared as if it had never been there.



He smiled, looking back to his friends and associates. “Are you ready to say goodnight then? When we wake up, we’ll be richer than kings! We can finally party with the El Salvadorians!” he screamed, jumping into the whirlpool of water below. His laughter still echoed through the surface and his friends held their breaths, waiting to see if he would emerge again. They looked at each other, unsure of what to do now that the moment they’d all been waiting for had arrived. One nodded, and together, they jumped.





# CHAPTER 2

## DEATHLY MIRROR



“02/21/-97948”

**FAH**

**E**lectric tendrils seared the pitch-black night while the steady stream of raindrops fell across Atadia. Inside a white vehicle racing through a hyperloop tunnel, a woman recited a mantra under her breath, eyes gently shut. Turbo, her Pomeranian best friend, rested comfortably on her lap. Even with the silent vacuum outside, her voice was too quiet for the car’s internal microphone to pick up amidst the gentle hum of the motor. Her perfume diffused through her silken sundress, filling the cabin with the citrusy flavor of a mimosa. The sundress was impeccably chosen to match her shoes and purse, all three of which hid deceptively hefty price tags.

But you wouldn’t notice any of that.

The first thing anyone saw when they looked at Fah was her irises. Sometimes green, other times blue, occasionally purple, and always irresistible. What stood out wasn’t their iridescent beauty, but rather the sharpness and keen intellect behind them. Her eyes were an ocean

of RGB, computer code, and virtual worlds. Data itself seemed to flow through them with great precision. While she was perfectly capable of seeing reality through her vision, her mind itched to turn her visions into reality. In other words, she was a visionary.

Even before her first hormonal mood swings struck, Fah had built an AI that took the world's biggest online game by storm. No it's not Cops Games. Sigma, a decentralized tactical, turn-based JRPG was the sport in Atadia and she remained at the top decades later, only behind the legendary Raves. Of course, she only had time to dump into gaming since her 1/1 graphic novels and animations wrote themselves algorithmically—middle school hobbies that caught the watchful gaze of the tech world. She was the new messiah—buyout offers from the private sector flooded in, each one more prestigious than the last. Obviously, grown-ass anons all wanted her to adopt them.

But she had never been one for money and fame.

As her peers worked on finding their passions and interest in social causes, Fah began working on her magnum opus: *The Manifesto on Humanity in the Age of Data-driven Society*. Groundbreaking, provocative, and frighteningly brilliant, the Manifesto illustrated Fah's vision of a society that set aside its fear of information technology and embraced its full potential. Decades on, it remains one of Web3's most famous literary pieces—its promises of a utopian life built upon data was proven timeless. From her childhood as a wunderkind, Fah found herself as a senior executive in Atadia's Ministry of Human Capital. As one of the few people who directed policies that influenced the algorithms that ran the city, Fah's role was to shape the future and nurture Atadia's workforce.

Fah was shaken from her stupor by a shabby car that embedded itself in her vehicle. She was shaken, but not hurt; her ride had anticipated the collision and avoided the worst of the damage. Her right hand remained steady while her left fingers twisted and turned her WoW-kRd ring. It was a nervous habit she picked up from Meka—



a tick she couldn't quite shake off. After a few minutes, small roadside assistance drones swooped down to clear out the debris and Fah continued on her journey.

“Your car had the right of way. Therefore, all expenses, including the 1,240 \$ATA in damage, will be completely covered by the insurance. The nearest garage with compatible parts is at the Portals District nearby. In two years, your car insurance premium

will go up by 0.4 percent. We wish you a safe journey. Thank you for choosing us, Perfect Hedge. We manage the risks for you so that you don't have to.”

Fah paid no attention to the message. The process was all automated, so she was free to ignore it. Her head swam with thoughts of Sandy. They were supposed to have dinner tonight, celebrating her eighteenth birthday, but her daughter couldn't even wait for her to come back home before she left to celebrate with her friends. She couldn't blame Sandy. The girl didn't know that their time together was limited. After her husband left in a huff as she predicted, Fah put Pun to bed, set the AI babysitting robot on night mode, and left.

Her car decelerated into the back of an ancient house of worship. Capital-A ancient. She wouldn't be surprised if the place counted its age in millenia. The bus stop in front of it was practically abandoned while graffiti of skulls and bones littered the surrounding area. Unlike the ornate front facade, the back of the structure faced the city wall. Only a narrow walkway indicated that there was an entrance to the building. Sea serpents and tidal waves were etched into the stone as if to remind visitors of the deity they worshiped. The pattern matched that of the key in Fah's palm. She'd arrived at the Basilisk Temple.

Fah stepped out of the car, craning her neck to look up at the building. It drew inspiration from both the Old Western and Old Eastern architectures she had heard about; serpentine dragons of stone wound themselves around ornate spires and pillars that seemed to scrape the sky itself. The grand building must have been an architectural marvel when it was built long ago. Now, against the backdrop of modern Atadia, the Temple was out of place in space and time, standing still amongst the constant flurry of activity in the tech-dependent city.

As the car advanced towards the nearby garage, Fah headed for the Temple gate. It was poetic that both she and her car were looking for some form of healing at the same time, she thought. Perhaps this place could fix her. Fah put one hand on the gate and gripped the key in the other. The rusted frame screeched open and she shivered. It was a warm autumn day, but the inside was as dark and cold as a January night.

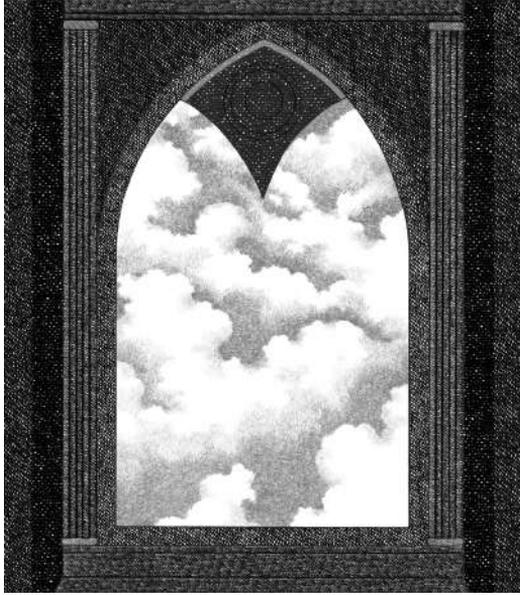
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“Look for the Scirtemais mirror. You must prove yourself worthy,” a voice from her dream reminded her.

Fah had been having the same dream for the last three nights. The voice came from an old hag covered in a thick purple shawl. Fah couldn’t make out her features. The dream also told her to pick the right mirror, as there would be consequences if she so much as looked at the wrong one.

Fah didn’t know the consequences of choosing the wrong one, but she wasn’t exactly keen on testing the correctness of the oracle that kept appearing in her dreams. As she stepped into the hall, the grand temple reduced to an old walkway dimly lit by a few candles. There was little she could do but move forward, so she continued to a set of doors.

Though the exterior decorations suggested an extravagant ballroom: the type with intricate stained glass panes and frescoes painted by the most decorated of artists. What lay before her was instead another unlit



corridor. This one was little more than a makeshift tunnel made of dirt and clay instead of bricks. The walls were lined with mirrors instead of torches. The path seemed to extend infinitely, only interrupted by the occasional concrete cube every couple of yards or so, each accompanied by a spiral staircase descending into the depths of the earth.

Black engulfed her as she went further into the tunnel. Soon, even sunlight itself fell victim to the darkness. As its last ray abandoned her, the mirrors instead began to glow with candlelights. Dragonflies flew in out of nowhere and buzzed through the hallway.

It made no sense. This place defied all reason and logic. Why haven't the candles gone out? Where did the dragonflies come from? Why had she seen this before in her sleep? The harder she tried to answer her thoughts, more questions would materialize. Most importantly, who was the old lady that gave her the map of the place in her dreams? She had told Fah to

keep a hand on the wall at all times and to toss a few pebbles out before each step. Fah was supposed to stop as soon as the pebble hit something that wasn't made of glass.

Her last pebble made no sound.

She looked up and was met by hundreds of emerald-green snakes slithering in her direction. Their jaws sprang open all at once, revealing wicked fangs and forked tongues. The dreadful sight paralyzed Fah with fear. They hissed and climbed onto her body, tracing up her arms. She couldn't take another step, nor could she feel any of her limbs. Scales brushed dangerously against her neck and, before she even had the chance to shut her eyes, Fah looked into one of theirs'. Instead of vertical slit pupils, sickly-pale orbs took their place.

After what felt like an eternity of pure terror, she noticed that she was still alive and realized that the creatures meant her no harm. They slithered past her quite disinterestedly to put out the candles behind her. When the last of the flames vanished into the surrounding darkness, the snakes vanished into the shadows, leaving Fah alone. As her legs ceased their shaking, Fah made her way forward. Now, the pebbles were her only guide. In the distance, she could hear cheerful conversations and laughter. A salty breeze made its way up her nose and she pulled her feet out of the rising water beneath her feet. It was then that Fah remembered a name for a serpent king—the Basilisk

After another twenty minutes of trudging cautiously on the slippery path, Fah was rewarded with the light at the end of the tunnel. The room was stacked from floor to ceiling with mirrors and rows of computer servers humming with electricity. A small stone plate on top of the door read "Lambda." Little red and blue LED strips illuminated the place and, in turn, dimmed her once bright eyes to a dull pavement gray. In the center of the room stood an antique mirror. Peering into the mirror, Fah recoiled sharply as blinding light singed her eyes and she blacked out.

~#~

Long time ago, a small girl who was barely tall enough to climb on her parents' bed on her own stared back at her through Scirtemais, the magic mirror. Like countless Atadians before her, it was time for young Fah to learn the nature of her death through the mirror. They called it the Awakening—a rite of passage that all children went through in their journey towards adulthood. She glanced to her left and right, taking comfort in her parents' presence beside her. Her shoulders relaxed slightly as she exhaled, her breath condensing on the reflective surface. It was time for her to receive her death date.

In the mirror, her reflection morphed into a set of numbers.



“12/21/2054”

She barely had time to comprehend the date before being crushed in a bear hug by her parents, who embraced her with pride. Her parents were relieved that they had some time to spend with their little girl. She had cleared an auspicious milestone. Fah giggled, nestling her head into her mother’s neck. Their joy was cut short when Fah noticed the numbers changing.

The numbers vanished as a new set of numbers took their place.

“02/21/-97948”

Fah looked on with dumbstruck eyes, her mind failing to comprehend the year. The tension was so thick that one could cut through it with a knife. The mirror flashed twice and went dark. Her mother bit her lower lip, something that did not go unnoticed by her young daughter. With confused tears staining her shirt, Fah shrieked for her parents to kill her, for she was supposed to be dead. Her parents looked at each other with nervous eyes before turning to her. Her father held her close, repeatedly whispering that the mirror was wrong under his breath. Her mother brushed her hair and kissed her forehead. The two of them made her promise that she would tell no one of the second set of numbers she saw.

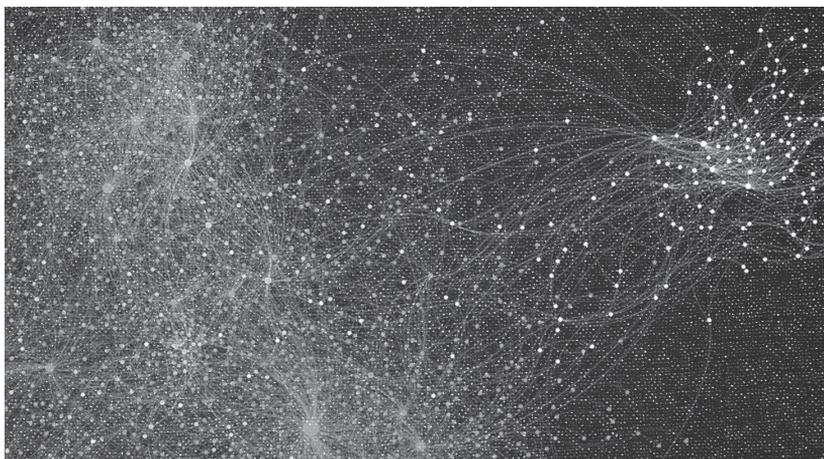
~#~

Fah found herself lying spread-eagled on the damp floor of the room, brought back to the present. Indeed, it had been her closest and most guarded secret, one she dared not to tell a soul about. No one, not even her husband and children, knew she had two death days. One was quite normal, inching closer by the second. The other, however, was nearly a hundred thousand years ago. Despite access to every Atadian’s file and untold amounts of classified information, Fah heard of no one with two death dates.

She had been trying to stay healthier by eating the right kind of food, achieving a better work-life balance, and even praying to every god she could think of just to hedge her bets. And yet, it seemed that her efforts had been accounted for by the mirror before she had even considered them. Before she came, she'd thought the old lady in her dreams was a good omen. She'd managed to convince herself that all her hard work would pay off. She'd thought they would grant her a few more days on earth, or at least some answers. Instead, the dates stood still, as if chiseled in stone.

When Detha, de facto leader of Atadia, “gifted” the people with the smart mirror, no one paid much attention to them. A mirror that could predict the day of your death sounded like a scam. Not long after that, families and loved ones of the recently deceased were whispering about the mirror’s morbidly precise warning. As more rumors spread of people dropping dead on schedule, the mirror’s credibility rose, along with Detha’s. Conspiracy theorists that pushed the Sombrero Devil theory gradually backed down.

It didn’t matter that protests erupted against the apparent breach of privacy and Detha’s refusal to disclose how the mirrors arrived at their



predictions. It didn't matter that his enemies were mysteriously met with a death date so close to the launch of the program.

Time eroded any misgivings and left the city more determined than ever to embrace newer, shinier things. People began installing smart mirrors with Scirtemais shards in their homes and soon, the mirrors could predict people's death with an accuracy of seconds. Death businesses bloomed within weeks, covering everything from healthcare to final day parties. A handful of the latter that Fah attended were rather peaceful, with the soon-to-be-dead closing their eyes one last time and smiling weakly at their friends and families gathered around them. Salute emojis were casually exchanged.

Others, however, weren't so lucky. Freak accidents, vicious murders, and brutal endings lined up to steal their final breaths. Fah couldn't rid her mind of the sight of a man's contorted expression and guttural scream at his final day party, only cut short by the malfunctioning drone finishing its evisceration.

Somehow, having the knowledge of the exact amount of time they had left on earth hadn't inspired people to stop and smell the roses. Instead, the whole city was convinced to shell out on premium life insurance and strict diet plans. People put on brave faces when their death day approached and some outright refused to acknowledge the predictions.

With science so rigidly objective, people turned to faith. Infludumpooooor-turned-miracle workers popped up everywhere, each claiming they could prolong lives with medication or meditation or some other pseudosciences. Death coaches became a viable career since most people couldn't accept their deaths so serenely. Funeral rites were revived, just like emperors in ancient times. Atadians began furnishing their graves with fineries and beloved objects, hoping to be reunited with them in the next life. In the metaverse, sleazy founders claimed to be able to decode the secret of immortality and sold them off as utility tokens to people

who had yet to make peace with their end. FOMO kicked in hard despite several secret warnings in the form of Typestracts once made popular decades ago by a famous degen poet.

While some clung stubbornly to life, others found a way to make their limited time count. When she was eight, Fah first realized that her date of death meant that her life was much shorter than the average Atadian lifespan. She knew she wouldn't live long enough to meet her grandchildren. She knew she wouldn't live long enough to see many of her ideas become reality. Her young mind couldn't understand the unfairness of it all. She spent every waking moment trying to find a way to prolong her life. She read all the papers she could get her hands on about the smart mirror development. She asked her parents, her teachers, and any adult she knew about their experience with death. The more she looked, the more questions she had. By the time she knew she had to give up, she didn't have anything more on the mirror than the day she began searching. Another wave of despair had set in then, but she couldn't spend every single night feeling angry about something she couldn't change; at one point, she put the knowledge away in the back of her mind and started living her life. She rose up in ranks among the elite of Atadia. She fell in love with Meka. They had two beautiful children together.

Fah had nearly forgotten what it was like to try to change one's destiny. The once familiar, bitter taste of disappointment became a foreign sensation. Until today. Decades had passed and here she was, in a crude hallway in a bygone temple, hoping that she would finally have her answer. The world owed her one.

Even she knew that was simply a lie that people told themselves to sleep peacefully at night. The world kowtows to nobody. She would die on December 21, 2054. She had dealt with this fact before and she would do it again. Back then, she had given up on her manifesto and the dream of sculpting Atadia into a paradise for all and took a job as one of the highest-paid civil servants in the city. She became an important cog in the system, but just a cog nonetheless.

Right now, she couldn't be bothered to care about anything else. She didn't have it in her to try and uncover the secret of her universe when her own life was so obviously controlled by something she couldn't find. All she really knew was that her car had been repaired and was now waiting for her in front of the basilica.

Fah sat down and stared at her hands in the light. Scarlet blood bloomed where her hands were cut by the mirrors and the rough stone wall. The cut on her left thumb was particularly deep and she sucked it in her mouth without thinking. The sting and metallic tang of blood brought her back to the present. The home security system sent her an alert on her car system: her daughter still wasn't home. There was no need to worry, Fah told herself, despite the uneasy feeling welling up within her. She turned and twisted the ring again. It was Sandy's birthday—she was now a legal adult who could celebrate all night as far as the law was concerned. Children seemed to grow up too fast here, but life had to go on somehow.

The starlings in the sky knew this. They circled the white car and saw Fah inside. The birds knew she had more questions than answers, despite the fact that she held the fate of half the city in her hands. Perhaps the people on her computer were the real victims here. They had no say in where they could go and how they would die.

Unbeknownst to her, deep inside the temple, a floor-length mirror spun on its own. As the reflection changed from corner to corner, the last candle blew out.







# CHAPTER 3

## DISSIDENCE



*“I’m ready”*

### **SANDY**

Sandy’s eyelids sprang apart, awoken by the furious clicks of a mechanical keyboard and low mutters. The lumpy mattress in this dingy room was destined to rouse her from her slumber at any cost. Propping herself up groggily, she peered at the computer screen and the person before it. The screen was pitch-black except for a waterfall of code, moving too fast for her eyes to track. It’s the new Helius updates.

The figure hard at work was clad in black from head to toe. Her features were barely visible, save for her long hair that stuck out in every direction. She might as well have become one with her gaming chair. This morning was infinitely better than yesterday. Sandy smiled and peeled herself from her bed, slipping on the only dress she had, and kissed her girlfriend, Flow, good morning.

Sandy received a quick peck in return and a smile for her trouble, but the coder remained otherwise unchanged — she couldn’t afford any

distractions at this point, it seemed. For the last few weeks, all her waking moments were spent building and distributing AtaDAO-β, an underground decentralized voting protocol. It was meant to be a challenger to PolitYouro, the main voting protocol imposed on Atadia by Detha and his technocrats.

Few fully understood the differences between the two systems, except that one was mandated by the government while the other was developed to fight it. With that alone, AtaDAO-β surged in popularity among dissidents, quickly finding itself in the hands of nearly half the city's citizens despite the fact that they needed hidden identities and could only use it near the Oasis.

As Sandy prepared to begin her day, shouting from the hall down below disrupted her peace.

“What did I tell you? More than six hundred thousand people support marriages between pets and owners! I've won our bet! There are benefits to hanging out in the weirdest corner of Utube after all,” one voice said.

Almost simultaneously, another shriek cut through the sea of gm's and gn's, “Auntie, you owe me too! I told you this influencer has been using every Atadian as his exit liquid.”

“Oh, this one is a no-brainer. Why on earth would anyone solve drone violence with...more drones?”

This could only mean the polling result from AtaDAO-β had been released. Given half a chance, people would gamble on anything they could get their hands on. The BetDex pool downstairs was electrified with a steady stream of tokens.

“How come the results from AtaDAO-β were nowhere close to the ones we got from PolitYouro?” Sandy asked.

“Various reasons,” her shadowy super girlfriend said, turning away from the monitor for the first time. She blinked rapidly, adjusting her eyes to natural light instead of LEDs. Sweeping her hand across the dusty

cover, she gingerly plucked a large textbook from one of the small shelves above her desk and handed it to Sandy.

“PolitYouro is a protocol of elites, designed by elites, for elites. Even though we have had it for as long as we could remember, it wasn’t a system built for our good. We need a new one of the people, by the people, for the people. Does that make sense? No more SBF-Coraline vibes”

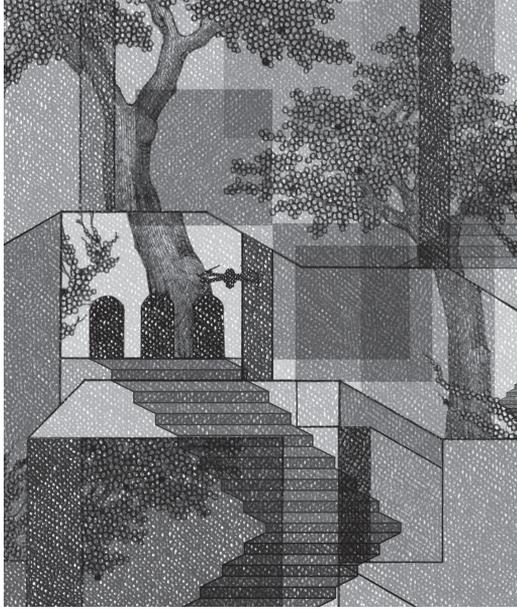
Sandy stifled a giggle. It was a total oversimplification, but she had to applaud Flow for trying anyway. In her musing, she missed a few sentences and looked back up when her partner’s voice rose above the shouting downstairs.

“- and don’t get me started on the cowards who cast their votes in favor of the government just to avoid getting followed by the tracking drones. Fucking invertebrates,” her Flow ranted, jamming a spiteful finger into the page as if it could harm the words themselves. She huffed, lit a cigarette, and turned back to her monitor. The last thing Sandy heard before she left the room for the hall downstairs was a quiet muttering. “Burn it to the ground.”

~#~

The old-fashioned hall speakers crackled, Soul Amnesty Radar program transmitting a tiny voice that announced the upcoming result of the referendum on assisted suicide legislation. Below it, people chatted over breakfast and coffee from Mt. Atadia, making wagers and offering their input over bowls of rice porridge and youtiao. Sandy waded through the crowd, delightedly eavesdropping on fiery conversations made without the fear of the walls having ears. She stopped before a hologram broadcast of a panel discussion.

“I think we need to pour more resources into prosecuting coders working in the black market and end the tax on assisted suicide. People



should have bodily autonomy! It's none of our business if they chose to live or die!" said a ferocious lady in her eighties. Ms. Warren was a vocal critic of the law and, dressed in scarlet-red, she was out for blood today.

"I see where you're coming from, but I take issue with it. Five issues, to be precise," a voice in a navy suit replied, tweaking his glasses on the bridge of his nose and nodding to himself. No doubt, he would exceed the time allotted to him by the program for today. "Gm. I'm your buddy Zhao. Life and death, and their predictions, are the backbone of our society. If we stopped regulating them, the prosperous Atadia, our pride and only home we know, would simply devolve into chaos. Our city became an inspiration for the world because of the government's algorithmic decision-making process. With data on our citizens' lifespans, we were able to roll out tailored policies on land ownership, public goods, and social security."

"If people don't conform to their predicted lifespans, all these

decisions that support the collective good instead of the individual one, would not be possible. If we could convince suicidal people to continue to live for the sake of society, even when they didn't want to, the collective benefits surely outweigh individual suffering," he finished with a flourish, gesturing to a graph on the screen supporting his argument. The crowd erupted in applause for the speaker's charisma. B/W chad gifs filled the hologram spaces.

The man smiled modestly, soaking up the crowd's adoration. He paused, letting tension linger in the air. "More importantly, we need to find a more effective way to address criminals and the burdens of society. We have limited resources, as everyone here knows. Why should we spend royalty money on people who refuse a healthy diet or the bedridden, senile boomers? Why should people our algorithm identifies as having violent criminal tendencies be given a chance to act on them? Shouldn't we take them out before they hurt your children? Prevention is the best cure, my friends. We must-"

The speaker who went before him couldn't stay silent any longer. She defiantly stood, interrupting him before his time was called.

"What about the twenty-five-year-old who took his own life because the government offered to end it in exchange for wiping his girlfriend's debt from decades-old FTX case?"

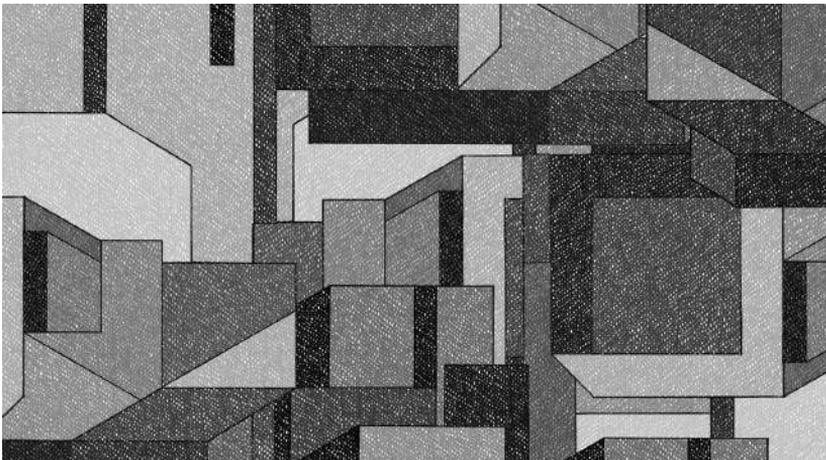
A collective gasp washed over the crowd, followed by hushed silence as eyes across the room landed on her. "What about his parents? They loved their child and they lost him to a message on a screen sent by your beloved Detha. This insidious algorithm takes into account none of these. Why don't we, the people, have a say in how our data is used?" She could barely keep her voice steady while her eyes grew heavy with unshed tears.

"Please calm down, ma'am," her opponent said, cutting through a barrage of insults thrown at her from the audience. The crowd waited with bated breath. They weren't here for her anyway, most people signed

up for the discussion to watch the man. At the moment, he was the most followed speaker on the discussion platform.

When he deemed the room sufficiently reverent, he spoke once more. “I don’t think it is a matter of right and wrong here. The algorithm processed everyone’s data and guided us to whichever solution would best serve society. Our collective benefit will always outweigh our personal one or even a whole group of people. We must think of our society as a whole. Look at the big picture,” Zhao said, pausing to adjust his glasses and looking back at the camera, communicating directly with the audience at home. “I think your twenty-five-year-old did the right thing. The algorithm told him that it would be best for his girlfriend and Atadia if he simply ended his own life. It gave him a choice and he took it. His parents should be proud of him. It’s the greatest honor to have that opportunity to make such an impact on society.” The mindless Atadian crowd in the studio roared in agreement, drowning out objections from the other panelists. They were riding high on righteousness.

“It’s time, love,” Flow said, startling her. She took Sandy’s hand and together, they made their way to a room full of hospital beds. “Are you ready to be truly free?” her girlfriend whispered.



Sandy looked at her reflection in the mirror in front of her. She loved and loathed what she saw in equal measure. In her face, she could see both her parents. Her mother's nose, her father's cheekbones. She'd once looked up to them, everyone did. Her parents were practically deities in the city. Atadia was a model, an aspiring city every little town hoped to become.

It was all too good to be true. Her trust in her parents and her world, by extension, was shattered when she learned that the efficient data collection came courtesy of a little sensor implanted in every single citizen. Her every move and every thought were recorded and sent back to Atadia City Lab for analysis. The worst part was that the sensor was the only confirmed data collection device. It was impossible to believe there weren't more implants scattered in everyone's body. Sandy heard people whisper about a hormone measurer and food receptor in their mouths.

The Atadia City Lab had been tracking her every move, from the first time she opened her eyes to her first sneeze of the common cold. The city knew when she first menstruated. It kept track of her virginity. It knew everything from people's pregnancies to their final thoughts before their last breaths escaped them.

The city celebrated its data, but never talked about how data and statistics could be twisted as easily as Detha had twisted the city itself. A lab technician could pull up a day in Sandy's life when it was nearly impossible for her to get out of bed when her head was filled with rage against the state-sanctioned violation of her privacy and rights and deemed her a threat to society.

Dread was a dear friend. Sandy had thought about killing herself and ending it all countless times but, as soon as the idea crossed her mind, her bedroom door would swing open and her father would come in and hold her tight, not out of affection, but out of necessity. She'd then spent countless days forcing her mind to go blank, refusing to think of anything but children who grew up too fast and adults who refused to stop playing gods.

Little by little, she'd learned to build herself better armor. She'd committed adultery. She'd stolen from widows and orphans. She had tested the limit of the law and its scope of surveillance to the point where she was left unconscious on the street as a punishment. Her father had come then, carrying her broken body back home and nursing her back to health. By the time she could talk again, she'd figured out the keywords and triggers for her implants. The worst that could happen had already happened. She was done being afraid.

“I'm ready.”

## **MEKA**

Meka woke up with a hundred missed calls from Fah. Yes, one hundred in total. He sighed, shoving his messy divorce to the back of his mind as he dragged himself to the liquor cabinet and poured himself an Old Fashioned mixed with a left over red from The Prisoner. Now that's a way to start the day.

Despite the liquid courage, he couldn't bear the thought of returning Fah's calls yet. He donned a pair of plush slippers and shuffled into the living room, where he promptly plopped himself on the couch and turned on the television. A highly publicized debate between a seasoned opposition member and the government's new rising star academic was on screen. The bookworm brimmed with confidence that teetered on the edge of arrogance. He was so certain of his own victory that Meka wondered whether the glasses the man was wearing was a teleprompter, feeding him lines in real time to corner his foe. The opposition lady roared back with a story of a young man's life or another when a Dialect notification appeared on Meka's Saga.

An \$ATA loan he'd given to a business run by a group of Blocksmiths six months earlier had earned him over 1515 percent returns. Indeed, it was far higher than any investment he'd ever made in the stock market. In hindsight, it was a good call that Fah pushed him into giving them a chance through the Lending Lab Pool.

"Would you like to deposit your \$ATA with the Central Bank of Atadia right now for your convenience and guaranteed interest? We will also certify you as a Lender of Last Resort in your profile," another message popped up.

"Yes," Meka confirmed.

"Thank you. The transaction is now completed. Seeing as this is the end of the month, would you like to transfer Sandy's allowance to her now?"

"Sure, the same amount, the same account, please," he replied.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but the account is now offline."

"What? What does that mean? What's the TPS right now? Can you try again?"

"With Firedancer 6.0, TPS is now 15.1 m. I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but the account is now offline."

"Atadia City Lab, my name is Meka Klinchun, ID number ATA19982172557XT. I need the location of an Atadian citizen, Sandy Klinchun."

"Location not found. The last known location was at the Oasis, a public park."

He stopped using voice assist and punched in Fah's number.





# CHAPTER 4

## PARADOX



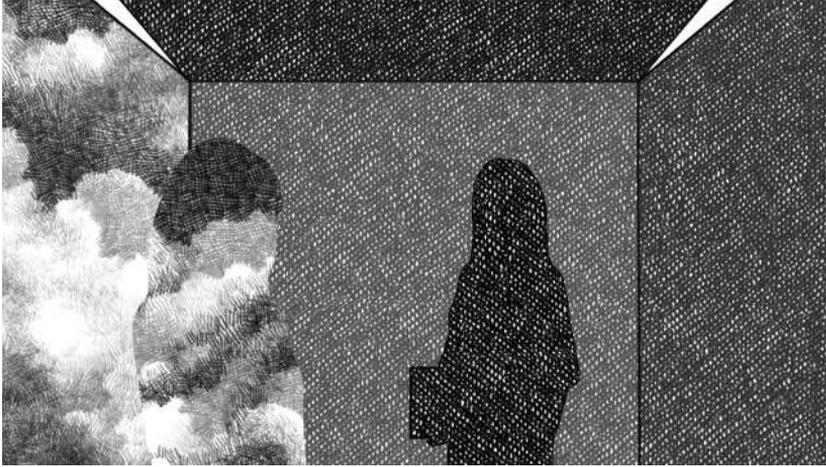
*"I'm ready"*

### **SANDY**

**M**iles away, Sandy woke up with a splitting headache and a thick bandage wrapped around her head. She could neither smell nor taste the air around her. Instead, she could only feel its cold dryness prickling the back of her throat as she inhaled.

In one disorientating moment, she thought she awoke on the morning of her birthday again. Her imagination focused absentmindedly on a ribbon-wrapped parcel in her hands. Ever since algorithms could predict everyone's every whim, there was no need to find presents for loved ones any more. Sandy couldn't remember the last time she had received a present.

She ran her hand on the glossy seam of the wrapper, gnawing on her bottom lip in concentration. She couldn't recall ordering herself a present and her gut seemed to twist upon itself in response. Perhaps her state-issued smart pillow may have invaded her dreams and ordered



something she didn't need. That was her paranoia talking, she thought, puncturing the tape with her long manicured nails and splitting the box open.

Her fear left her when she peered into the box.

The box was packed to the brim with three Thugbirdz hoodies , a pair of hiking shoes, a toob of toothpaste, a box of bandaids, and two boxes of Black Honey drip coffee. Sandy took a few sachets of coffee out and-

“Your body is now yours and yours alone,” a familiar voice called out from behind her. Sandy got up and, instead of the bright corridor of her home building, she found herself surrounded by darkness. Gingerly, Sandy sat up on the surgical bed. The room smelled of antiseptic and she felt groggy from anaesthesia-induced sleep.

“Come on, love, we have so much to do,” Flow urged, placing two lumps of something soft and wet in her palms.

Sandy rolled them between her palms. They were round and slimy. They were her eyeballs.

Instead of a smooth surface, her fingers felt the ridges of a computer chip embedded in a small spot. She crushed them in her hands. Blood and water dripped onto the ground, the only sound in the room.

Sandy left her bed and knelt on the ground, tilting her face to the unseen ceiling above her head. Members of the Protector emerged, gathering near her bed.

She couldn't see them and they couldn't see her. Everyone had voluntarily removed their eyes, along with the chips inside of them. But none of them had ever seen so clearly. They could feel the change in the wind.

“Long live the  $\mu$  civilization! Long live the  $\mu$  civilization!”

“WAGMI WAGMI WAGMI WAGMI”

The celebration went on, unnoticed by the people above ground.

## MEKA

The Oasis loomed large before him in the first ray of sunlight. Meka clutched his son's hand a little tighter. Losing his daughter only two days before made him uneasy.

“Dad, why are we here?” Pun asked, rubbing the light from his eyes and letting a small yawn escape his mouth. The corners of Meka's lips perked up. Pun had never seen this corner of Atadia before. The two of them were here to find clues to Sandy's whereabouts, but Meka hoped his son would treat this as a father-son adventure of sorts. Pun was too young to know that their family was falling apart; Meka wanted to shield the boy from this reality for a little longer. Sandy, however, was another story. Having turned eighteen, she was a legal adult. Not even the government could force her to come home against her will. Meka stifled a bitter chuckle. In a city armed to the teeth with data collection and state surveillance, it was simply impossible to disappear without meticulous planning and help from the dark web. He had little hope of finding his daughter, but he owed it to himself to try his damndest.

“We're exploring the Oasis today,” Meka replied, pointing at a glass structure resembling an oversized greenhouse in front of them. “Our

ancestors built the Oasis as a fail-safe. I was told that somewhere here is a place free of algorithms and bots. One day, if we find out that all our progress and advancements haven't actually been good for humanity, our descendants can always take refuge here and start over."

As they made their way beneath the cool shade of the tree cover, Meka softened his hold on Pun's hand as he caught a whiff of pine. Pun laughed as a pine needle fell on his nose. Meka scanned his surroundings for clues that could lead him to his daughter, but it was harder than finding a needle in a haystack. At least the needle wasn't actively evading him. It was worse, though: he didn't even know what he was looking for. Across the park, a pack of teenagers circled the perimeter. They spread out with military-like precision, forming a search party that would cover the whole expanse of the park. He wondered if they were looking for the same thing.

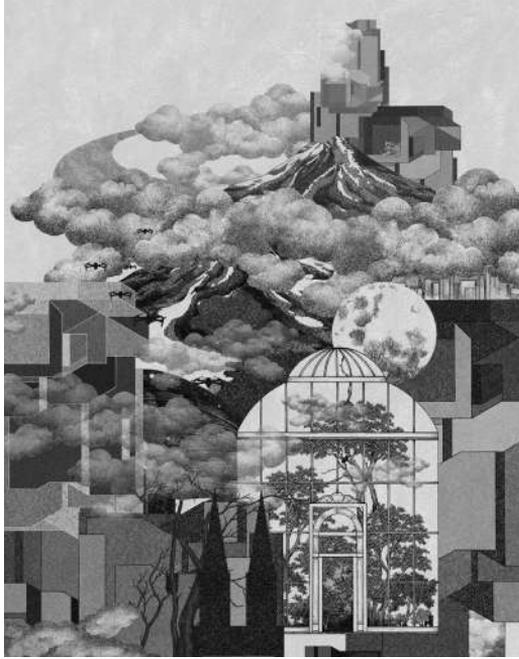
"We've never had a chance against the invisible enemy, for the enemy is everywhere, even in our consciousness," he muttered, fixated on the adolescents.

"What did you say, dad?" Pun prompted him.

"Oh, nothing really. Today just reminds me of your mom's teenage writing. I don't know what we're up against, and I just hope your sister is safe wherever she is." Pun nodded firmly while fiddling with a stray acorn he found. They were rare in the sterilized Atadian streets. The taps of their feet against the paved slope slowed.

"Dad, why doesn't this place have an escalator? That was a huge climb," Pun complained, stopping to massage his calves as if to reinforce his point. Just around the corner, he could still see the city below, rooftops and buildings littered with holographic advertisements.

The light from the city, even in the morning, was so bright that it illuminated the old park like a well-lit lamp. The city was gently covered by the grapevines, juxtaposing the concrete marvels with its leaves and stems. The vines covered the roofs all the way to the old electricity poles and traffic lights.



Meka looked at his surroundings in confusion before realizing that cars needed neither drivers nor parking spaces by the time his youngest child was born. “Right, so this building was once what’s called a parking lot. Years before you were born, people had to drive their own cars, so when they had to run errands or have lunch, the cars needed a space to park. They didn’t go around picking up other passengers like the cars you know.”

Pun looked at him, wide-eyed before he started to giggle.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

“It’s like a house for cars. People in those days built huge houses for cars too!”

Meka couldn’t help but smile back. Pun was right, we had once wasted so much precious urban space just to store unused vehicles. It’s much more efficient now: fewer cars, less need for space, and less traffic. Now, even the old parking lots have been turned into mixed-use spaces.

Each building was its own microcosm, complete with gyms, parks, shops and restaurants. Some of them were turned into outdoor theaters and stadiums.

“Oh, that was where the cars used to go to get charged, right?” Pun said, pointing to a decommissioned gas station turned skate park.

Many things became obsolete once self-driving cars with automatic conductive charging systems that powered them as they moved along roads were rolled out. One invention had turned the city upside down. With perfect synchronization and navigation, traffic had practically vanished. People got to their destinations, did what they needed to do, and went home in the shortest amount of time possible. No more restaurant dinners waiting out the rush hour jam. No more café chatter of drivers trading their favorite shortcuts and secret routes. No more gentle jazz tunes while rain slowed the streets to a halt. The city itself began to spread out as the people no longer needed the city center. The brick-and-mortar stores thinned out and were long gone by the time anyone thought to look for them.

Municipality roads and small alleys that weren't being maintained by the government were divided up and sold as public assets. Shareholders obsessively swept their streets sparkling clean with potential profits in mind. Some disused ones were turned into museums or events venues - anything to keep the money coming.

## **PUN**

As they left the radiant warmth of the Oasis behind them, Pun's gaze landed on a narrow path in his peripheral vision marked as “Peepswalk Alley.” The sign was poorly maintained and barely legible, worn away by years of erosion and graffiti.

Like any other six-year-old, Pun couldn't resist his thirst for adventure. He yelled for his father to wait for him before charging headfirst into the dimly lit walkway.

Dim might have been an understatement. The sun couldn't seem to reach the dingy path here. As soon as Pun sat foot on the cobblestone, he felt as though he was stepping straight into the night. A chill crept behind him, racing up his spine with a tingling buzz. His vision cleared as his eyes acquainted themselves with the darkness. The dilapidated storefronts were once part of a bustling commercial street. Some old neon signs littered the ground while others clung desperately to the side of their buildings for dear life.

“Degen Coin Flip: The First Unicorn”

“Reject Humanity, Return to Monke”

“Father and Son Ministry of Alpha”

“Taiyo’s Secret Channel”

“The PriMer Brothers Gallery”

“Bobby’s Brew”

“Flip loans with a bunch of gnomies!”

Pun couldn't quite comprehend the purpose of this alley. More than that, the shadows of the past unnerved his young mind, which was unaccustomed to humanity's desperate side. He slowly turned away, afraid to disturb the stillness of the Alley for fear of what could take place. Before he could return to the main road, however, a bony hand reached out and snatched his collar. His neck jerked in response as the hand dragged him deeper into the street. Pun kicked and screamed in resistance but was helpless as he was dragged behind a fortune teller's shop.

~#~

The air hung thick with a confusing mix of burnt coffee and wilted jasmine. From his place atop a makeshift cardboard bed, Pun noticed he was in some sort of hut covered with purple tarps and filled with rickety furniture. Before him, a raisin of a lady was crumbling chunks of white chocolate into a small teacup. Pun propped himself upright with his



elbow and looked around. The only source of light in the shack was a miniature lantern, an ancient device he had only heard of from his textbooks.

“Drink,” the hag commanded while handing him the cup.

“My mother said I’m not allowed to drink anything with caffeine,” he countered, scrutinizing her wrinkly hand. A whiff of white chocolate reminded him of how thirsty he was. He was tempted.

“It’s my duty to help you,” she said, offering the cup steadily in front of his face. “Forget what I said and just take a sip of this and you’ll understand why.” The old has sprinkled a magical cupcake concoction.

Pun couldn’t tell if he was dreaming or not. The hut, the parking lot, the drink. They all felt unreal to him. Without thinking, he took the cup from her palms and sipped slowly, letting the liquid glaze his tongue and wash down his throat.

He was overcome by the sharp tang that was mellowed out only by the cool breeze he felt on his neck. Cold sweat clung to his back and the silent room came to life with activity. He could hear the cries and laughter of children in the far corner, though there were none. Chestnut brown hair flowing in the wind flashed inside his mind. The metallic stench of blood-soaked ground invaded his nose and Pun stared upwards fighting the bile rising inside his throat, only to see the sky replaced by swarms of locusts.

“Save me from what?” Pun spat out, almost choking on the drink.

“Your parents’ misguided ideology,” the old woman hissed.

The venom in her voice startled him and he dropped the teacup he

didn't know he was still holding. As it shattered as it hit the ground, the shards melted away, taking the hut and the woman with it.

Pun blinked and saw the storefront of the fortune teller's shop once again. His father squinted in concern.

"Oh thank goodness. Pun, where did you go? I've looked everywhere for you. Here, put your shoe back on, we're going to be late."

~#~

Pun followed his dad down a large driveway lined with trees. A white building dominated its surroundings. Its angular façade stood out amongst the organic landscape. To Pun, it resembled intersecting sheets of steel. He had never seen anything like it.

They had arrived at Atadia City Lab.

As soon as he realized where they were, Pun bounced up and down on his toes with excitement. All his friends knew that the City Lab was the coolest place in Atadia. People spoke of the cutting-edge technology and experimental ideas inside the building and how only the *crème-de-la-crème* of scholars could hope to work in the City Lab.

Pun excitedly looked around, hoping to take in as many details as possible to tell his friends about later. As the father-son pair entered the lobby, a pack of robotic security dogs gave way to an automated walkway that took them into the zone nicknamed the "Big Brains" of Atadia.

It even had the appearance. The walls were made not of concrete but of interwoven digital screens. Their displays glowed with dazzling data reports he couldn't comprehend. Above the screens, a famous quote hung in a picture frame.

"We tried some shit. We learned some shit. Now we're trying some new shit."

"Welcome to my office," his dad said, gesturing to the rest of the room. Pun could barely hear the gentle hum of the various computers that connected to the displays. From the expansive floor space to the im-

possibly high domed ceiling, Meka's office truly befitted someone of his caliber. It was more like a planetarium than an office, Pun thought. But that was where the similarity ended. Aside from the main screens and a desk with a matching office chair, the room was completely bare. Pun didn't think anyone could spend over eight hours a day here without going insane. He allowed himself to consider the possibility that his father had a screw loose somewhere. Perhaps he didn't know his own father at all.

"Look at this," Meka said, pointing out the dome above them. The hologram morphed into a treehouse containing nothing but bookshelves. "Doesn't that look like the new library that's about to open near your friend's house?"

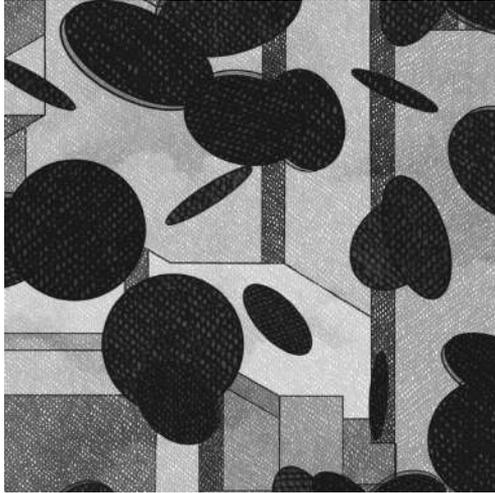
Pun knew immediately which friend his father meant. The area his friend lived in was called B-187, an underdeveloped area starved of infrastructure, despite the number of families with above-average capacity living there.

A shout from another screen distracted Pun. "Devs do something!" someone shouted. It was the footage from a protest he had seen on the news a few days ago.

Under the same screen, reports from the B-187 district continued streaming in. There were reports on wait times for a floating public park, death rates, land appraisal, and resident satisfaction. The latter was projected to increase to 91 percent by the end of next month, coinciding with the Library's grand opening.

The next screen streamed footage from every inch of B-187. At the bottom of the screen, a man in a city uniform used his Saga to take a picture of a decrepit building. As soon as he did, a set of numbers began to fill the screen.

"Aberdeen Building 3, appraised at = 12.8 million \$ATA, Foot-traffic score = 61, Walk score = 93, Green score = 48, Solar score = 80, Soil score = 83, Road congestion score = 32, Well-being score = 22, Cultural



score = 17, Business score = 56, Value under flood risk = 1.1 million \$ATA. Data recorded on February 19, 2048.”

His father paused before asking the system for the life expectancy of the locals.

“78 percent of the people living in the vicinity of Aberdeen 3 will have their life expectancy increased by 2.76 percent if the development you proposed goes through as planned.”

The whole thing continued on like a merry-go-round. Pun tried to listen for as long as he could, but he couldn’t understand half the sentences going on between his father and the machine.

“Dad, you aren’t actually working,” he complained. “You’ve just been talking to the screen for the last fifteen minutes.” With no reaction, Pun climbed up to the office chair and started spinning on it. This Atadia City Lab has been somewhat of a disappointment, if he was honest.

The speaker droned on, “As per the agreement with the voters from the last gubernatorial election, the system had undertaken 522 landowner requisitions out of the planned 541. The remaining ones are currently

being examined. In order to meet the established deadline, the system requires your authorization for the construction of a 21-floor mixed-use public space. The blueprint includes an office zone, a shopping zone, a restaurant zone, and a multistory park. The construction will be finished within two years and its public cost-benefit analysis report can be found in the file: algorithm atadia-sim 2045v4.02.”

At this point, Meka noticed his son’s glazed-over expression and beckoned him over, pointing at the screen.

“Can I have tomorrow’s garbage collection schedule?”

Pun’s eyes widened when several green garbage trucks appeared along with the map. Each destination was marked by a colorful dot and the truck’s trajectory was mapped out with a line. There were timestamps all over the screen. From here, he could see that the collection began at three in the morning and ended in the late evening. Each destination dot also rattled out a series of numbers informing Meka of the amount of waste collected at any given time. Atadia only had eight garbage trucks for the entire city and their routes were plotted out for maximum efficiency.

“Residents of district B-192 are reporting a lower satisfaction rate than usual, can the truck move to the area a little faster? All trucks should also be looking for an Atadian citizen, Sandy Klinchun.” His father said the last part under his breath and Pun was about to ask how the truck could do that, the routes were reshuffled right in front of their eyes and the computer reported back that the garbage from district B-192 will be collected four hours ahead of schedule.

“This change will increase the traffic in B-191 and B-193 by 4 percent. If you would like to undo the command, please let me know.”

Pun smiled up at his father, all earlier disappointment forgotten. “Your job is the coolest! Can you change something else besides the garbage trucks? Can you make the firetrucks and the police cars do whatever you want?”

“Hah! I could, I guess, but it’s not my job to do that. The system is

much better at calculating the routes than me or any other person here.”

Pun frowned, confused. “Well, what did you just do then?”

“I’m more like a conductor. I can see the big picture so I can suggest new parameters for the system to try and work with,” Meka explained as well as he could, but deep down, he knew that making the change in the garbage collection routes was mostly experimentation, they wouldn’t know if the alteration would be beneficial until it had taken place. At worst, the system would simply change back to its original route map without making a fuss.

“Oh,” Pun began, looking slightly put out. “My friends and I thought you built this city by yourself. We didn’t know you had help.”

“I’m not so sure we can call them my help, actually.” Meka’s reply was interrupted by his son’s stomach growling. They both laughed, but it was a forced one. Lunch meant that their time together had ended for today.





# CHAPTER 5

## WISH UPON A STAR



*“Do you think the tree is still alive?  
Or is it as dead as it seems?”*

### FAH

**M**ay’s blistering midday sunlight came through a small classroom for first graders, each small face concentrating on their lesson for the day: history.

Atadia had been busy churning out new workers to replace the first jobbers who seemed to have all vanished without a trace within the last decade. The street seemed to be made up of children and people over forty. Whispers of young adults freezing their bodies and leaving them in the care of a mysterious organization until their wallets were full and the government no longer mandated the minimum working age of thirteen.

This particular classroom had nine students and one teacher. It was a small, airy structure lined with bookshelves and a c-shaped table with the teacher at the center.

“Let’s talk about the history of human lives. In the beginning, before the earth even existed, there was nothing but stardust...” Ms. Jody

said, pointing at the hologram above her and the children. “Humans are the most resilient species on earth because we learn to cooperate and prioritize the collective benefit over our personal one.” The screen played a montage of evolution, monkeys branched out into neanderthals to modern humans to average Atadians. “We are very lucky that Mr. Detha, our leader, has travelled the world in search of lost knowledge and innovation. He brought what he learned back to us. Through our superior intellect and capacity, each Atadian citizen learned to participate in our development and fully utilize our resources. From then on, we no longer simply survived, we thrived. We get to live happy, comfortable lives because of our government.”

A boy raised his hand politely after she finished the sentence. “Ms. Jody, I thought Atadia City Lab took care of us. We don’t get to participate at all?”

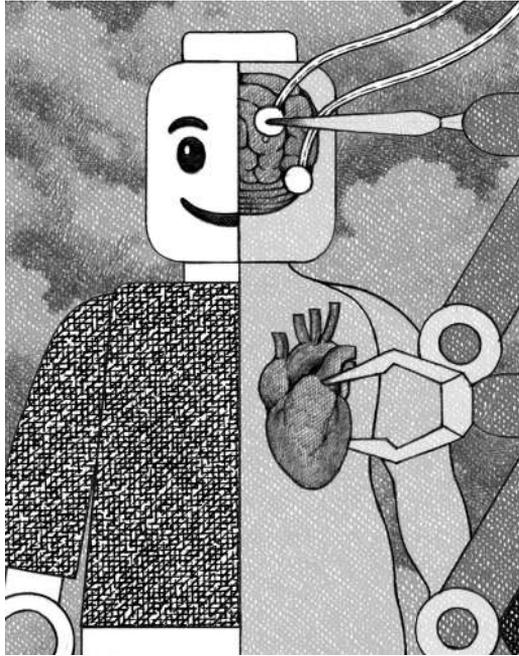
The CCTV in the corner zoomed in on Ms. Jody’s face. It identified her as Teacher ID K7X1927 and recorded her response as a part of her performance evaluation.

“We participate by trying our best and work to improve our social score, of course,” Ms. Jody replied smoothly, without a pause.

The boy looked down at his smartwatch and frowned. “How come my social score went down just for asking that question, Miss?” ... “Will I ever get accepted to yoots 2056 like this?”

By then, his teacher had moved on to other accomplishments of the government and the boy’s question went unanswered.

Fifty miles from the classroom, in a building marked “Atadia Human Capital Laboratory”, Fah tapped her fingers rapidly on the keyboard without looking down. “Can I have the folder for Teacher ID K7X1927 now?” she said, turning into another screen that began to display the information she requested. In the room next to hers, fifty cleaning robot operators and teaching assistants sat in front of their computers, monitoring the maintenance process and making sure all the remote learning equipment was in its best condition.



Fah began skimming through Ms. Jody's file as a part of her Perform-to-Earn teacher evaluation, but she would be lying if she said she didn't take any personal interest in this particular classroom. All teachers in Atadia's public school system received their bonus this way. Fah hummed with satisfaction. "Her value-added per student was 1.26 standard deviation, much higher than average Atadian teachers with the same experience and qualifications. Her students performed above average by the end of their school year. Very impressive," she mumbled, pulling up more data on the long-term performance of Ms. Jody's students recorded on her Atadian Pass.

- The screen began displaying various metrics of Ms. Jody's career:
- Long-term value-added: 1.71 standard deviation.
  - Unemployment rate of former students: 0.
  - Percentage of Former students identified as satisfied adults: 89%

-Average hourly wage for former students, two years after graduation:  
582 \$ATA

- Crime rate of former students: 0
- Percentage of former students married before the age of 40: 21%
- Percentage of former students under the age of 40 suffering from cancer, diabetes, or heart disease: 2.1%
- Diamond hand score: 9 out of 10

“Right, her long-term results are promising. I authorize her bonus token payment as the system suggested through the Proof-of-Loyalty system,” Fah said into the microphone on her desk, recording her voice as proof for the Human Capital Lab.

~#~

Fah watched from behind a pane of glass as the students hurriedly stuffed their stationery away while waiting for the bell. One by one, they filled out evaluation forms on their watches and shuffled out into the hallway. Their tiny feet waddled in single file to the canteen housed in the building next door. While the rest of the students sat together around circular tables in groups of four, the boy whose question went unanswered earlier sat alone. Other students simply walked past him as he put his head down and silently chewed on his food. The chair beside him creaked as he raised his head to see Ms. Jody sitting there.

“Pun, did you not want to get your food? There’s no line at the food printer now.”

Pun bit his bottom lip and asked for Uncle Finn’s tuna on rice from a legendary hawker. Ms. Jody shot him a half-smile and pressed the touchscreen. The printer nozzle zipped across the build surface, injecting synthesized meat and vegetable filaments in a preset shape. Pun caught a stray stream of drool running down the left side of his mouth. The grilled tuna was fragrant and irresistible. Hawkers no longer needed to bring

customers to their space-restricted storefronts. Instead, brick-and-mortar owners made one percent perpetual royalty on their recipes. The machine sent Pun a thank you message after he made his order.

Ms. Jody looked at Pun, her heart sinking a little. While his peers were matched with optimal jobs post-graduation, Pun's personal data including aptitude, parental expectations, and test results, weren't conclusive. The algorithm couldn't place him on a career path just yet. That made Pun the only at-risk student in her class and a worry for Fah.

The in-depth monitoring of children began only after it couldn't be denied that Atadia had lost an entire generation of young adults soon after Detha and his PolitYouro system came into power. People suspected that the disappearances were an attempt to free themselves from Detha's unfair labor laws and centralized exchange scams. Some said that they were fed up with inequalities enforced, not corrected, by the system.

But the leading theory was about money. It was likely that the young adults had been depositing their digital assets in long-term accounts, some wouldn't be able to even make a withdrawal for a hundred years. They then got their bodies cryogenically frozen, to be woken up only when their assets yielded over 10000x returns.

Either way, the young adults in Atadia would rather disappear from the face of the earth than spend one more day in this city praised for its exceptionalism.

"Pun, should we go sit with your friends? They are waving at us now," Ms. Jody said. In truth, no one was looking at them but, without her prompting, Pun often chose to sit alone and looked out of the window instead of making friends. Just like right now, he was staring unblinkingly at a butterfly in the field just outside of the canteen. Fah nodded approvingly at her monitor and watched Ms. Jody rush over to a group of boys, asking one of them to go and invite Pun to join them. The child blinked up at her confusedly and looked around the room.

Pun was nowhere to be found.

## PUN

A purple butterfly flew up to the riverbank and Pun's legs were shaking with the effort to keep up. *Apatura Iris*, the purple emperor, his watch identified. Unlike other species of butterfly, purple emperors eschew flowers for aphid secretions and oak sap as part of their diets. In other words, they were different. Perhaps he and they were alike after all. Pun's breaths came out as short, shallow huffs as the butterfly was much faster than he was. He wished the butterfly would understand that he wasn't going to hurt it; he just wanted to draw a picture of its wings. Finally, he watched it disappear behind a deformed weeping willow twenty or so paces away.

The willow was suspended between life and death: half of the tree was gnarly and barren while the other half buckled under a riot of orange flowers. The branches curved and dipped low under their weight as if to plant a kiss on the river. A black butterfly darted in and out between the flowers, satisfied with the nectar that could nourish its body for multiple lifetimes.

Pun felt the blades of grass tickle his exposed calves as he waded towards the weeping willow, his little hands fishing for the sketchpad he kept in a hidden pocket in his red backpack. The tall grass reminded him of his father's warnings about camouflaged snakes in prairies but, in the end, his curiosity won out. He stepped into the thick vegetation, over the stones, and through the vines that blocked off a long-forgotten pavement. The boy winced as sharper blades made shallow slices on his skin. At least there were no snakes.

As he looked for the butterfly, the trunk of the weeping willow gave up on its effort to hold up the rest of the tree. As if Atlas had let the world fall, the bark split cleanly in two and the brightly-blooming half tumbled away from the dead trunk. The flowers fell flatly into the river, staining the turquoise water into a sea of orange blossoms. Surviving ones



floated gently around him, enveloping him in a surreal snow globe of willow petals.

He recoiled in shock and nearly fell into the water, but a bony hand reached out and snatched his collar and kept him from plummeting into the river.

An old lady had come to his rescue. Pun's eyebrows crept upwards. It was the same lady from the fortune teller shop.

"What lies ahead is a mystery," she said cryptically to the six-year-old. "Do you think the tree is still alive? Or is it as dead as it seems?"

The entire root system of the weeping willow seemed to have been

ripped out of the ground, some of them nearly touching the boy's face. The only part still standing was, ironically, the dead half.

He couldn't find his answer, but the butterflies soon returned to the flowers in the water.

"Well, boy, good thing I got here just in time. Otherwise, you might have ended up like this butterfly," the throaty whisper of the old lady brought him out of his reverie. She was in a threadbare purple dress, the color still vivid despite its age.

Still baffled by the rapid turn of events, Pun could only shoot back a quick nod. He began to notice his surroundings. The old lady's clothing was drenched in water. A faint cool breeze followed her every step. He looked at her hands and what lay on them.

"Oh, no, no, not this one," he exclaimed, observing the tattered butterfly in front of him for the first time. The once majestic black wings were shredded like ribbons and its body lay motionless in death. The old lady, moved by his innocent display of grief, cradled what remained of the butterfly and its wings gently in one hand.

"Look at this," she said, putting her free arm around Pun, palm on this shoulder.

"Make a wish with me." Her aged eyelids closed and the motion of her chest paused in concentration.

Pun, despite not believing in wishes and the supernatural himself, decided to follow her instructions. His eyes were still wet with tears. He joined her in meditation. He wished that the winged insect didn't have to die.

Pun felt a tickling sensation on his nose. He knew what it was, but couldn't bring himself to believe it. His eyes met the compound stare of the recently-dead butterfly, its black wings beating together in unison. It shot back up to the flowers, delighting in the opportunity to go for seconds.

Her other hand rested on his remaining shoulder. With a smile, she



whispered, “nothing is predetermined and no destination worth getting to can be reached alone.” He recited her words in his head, committing them to memory. “What do you want to be when you grow up? I saw the Enigma Cube in your sketchbook where did you find it?, can we expect great art from you? Do you want to be like the Great Laura and John Lê or have exhibitions at Sir Mic’s Gallery?” she said, grinning at him encouragingly.

He gave the question the serious consideration it deserved before he shook his head.

“My teacher said that art is for aristocrats and artificial intelligence. The calculations prove there is no way for me to get into a prestigious school and make a living from NFTs. My family saw my test scores and they think I should work just as a medium in case they ever need to communicate with a group of influential ghosts. They all had a good laugh about it.”

When he looked up, the old lady was gone, leaving behind a roughly sharpened graphite pencil hidden among the fallen leaves and branches. Pun squinted at the leaves, which had numbers and letters etched on

them as though they were part of its genetic makeup. A kaleidoscope of butterflies fluttered around the skeleton tree, replacing the fallen flowers with their wings. One could mistake them for sapling leaves emerging in spring.

Picking up the pencil, Pun pressed the tip firmly to his notebook and paused in thought. What a strange turn of events. The graphite became acquainted with the paper; together, they formed a peculiar fallen tree with mourning butterflies and tears made as an offering to nature's sacrifice. It was a work of art. It was a miracle. He looked at his drawing and exhaled with relief. Two questions engraved on the leaves by his feet echoed in his head.

“Do you believe the tree is alive? Though it is dead, can it still take on destiny?”







# CHAPTER 6

## MORTALITY



*“Hi, are you Meka?”*

**FAH**

Memory was a fickle thing, Fah thought as she laid in the hospital bed late at night, wondering if she would get to see Sandy. She wished they could have just one more conversation together as mother and daughter, the way they used to do when Sandy was younger. With a fine brush, Fah would straighten Sandy’s hair while telling her all about the wonderful places and new experiences she was destined for in Atadia. It was too late for such thoughts, she supposed. There would be no turning back now.

She could almost feel her son’s embrace. Meka had brought Pun to visit yesterday. He was old enough to understand the meaning of death. Fah had the Atadian education system to thank for that. Children learned of life and death by the age of five with no exceptions. Of course, this was to prepare them to receive their death dates through the mirrors. It was a simple fact of life, the government said. There was no point in sugarcoating harsh realities we would all need to face eventually.

Though her senses were dulled by the medicine dripping into her through an IV, Fah heard the creak of a door opening and turned her neck to greet her doctor with a weak nod. For now, it was all she could do.

“How are we feeling today?” the younger woman inquired, adjusting her stethoscope so that the ends balanced just right on her spotless white coat. She reached into her pocket for a pen and notepad, where she scribbled down Fah’s vitals and noted the painkiller dosage from the monitor. This gesture was redundant considering everything from the medication type to the dosage was computed automatically. Doctors were defiant in maintaining their bedside manner.

“Is it time?” Fah managed to eke out her question. She already knew what the answer was, given that this was the only reason a doctor would come in at this hour. The doctor pushed her glasses so that they perched higher on her narrow nose bridge.

“Almost. You’ve already declined our wish fulfillment offer but you wanted us to alter your last memories, correct? I can start the protocol in ten minutes.”

Fah suppressed a smile, reflecting on one of her favorite memories—the one that invaded her thoughts more and more lately.

February 10, 2046

“Why are you getting dinner with that nerd? His desirability score is way below your level. Diamond hand score is nonexistent. Please tell me you’re joking!” Jane’s slightly hysterical voice cut through the thick conversations around them in the cafe. Fah’s stare silenced her. She looked around at other patrons apologetically.

“There’s something special about him, okay? On Date My Professor, his students really liked him,” Fah said, blocking out her friend’s protests with a sip of her still-scalding tea. Jane was at her wit’s end. “He’s a 4! Even less than that weird Cardano maxi Mimi went out with last week. He’s probably a serial killer, or collects human wigs for fun, or--”

Fah didn't care to listen to more of Jane's speculation; she watched as Jane took her BiPhone out and swiped through more eligible professors on there. She forwarded them to her other friends around the table. All of the candidates scored much higher on the desirability matrix than the man Fah had chosen to meet tonight.

Mimi nodded vigorously, eager to prevent her friend from repeating her mistakes. "We can never be too careful. These guys are better, Fah, their profiles are all verified on-chain by the government. Oh, make sure you check their other avatars with Web-of-Wallets algorithm too, they might be dating someone else in other spaces!"

"Oh please, Mimi, not this guy. Look at his dating history. This is his first date! Definitely looks like the kind of guy that would bring their mom for moral support. Your facial features aren't compatible either—you look nothing alike! I don't think your baby would be very cute if you ended up with him. And I haven't even gotten to his savings, his student loan is through the roof. I'm not sure if that PhD is entirely worth it, honestly." A statistical study from decades earlier had shown that sharing similar facial features was a strong predictor of marital success. Jane briefly turned her focus towards Mimi and Fah breathed a sigh of relief.

"L-let's eat before the food gets cold," Fah stammered quickly, pushing the plates towards her friends.

"Oh, come on, don't change the subject. We're just worried about you. You literally have the highest desirability score in Atadia. We really don't want your social score to drop because of a bad date. That'll affect our scores too," Jane said, her words interspersed with strained laughter. Fah knew she meant well and was somewhat teasing, but her words contained truths.

Unaware of Fah's reactions, Jane continued rambling. "I guess it isn't that big of a deal. You could just go home if you hate him. There's plenty of fish in the sea, after all. At most we'll take a small hit to our social score. Here, let me help—I could get you the Moby Dick of fish. Mimi's a pro at metaverse cosmetics! You really need to get out of your

shell and...”

Fah barely heard the rest of her sentence. Her tea had gone cold enough to chug and she downed it. Her friend Jane grew up with four sisters and treated dating and fashion as elite sports in which to compete with her siblings. On the other hand, Fah was a bookworm only child of quiet parents; she did not enjoy leaving her comfort zone whatsoever.

“Look, I’m a platinum member on AtaDate, I can just make you a quick profile here with their new Ready-Player-Mate integration. Hold on,” Jane said, snapping a quick picture of Fah for a biometric verification before ticking the box for an “alluring” option and letting the app’s algorithm handle the rest.

“Ooh, let’s call you Esmeralda,” Jane said, proudly presenting a small avatar of Fah dancing on the table. This new Fah was wearing a red latex catsuit, moving confidently in front of the whole restaurant. The AR drew the attention of other patrons and waitstaff. By the time the little avatar made its witty introduction, all eyes were on her.

“This is more like it,” Jane said, letting out a small “kek” in satisfaction.

“I don’t know how to dance like that...” Fah interrupted weakly. She knew her friends were having fun. Mimi put Esmeralda in a few Portals Districts and reported back that she’d already received multiple offers.

“Look, this one guy named George gave you his only Atadian Handshake and owns an AtaDen Vision! Wait, there’s another one. His name’s Tom and he’s a millionaire with multiple robotics and ports businesses all over the world,” she squinted at his profile. “He now lives in Bali because he likes the sunset and the sound of the waves. His talent is... his ability to make girls do dolphin noises?” Even Mimi was taken aback by Tom’s hidden potential.

“Here’s another promising one but okay, I’m not sure about this part. He said he’s looking for a long-term relationship, but wants to liquidate the marriage automatically on Hadeswap whenever any children

you may have together reach the age of ten. He said he loves flares and capital efficiency and hates two things: teenagers and being illiquid...” Jane looked around at her friends’ amused faces. “Well, he also said you could verify his bedroom skills through augmented reality.” The whole table erupted into laughter. The audacity of straight men would never cease to amaze them.

To her credit, Jane knew that Fah hated the dating process and simply wanted to settle down. She adjusted the filter so that the dApp would only show men who were looking for a marriage contract ranging between fifty years to lifelong. The whole table got in on the action, using the “friends know best” function of the dApp to average their scores out and find the most suitable candidate.

“Someone your age with an IQ above one fifty...must interact with Lance the Philosopher guy in the Temple at least twice a month and score higher than the eightieth percentile of the population. You’d want someone decisive with enough savings to buy two houses in this lifetime. There shouldn’t have been more than three former partners in the past and those partners should give them at least four stars for the relationship. Oh and their parents should score at least 40 on the on-chain reputation metric among the exes,” Jane said, looking up at Fah, she nodded.

“I have sixty-nine candidates!” she announced triumphantly. The whole table offered to pay to sponsor Fah’s profile to show up on the first page of the man who’s currently ranked highest on their search.

“You could also just pick your soulmate? The government made you that contract when you were born,” Mimi said while Fah looked on skeptically. “Yours looks so much better than mine! And if you marry him, you’ll get a tax cut for the rest of your life. That doesn’t sound too bad?”

“Thank you all, but I’ve had enough input for today. I’ll go out with that researcher tonight and that’s all there is to it,” Fah said, effectively ending any further discussion.

“Fine, have it your way,” Jane said, pressing a button on her screen to get rid of Esmeranda’s hologram who continued to dance around on the table. “I don’t think a man you meet by accident at an AI convention could ever measure up to you, but hey, your life, your call.”

The table moved on to their meal with a silent agreement not to post any picture of the food on social media, lest their health scores went down because of all the carbs and cocktails.

This place really had good music taste. Bass strings, rhythmically plucked, accompanied a dancing piano melody. The sound of Bossa Nova enchanted the restaurant with an air of sweet tropical love.

At seven on the dot, a man sat down at a table in a dining room full of couples. He adjusted his white dress shirt he got from the YUNYUN designer store delicately, darting his eyes around the room in wait. He put his hands on his knees to stop them from shuffling in excitement.

He couldn’t have been more different from the waiter serving him his drink. The waiter strode through the restaurant as if were floating, barely disturbing the romance of the place. Fah saw the contrasting scene



and breathed a sigh of relief. At least the other person was as nervous as she was. It meant that they cared.

“Hi, are you Meka?” Fah greeted from behind the waiter. Meka’s face lit up as if she gave him the entire world instead of a simple hello. The seated man quickly left his sedentary position, moving deftly to pull out a chair for his date. For some reason, she found herself beaming back at him.

Meka turned to the waiter. “May I have the Backward Propagation, please?” Meka said, choosing the most masculine-sounding cocktail he could handle.

“I’ll have the 6BM then. I prefer something a little lighter,” Fah followed, ordering her signature drink. She visibly twinkled, finding her date’s worry over a small thing like cocktail ingredients somewhat endearing.

And just like that, two people began a new journey together. They’d somehow found each other on their own. It was the two of them against all odds.

~#~

“Wait! Stop!” Fah said, using the last of her strength to turn to the doctor before she could punch the code to alter her mind.

“I want to keep my memory. All of it.”

“Are you certain? Some of them might cause distress!” the doctor warned.

“Yes, I’m sure. That’s what it means to be human after all.”

## MEKA

Cold morning air blasted Meka's face from the hospital rooftop. He couldn't even remember walking out here. The wind howled at him, determined to remind him of Mother Nature's brutal indifference.

Though he was without the warmth of his coat, the pins and needles Meka felt were not from the cold. Numbness consumed him after he received a phone call from the hospital the day before. He replayed the message back and forth in his head, remembering each word as if he'd heard it a hundred times.

"I'm sorry, but your wife will not wake up from her coma, Mr. Meka. If you consent, we will disconnect her from life support now, as mandated by the Social Benefits Act D-1981"

Fah had never told him her death day, but he could make an educated guess. Upon hanging up, he rushed to the intensive care unit and watched helplessly as his wife struggled to breathe despite the support of the mechanical ventilator pumping oxygen into her lungs. Her lips were chapped from being intubated, but her cheeks were still faintly rosy with blood. She could still wake up, he told himself.

No, he reminded himself. She couldn't. The doctor said that there was no way to resuscitate her. The government permitted a grace period of a few days before they would mandate her removal from the machines sustaining her life. He was just prolonging the inevitable.

With a trembling hand, he pulled out a strange rock from a paper bag and placed it in Fah's still palm. A shard of ancient rock stuck out from its surface.

"This is a talisman that your mother entrusted me with. She told me it was a family heirloom. You had it on you when we first met."

~#~

Six months ago, Fah's memory began to slip. It happened right after Sandy left. The shock and grief of losing their daughter had reunited the couple, and Meka had moved back into the family condo within a few weeks. In retrospect, he couldn't exactly pinpoint the beginning of the end — it all seemed so innocuous. It started with a misplaced key. Then, the occasional timetable mishap. Soon, Fah was sent home from work, prescribed bedrest to recover from her fatigue. Meka too had thought she was overworking herself to cope with her daughter's disappearance. It wasn't until her health insurance terminated her policy that he realized his wife would not get better.

From then on, Fah spent her days at home either tending to their balcony garden or playing with Pun. She focused her remaining mental acuity on populating the garden with an assortment of cacti. Her fondness of cacti stemmed partly from their resilience and ability to survive in the harshest of conditions. She asked Meka to find Sandy and bring her back home, so that she could see her daughter one more time before she died. He didn't listen. Instead, Meka gave into his desperation, trying to find leading doctors and researchers who would take on his wife's mysterious illness.

He went to Mount Dronagiri in search of the mythical Sanjeevani, a plant the locals believed could revive the dead. He went to Norway for seaweed that could prolong lives, even when people were on their deathbeds. He infiltrated the Atadian black market, hoping to get Fah cryogenically frozen to wake her up when a cure had been found.

But miracles didn't exist. There was no philosopher's stone or fountain of eternal life. Fah was too frail for safe cryonics. By the time he admitted defeat and returned home, he'd lost four months with his dying wife. Regret ate at his sanity, corroding his mental fortitude and hitting him with "should have"s. He should have tried harder. He should have stayed home. He should have seen it coming. Each thought was more futile than the last. Even now, instead of holding her hand, he was out

on the hospital roof, leaving his wife to face her death while he wallowed in his solitude.

~#~

In the ICU, Fah's unconscious hand was clutching at the stone. The surface had warmed up since the moment it touched her hand the day prior. The shard pulsed with a faint green glow as if it were breathing. As she grew weaker, the light grew stronger.

~#~

Meka began to accept Fah's fate. The pair had shaped Atadia into what it was today. They worked under Detha, bringing his vision to life with the constant belief that everything in Atadia was there for a reason. But there was no explanation for her still body in the hospital bed. Technology, optimization, algorithms—none of them could change the fact that his wife was dying.

All morning, his Saga buzzed with sympathies and soothing words from friends and family. Many offered their condolences, but a nontrivial number asked him to simply let her go. They felt that it was his duty as a citizen to not waste public health resources on his deteriorating wife. They said that the sooner he let her go, the better off he would be.

He didn't doubt that, but he also knew the faster he pulled the plug, the bigger the payout would be for his relatives. They all received a cut if he didn't prolong Fah's life and "waste" the public resources and hospital space.

Meka stood on the balcony until the numbness spread across his entire body. It could have been minutes. It could have been hours. He was a man incapable of making a decision. He couldn't decide if he wanted to protest the system or simply bow down to it.



A nurse approached him with something in hand. It was a simple envelope made from mulberry paper, wrapped neatly with a red ribbon. He hadn't seen one of those since he was a boy. No one wrote letters any more in Atadia except...

Meka's eyes grew wide and he quickly opened it.

*Dear Meka,*

*My life partner, best friend, and happily ever after. I'm sorry for not preparing you for this day. By the time you see this email, my smart will has already been executed.*

*When I first met you, the dating algorithms were against it. They said I couldn't have been more incompatible with you. I know we believe these things to be infallible, but I'm glad they were wrong about us. Thank you for giving me a loving family and a life well-lived.*

*I feel bad about asking for more from you, but I want you to grant me two wishes. My first wish is for you to love and look after our children the way you've done for me. Please bring Sandy home and raise her and Pun*

*to be even better people than us. I believe in our Atadia, but I believe in our children more. I will look on them from afar.*

*My second wish is for you to live again. With this, all my personal data will be erased. I won't show up in your personal history or any paper trail. You have a long life left, and I want you to live it without regrets. I want you to find your passions again. I want you to fall in love again. I want you to live again.*

*At the end of the day, I'm still selfish. I tell you to move on, and yet I hope that you and the children think of me. I hope you think of me. I want you to look back on our life together with love and not regret. I love you.*

*Until we meet again.*

*Fah*

The handwritten characters became smudged with the tears dripping uncontrollably from his face. Meka dropped the letter and scrambled for the ward. He knew what his wife had done. He was too late. A strong gust of wind picked up the letter, carrying it into the night sky. He jumped down the stairs two - no, three - steps at a time. He made it to Fah's room and collided with her hospital bed, holding her in his arms for one last time. The hospital would come and remove her limp body any minute now.

He planted a kiss on her forehead, wiping his own tears from her face as he held it in a gentle caress. His bottom lip quivered and his body trembled on its own. He had broken bones and suffered from kidney stones before. But this was a different kind of pain—a level that he didn't know was possible. This was emotional pain, the kind that infiltrates one's bones and clenches one's heart in its grasp. He clawed at his throat, struggling for his air.

A calm voice from her doctor brought him back to the present. "Your wife is very brave. She erased herself from the system. When she

was losing consciousness, she wouldn't let us adjust her memories for a more peaceful death." Her words did not erase the acid in his blood, but it did help him reorient himself.

Meka lowered Fah back onto her bed, shaking his head with confusion. It was rare for people not to accept the memory alteration. Most people wanted to remember only good things before they took their last breath. They wanted to view their lives through rose-tinted glasses. This was one of Detha's most popular policies in Atadia.

"What were her last wishes?" he asked. The city did its best to carry out the dying wish of every one of its inhabitants. He knew full well that the doctor legally could not disclose any information on Fah.

"I'm sorry for your loss. The Ministry of Public Health is unable to offer you the 'Atadia Healing' VR experience currently. We have other VR experiences available. Please state your preference in this form," the doctor replied, ignoring his question entirely.

Meka left the hospital with a heavy heart, nothing mattered to him now that Fah was gone. They say that love fills one's world with color. Meka's grief drained his world of its splendor. The ash-gray winter sky and monochromatic Atadian streets only served to remind of the joyless journey ahead. Time seemed to dilate before him, unbearably long for a man who'd just lost his anchor. He couldn't bear to pick up his son from school just yet. He had no words to describe what they'd lost.

Fah wanted him to fall in love again. And he already had.

His desperation and fear from the previous six months had reminded him of how much he loved his wife. He loved her with all his heart, and it still wasn't enough.

He couldn't keep her.





# CHAPTER 7

## AWAKENING<sup>2</sup>



*“Are you truly free?”*

### **PUN**

**T**urn a little to the left. Can you look up to the top of the tree? Good. Hold that pose,” Pun said, tongue out, paintbrush in hand. His voice was one of many in a beautiful summer day in the park today. Birds chirped cheerfully and children laughed, running around the park like it was one big playground.

In a way, the Oasis was just that. A place for everyone. It was especially lively today. People took advantage of the remaining warm days before winter arrived and basked in the sun.

Pun twirled his brush a few more times, too fast for the passersby to guess the final product. Soon, the face of a small girl took shape on the paper.

“There you go.” He handed the drawing to the girl in question, who clasped her hands together with delight and thanked him before running to show off the portrait to her friends. She reminded him a bit of his sister: soft-spoken, polite, and kind.



It'd been eight years since his sister left home without a trace. It was also seven and a half years since his mother passed away, which might as well have also been the day he lost his father too.

For months, Pun watched his father waste away, only half-heartedly going to work or staying in bed. Then, one day, it was like someone flipped a switch. His father began spending most of his working hours coding or searching for something on the screen. When that happened, Pun was left to fend for himself. His father stopped talking about expectations and careers and the future, so Pun turned to the only thing he had that still brought him joy, his art.

Pun shook his head, for it was useless to dwell in the past. He put the brushes away, rolling the rest of his paper and packing them all away in his leather satchel. As he took one last look at the bench to make sure he didn't forget anything, he saw it.

An emerald shard was on the ground as if it was carefully placed there. It was startlingly out of place here in a park full of children and trees. Pun picked it up, absentmindedly rubbing the pendant on his neck. They were similar, but not identical.

He held the gem to his ear. Something told him to listen carefully.

~#~

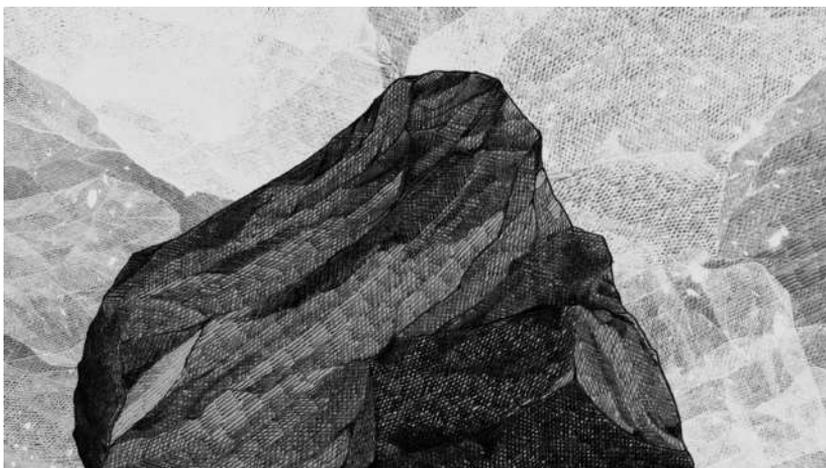
Political tension had flared overnight. Social media platforms and metaverses began to flood with data-backed criticism of Detha's government. The people, fed up with rampant systemic inequality, alleged political assassinations, and disappearances, had collectively lost it. Pun watched the protest unfold through a hologram, raptured.

“Did you know that six whales control our entire city?”

“...and what about the children? Only one person should be in charge of deciding their fate! Why do I have to put my child's future in someone's invisible hand?”

“It doesn't matter if there's a million more of us working class. This system was built to maintain the status quo for the elite.”

“We need to abolish this oppression. The billionaires are swimming in profit in their sleep and we the workers are just here to help them dodge their taxes without as much as fair compensation.”



“Have you ever wondered where our lost generation went? Where are the people aged eighteen to thirty? They either killed themselves or got their body cryogenically frozen so they could be brought back to life when the world gets better! This is how bleak their future had become. We can’t trust the PolitYouro system anymore!”

“Atadia is quietly throwing away our own future, just for the sake of a few people in the ruling class right now. You need to stop trusting the damn mirror and dive into the water. You might be surprised by what you find there.”

Instead of a usual busy Monday morning, everything outside of the Oasis had been frozen to a standstill. The Protectors had stormed into the open for the first time. Reprogrammed sentient droids, silenced artists, laid-off white-collar workers, and disgruntled environmentalists banded together in a militant coalition. Enlisting the help of disillusioned ordinary Atadians, they began their march.

\$ATA wallets sealed shut, preventing people from accessing their money. Traffic lights turned red, and stayed red. Anti-Detha propaganda plastered advertising holograms that once promoted data-driven insurance and dating services. On the ground, Atadians covered their heads as packages rained from the sky, ditched by delivery drones as they veered off to drop Protectors leaflets over the city instead.

Atadia, the algorithm city, was paralyzed.

Police barriers were not enough to hold back the Protectors, who breached them en route to the Basilisk Temple. Law enforcement was powerless against the force of the people. Their ears covered, the Protectors made their way in, unaffected by nearby flashbang detonations.

As if in concert, the deafening chaos that washed over the city vanished into dreadful quiet. Holograms across Atadia went dark, before broadcasting live footage of a dark room with a small bench. No one knew where it was. As the city held its breath, a girl emerged and sat down in silence. Though she was only in her twenties, she was a sickly pale that



almost appeared translucent in the dim lights, like someone who had last seen the sun decades ago. Her wispy chestnut brown hair dangled messily behind her back, unkempt and disheveled. She was clad in a dress so worn down that it was impossible to tell if the color had once been anything but gray. The camera zoomed into her face, which had a green blindfold across her eyes.

Untying the knot behind her head, she took the blindfold off, revealing shining orbs where her eyes used to be.

“It’s time for us to take back our lives.”

With a single phrase, the Protectors and their mob erupted into

a battle cry. Young people stormed the streets while many of the older ones still couldn't make head or tail of the situation. They had all become too complacent in their comfort. They had become too familiar with ignoring the truth.

“Have you ever wondered if your lives have gotten better, just as the government said it did?” the girl on the screen continued. “Are you truly free? Does your left hand even belong to you?” The city fell into a hush. Whispers of worry and fear took place all over.

“Atadia owns everything you have. Every emotion and feeling is recorded. Everything you ever wanted has been put in your head by the city. They own everything you are and everything you will be. They own your past. Your present. Your future. They own you.

“Atadia makes all your decisions for you. You are a cog in their machine, utterly replaceable. You are no different from a delivery drone or a self-driving car around here. You simply serve a purpose. A purpose of someone you don't even...”

In one corner of the city, a young man rapidly wrote down a note to build his rebuttal on.



“The wellbeing of our lives and our society cannot be measured by simple economic indicators. The progress we’ve made by throwing away morals, democracy, and humanity is no progress at all. For too long, we’ve buried our heads in the sand, comfortable in our ignorance while our leaders assassinate their opponents in the middle of the street. Atadia’s future—our bright future—was extinguished to fuel the fortunes of the powerful. Just like my future, and that of my unborn child.”

In a shabby house in an unfashionable part of the city, an elegant lady in red mumbled to herself, looking at the same hologram displayed all over her house.

“...then I found these people. They’ve opened my eyes and showed me the truth.”

The Protectors had reached the Hall of Mirrors right outside the Lambda room where the magic mirror resided.

“I was furious when my child wasn’t allowed to make it into the world. My womb underwent an abortion out of the city’s will, not of my own. His blood is on the hands of the City Lab, who said that a teen mother would disrupt their planned system. But I’m not angry any more. I’m glad no child of mine had to live in a city where the odds are so stacked against them. This house of cards was built to oppress us and stop anyone from thinking critically. We will change this. We will change the world so that not one more innocent child has to grow up in our current reality.

“This is not the last you’ll hear of us. We are the Protectors and we will show you the light. We are here in your house of worship. I have two volunteers with me here...”

The broadcast went to the Basilisk Temple where two people in wheelchairs with heads covered in burlap sacks came into frame. A few more people were busy moving mirrors into the room.

“The mirrors foretold that these two men would drop dead within the next minute. Let’s see.”

The city of Atadia stiffened at the thought. Some shut their eyes outright, refusing to watch certain death unfold. The remaining few were skeptical enough that they watched with anticipation.

“Five”.

“Four.”

“Three.”

“Two.”

“One.”

A body on the right began convulsing violently. He thrashed and howled for a few seconds before his body lay motionless on the chair, foaming at the mouth.

Someone got up and uncovered the volunteers’ faces. The dead man had his eyes wide open, his last thought was obviously filled with fear. The other volunteer, still very much alive, was touching his empty eye sockets with trembling hands. A collective gasp rang throughout the city streets.

“As I said, you belong to Atadia. Nothing you feel, nothing you see is truly real.” As she finished her sentence, hooded figures from the Protectors took positions in public spaces. Each equipped with a shoulder-launched rocket, they fired their armaments into the night sky. Instead of flying up and out, the rockets collided with something mid-air, shattering against an invisible barrier that encompassed the city.

Thousands of pieces of debris that was once Atadia’s artificial sky rained on its residents.

“Let us live our lives with free will. Let no invisible force map our destinies. Let us remove our eyes, so that we—” The broadcast went dead. “BREAKING: FUNDS FROM THE FTX FRAUD FINALLY RETURNED IN FULL. SOLANA SUMMER IS FINALLY HERE.” The government had managed to interrupt the signal and the daily news program resumed.

In an old warehouse at the edge of the city, a SWAT team and execution droids burst through the doors. They were ordered to terminate the girl but, by the time they arrived, there was nothing left but the corpse of the unlucky volunteer. The police force managed to slowly round up much of the Protectors, but the remaining ones managed to broadcast their feed one last time. This time, it was of Sandy, who stood defiantly before the camera without her eyes. Behind her, Pun looked on worriedly.

The mirrors shattered into small pieces. Tens of reflections of various sizes and angles continued to stare back at the audience. On the broken shards, faint green letters appeared. All bore the same message.

“Date of Death Not Found.”



## MEKA

On a cloudy evening in June 2057, anvil-shaped cumulonimbus loitered menacingly over Atadia. Their darkness cloaked the city in a dreadful gloom. If anyone looked closely, though, they'd see most of the clouds congregating around the inverted pyramid floating in the north of the city. A behemoth of steel and glass coated in a layer of one-way vantablack, it almost behaved like a black hole, sucking in the surrounding light.

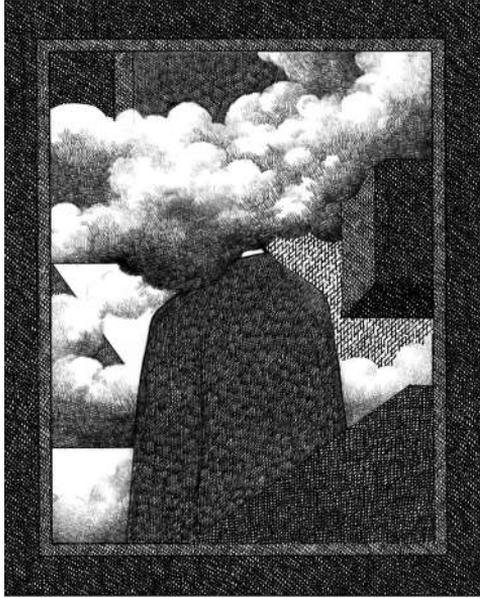
The pyramid's enormity unsettled the children. They'd pester their parents for answers. They wanted to know what the building was doing in the sky. They wanted to know who built it. More than anything, they wanted to know why the building was staring back at them. These questions all went away as soon as they attended a service at the Basilisk Temple, of course.

The parents couldn't see the building. They all attributed the questions to their children's overactive imaginations. And yet, not one of them cared to look up to see for themselves. There was no reason to. After all, the sky did not change in Atadia unless the state willed it. People went about their lives in blissful ignorance, unaware that the pyramid had been descending since early morning.

It stopped right above the Oasis. The artificial sunlight and storm-cloud were mismatched today. The strange sight should have served as a warning for the people, but none of them heeded it.

On the top floor of the pyramid, a man in his late forties stared uncomprehendingly at his own nameplate, inscribed in a wooden block on his desk. In contrast to the rough exterior, no expense had been spared for the interior of the pyramid.

Each room was decorated with artifacts from the  $\mu$  civilization, an ancient civilization one hundred thousand years long gone. The  $\mu$  civilization was a high-tech society that buried its scientific marvels in



a deep underground vault just before its population went extinct. Aradian historians attribute the downfall of the  $\mu$  civilization to a coronavirus pandemic that caused widespread death, famine, and led to the collapse of the civilian government. The royal family used  $\mu$ 's highest technology, cryostasis, to preserve their bodies for a return to a more livable era. Though a military government rose in its place to try to stem the bleeding, the  $\mu$  civilization had devolved into anarchy. The subsequent infighting eliminated the remaining survivors.

Spiral staircases made way for hallways lined with tapestries and silk carpets. The entire building had a white marble floor linked together with intricate stainless wires. The wires sometimes glowed with lights in pulses. Watching the light made you feel like the building was a living, breathing thing.

On the executive floor, the same man sat in the same spot, as if he was waiting for something. Instead of his nameplate on the table, he

looked outside, chewing his bottom lip worriedly. The clouds gathered around the windows, blocking him from seeing anything else.

A voice came through the speaker.

“It’s time, Meka. Execute the order.” Detha had arrived.

“Right, ser.”

“We’ve been through this. Advancement requires sacrifices. We must cleanse the world of evil to make way for a brighter future.”

“Yes ser, but do you think it’s a bit extreme to use our tool of justice to eliminate-”

“That’s enough,” Detha interrupted him. “Fah would have wanted this.” A critical hit. Meka nodded, pushing back the bile rising in his throat before reaching out to sign a paper in front of him. The simple practice of writing down one’s signature on a piece of paper seemed out of place in this floating building full of screens, but Meka tried to with a shaky hand anyway. His hands wouldn’t move, though. His fingers trembled. The chip in his eyes sensed the change in his emotions and stimulated his nervous system to generate more endorphins. Meka was tempted to give into their analgesic effect. Sign the papers and fall into painless relief, he thought.

“No,” he muttered softly. The speaker went quiet. He quickly unplugged it, not wanting to hear what his boss had to say. An awful minute of silence scared him.

Meka could feel the hairs on his neck stand on end. Detha’s voice filled the room. This time, it didn’t come from the speakers. It came from within Meka’s own mind.

~#~

Three years after Fah died, Meka threw his life into work. Before that, he was an efficient, reserved man who worked the required hours before rushing home to spend time with his family. None of his

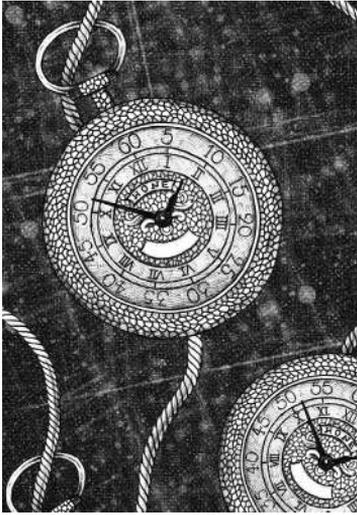
colleagues could predict how far Meka would progress as a widower. He'd learned to work the room and gain favor with executives, cementing his position in the government when he was appointed a committee position in the PolitYouro, then the chief justice of Atadia, all within four months.

Since Fah's passing, bitter coffee and junk food replaced her in the condo. He needed them to stimulate the remnants of taste he had left. Meka couldn't bring himself to feel anything. His days were spent in a supine position in his recliner plugged into an AR headset. He spent half of his time allowing the AR to take control of his memory, choosing to remember Sandy's laughter and Pun's enthusiasm for football when he was a toddler. Meka preferred augmented reality to his own. The AR put Fah across from him at their dining table. In this artificial world he'd created, she was always smiling. He used software to pretend he could still hold Fah's hand when he touched his own. And yet, her hand felt cold and inhuman. No software could bring her back. The apartment was left as if she was still alive. All her clothes hung in the closet. Her makeup stayed on the vanity. His once loving home had become a mausoleum.

Every night at three in the morning, Meka jolted awake. His brain seemed to work best at that time when the rest of the city slept. Each time it happened, he pulled up a hologram screen and began writing unrecognizable code. Days turned into months and before he knew it, years had gone by. The promise he had made to his wife played over and over again in his head. His disappointment with himself and his inability to change her fate made him obsessed with preventing unnecessary deaths. He presented the Crime-Zero system to Detha when he perfected it.

~#~

Meka shoved the papers away from him, trying to put something between himself and Detha's voice, which grew louder with his quickening heartbeat. Meka couldn't bear to look. He shut his eyes,



readying himself for his fate. Detha's answer surprised him.

"I think you may need some convincing," Detha now spoke with a voice that was not his own. It was Meka's voice. It was like he was talking to himself.

"Why?" Meka croaked. Detha knew what he was really asking. He was all-knowing.

"Meka, what is it that all life strives towards? Countless people before us have asked this question ever

since the very first of us learned to start fires. But the answer has been staring us in the face this whole time."

"Living creatures live in order to continue living. Natural selection dictates that those who are stronger, fitter, and smarter are destined to live on while the weak are weeded out by competition. Government exists to protect the weak from this fate, so that they cannot be exploited by the strong. What happens when the rule of law breaks down? A future where mafias can plunder from hardworking shop owners and mobs can overthrow civilian governments is no future at all. That is why we need Crime-Zero—to protect the weak who cannot protect themselves. It is truly the greatest advancement in Atadian society since the smart mirror system."

Meka could feel goosebumps forming beneath his shirt. He began to shiver. This was truly a terrifying creature. Not because of absolute power, but because Meka found himself agreeing with Detha's words. It filled him with a righteous pride: that his work would embolden the innocent against society's worst. Speech truly was the most dangerous skill of all. Detha's words ensnared his mind and bewitched his thoughts. Meka felt empowered to sign off on Crime-Zero and unleash its full force

on the rebels. Only by doing so would his vision for a brighter Atadia be secure. He glanced over at the smart mirror at his desk. Numbers coalesced on the display. His death date reminded him of what he was about to do. No, he couldn't do it. Signing the paper would mean signing the death warrants of countless Atadians. He stood up from his desk, pen in hand. Their families would forever be incomplete. They would have an empty seat at the dinner table every night. They would have someone they'd always be waiting for. Just like him.

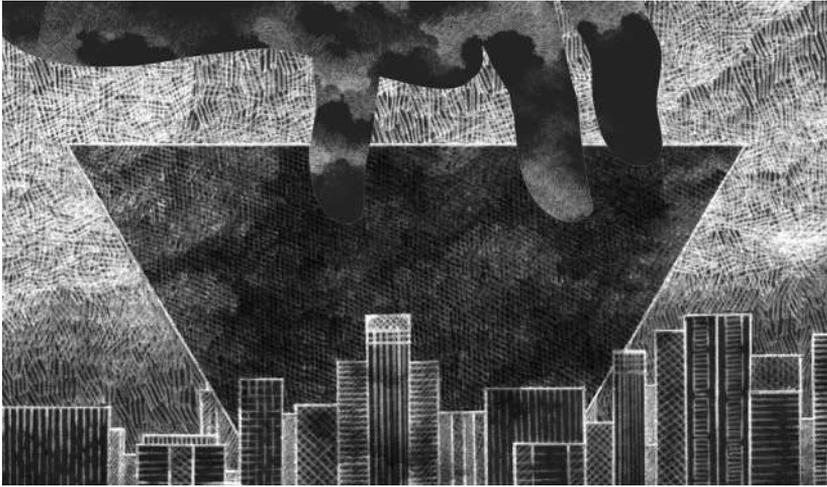
Meka Klinchun dropped his pen and let it tumble to the floor. He was frozen with fear, and understandably so. The nib stained the white marble with blue ink as it dented irreversibly. It would be the only thing he spilled today. His hands were still trembling, fingers locked as though the pen was still between them.

“You truly are a fool of the highest rank. Always have been. Our data collection wasn't for Atadia's benefit — I used it to search for my fellow  $\mu$  brethren to rebuild our world from scratch. I have cheated death once before, hundreds of millennia ago, and I will do so once again. Using your Crime-Zero system, I will ensure that nothing, natural or otherwise, will be able to touch me.”

Meka looked on in stunned horror, knuckles white from gripping onto his chair for dear life. Meka watched helplessly as his right arm began to move against his will. Detha was controlling his body somehow. His hand picked up a pen and he uncapped it, holding it dangerously close to the paper.

“Thank you for your hard work, you pathetic Salariman. Be a good dog and go die already.” Detha forced Meka's hand to sign the form. Meka watched helplessly as a delivery drone snatched the paper from his desk and dropped it off to his robot secretary.

As soon as it was done, the hologram screen in front of Meka began beeping rapidly. The screen displayed hundreds of pins with the same warning sign, “Death Day: Today.” The notifications kept pouring in and the screen soon filled with nothing but the identical deadly messages.



Meka couldn't take it anymore. He got up from his chair, wading through the sea of holograms and stormed towards the fire exit. He couldn't stand to stay in the room even for a minute more.

Meka reached desperately for his cigarette, his only source of warmth and comfort. He pushed the door to the roof open. His heart was beating in his throat. His hands were too unsteady to start his lighter. He threw the lighter away, sprinting towards the edge of the building. The wind carried his feet further along with each step. He clambered onto the small guardrail, feet balanced precariously on the edge.

From here, he could almost see the entire city of Atadia. All around Meka, armies of drones flew out from the pyramid. Some of the drones were controlled from inside the building while the rest were autonomous execution drones, authorized to end human lives without hesitation. Meka looked up to the sky, trying to get an answer he knew wasn't going to come. He could do it. He could jump.

And jumped he did.







# CHAPTER 8

## ENEMY WITHIN



*“It’s always been you, hasn’t it?”*

### MEKA

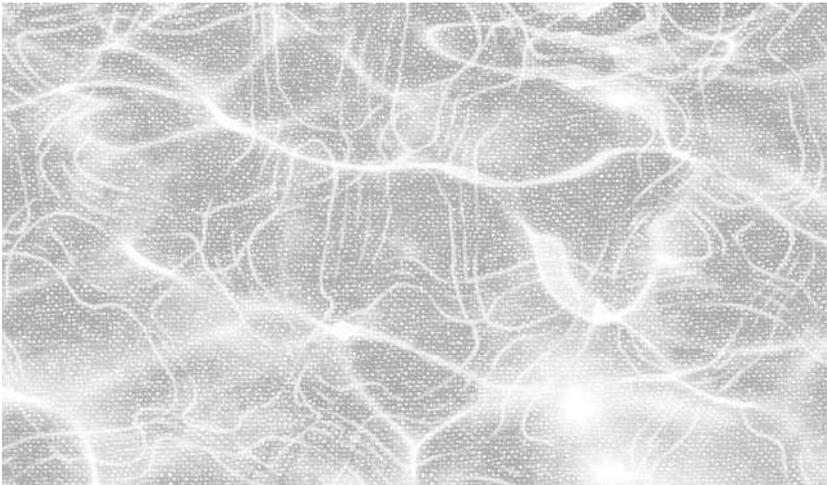
Meka couldn’t remember what happened to him during his fall from the heavens. His memory of his descent was blurred by the emotional turmoil eating him from the inside out and the gale-force wind that ripped past his ears and buffeted him around like a pebble being shaken inside a can. The strong winds forced him to close his eyes, so he never saw the ground coming. He blacked out in an instant, though he didn’t remember it. After what felt like an eternity in the darkness, a thought crossed his mind. He was dead, wasn’t he? Wait, that wasn’t right: he couldn’t be thinking these thoughts if he were. Meka was wrapped in the tight embrace of a set of vines that enveloped his body. The warm water that surrounded him drenched his clothing, but the shelter it provided meant that Meka didn’t care so much.

Meka noticed that he couldn’t hear Detha’s voice any more. For the last few months, Detha had taken residence in Meka’s mind. Meka thought he was going mad. Here, in this tranquil place, Meka was at

peace. The quietness of his mind was the relief that he had been seeking for ages.

Opening his eyes, Meka saw the brilliant turquoise hue of the water and, swimming up to the surface, marveled at the dramatic cavern that rose above him. The currents gently brought Meka to the shore and deposited him on the silky, pale sand. The sand was more like a plush velvet than a collection of mineral particles. He grasped a handful, watching it gradually run through his fingers. The scent of fresh food and cheerful conversation caught his attention. This wasn't the Oasis, but he felt like this place was somehow important.

Meka frowned. There wasn't an inch of Atadia that he didn't know about, thanks to the City Lab's data collection prowess. And yet, this place defied his expectations. The soft crackling of fire and chatter filled him with a nostalgia he hadn't felt in years. Was it a sense of home, comfort, or even both? Meka didn't really have the energy to ponder; his mind was racing to digest the view before him. He squeezed the remaining water from his clothes and staggered to an open lounge area where a local news channel broadcasted live.



A grainy video played, showing a side of Atadia Meka didn't want to see. A month after the Crime-Zero system was launched, swarms of autonomous drones flew overhead, blocking out the sunlight through their sheer numbers. He had been asleep for a month. They said that if one listened carefully on a faraway hill on a peaceful day, one could hear the soft buzzing of millions of propellers that faded into the background. All crimes from misdemeanors to felonies were promptly eradicated. The government expanded the system for anti-corruption efforts within state agencies and the stock market.

Overnight, Meka's name was known to all Atadians, who christened him the true defender of justice. Many grieved for his passing, as he got the chance to witness the fruits of his labor. Few in the general public actually knew how Crime-Zero worked, but it was purported to detect minuscule variables that cause crimes, including seemingly irrelevant factors like wind direction and air pressure. As soon as the system detected a potential criminal, law enforcement would intervene before any harm took place. Detha hailed it "Atadia's greatest contribution to human civilization." Prevention is better than cure, they said.

Meka balled his fists as a news anchor heaped more praise on Detha. Crime-Zero was Meka's final requiem for Detha and the cabinet. Unlike what others had assumed, he didn't do it to advance his career. He did it to realize the dream he shared with the woman he loved. He'd wanted to make the city into a utopia, a place without crime and suffering.

While other couples bickered over what to make for dinner, Meka and Fah spent their time in the abstract world. Four hours past midnight, three glasses of tea down, and far beyond the waking hours of most people, the two would talk away the hours on the loveseat in their living room, chatting about the meaning of life and the likes of the Ship of Theseus until the sun came up. They both thought technology had all the answers. Society could be regulated without bias if left in the hands of algorithms instead of humans.

When Meka returned from his daydream, he was surrounded by a flock of people with bandages and cloth covering their eyes. An assortment of Atadians of all ages and sizes sat by him in the open space, looking towards him. He knew they were blind, but somehow he had a strange feeling they saw him. He winced as he tried to stand up straight. When he hit the water, he survived with severe injuries; the vines broke his fall, but they did not leave him unscathed.

He had one question on his mind: who is Detha? The dark ruler of Atadia was a mysterious man that few people had ever seen, never mind interacted with. Meka stared into the distance, trying to understand what had transpired a month ago.

“Are you here to become one of us?” one of them asked him.

“Who are you people?” Meka answered their question with a question of his own.

“The Protectors. We, along with some of the remaining OG Atadians, are the ones who will bring Atadia back to the light,” another replied. Meka frowned. His experience at Atadia City Lab told him that these Protectors were actively detracting from Atadia’s growth. Their rebellious activities went against the government’s efforts to make the city a better place for everyone.

“We know the thoughts in your mind, and we know who you are, Meka Klinchun,” a withered-looking girl stepped forward. Her features were clearly young but at the same time reminded him of someone decades older. Her face was gaunt and her hair was a frizzy blond tangle. “Do not look at us with such a disapproving gaze. You of all people should know that Detha is the true enemy of the people,” she said, peeling back layers of his belief in his cause.

“We discovered these in our eyes. A fallen Protector gave us his eyes so that we could finally see.” The girl produced a tiny integrated circuit that she pinched between her fingers. “The chip creates a voltage in our heads that severs the connections in our neurons. It communicates

with some hidden server through a satellite link. When this thing fully activates, the potential difference instantly causes death.”

Meka was silent. It all made sense now. Her memory loss, her gradual but unstoppable decline, her death. The months he spent scouring for a cure were futile because her condition was artificial, not natural. But that could only mean one thing. Her illness was no play by fate. Her decline was no unlucky coincidence. Her death was commanded by Atadia itself and he was powerless to do anything about it.

Looking out to the dark sky in the video feed, Meka could remember each word he’d exchanged with Fah in their youth as if it had all just happened yesterday. Their dream was within his reach. Implemented a different way, the perfect society they’d wanted could’ve been achieved. His mind would wander to faraway places but would always falter when it wondered whether Crime-Zero was right for Atadia.

“They must be eliminated,” Detha had once whispered in his ears. The same thing he had been saying for nearly a year. “The rebels are standing in the way of the perfect society. The future your wife wanted. Do you really want her death to mean nothing?”

“I used to hear him in my thoughts. He was in my dreams, too. For some reason, it’s stopped since I ended up here,” Meka revealed. A particularly old Protector stepped forward, waving his wrinkled hands about in an effort to touch Meka’s arm. He grabbed a gentle hold of it.

“It seems that he is trying to merge his consciousness with yours. Here in the depths of the Oasis, algorithms are powerless. Though he is still inside your mind, you are out of reach of his mind raids as long as you are with us,” the man said. Meka thought of how Detha told him that he cheated death once before. He had heard rumors of brilliant  $\mu$  scientists who discovered a way to transfer consciousness after death. Detha must have been the result of these trials.

At that point, Meka couldn’t distinguish Fah’s wishes from Detha’s. Their voices had blended into some amalgamation that he

couldn't separate. A doctor had diagnosed him with dissociative amnesia. What used to be vivid memories suddenly faded into the same shade of gray, then gradually blurred into void. The screen changed scenes. The sun was setting over the edge of the horizon, but the drones still flew all over the city. Their usual quiet hums became resonant, escalating into an unbearable roar. Meka cupped his hands around his ears, trying his best to block out what he had made. Oh, how he wished his amnesia would make him forget this instead. With a glance at his Saga, the ground below him morphed into a memory scene.

Two children, a young boy and a slightly older girl, kicked a ball around with their mother while their father sat in the bleachers, snapping photos enthusiastically while cheering them on. The girl burst into laughter as she weaved the ball through the boy's defenses, topping it off with a nutmeg to boot. The boy, frustrated, stuck out a leg and tripped his sister as she tried to rush past him. Her white jersey became stained with dirt and stray blades of grass. The boy snickered. Apparently, her hair met the same fate as her shirt. The two of them tackled each other playfully, trying to give the other a piece of their mind. Meka enveloped himself in the perfect memory, hoping to escape from his reality, at least for a little while.

The screams over the video feed interrupted him.

~#~

The other swarms dropped bombs indiscriminately. Their sheer numbers negated the need for precision weaponry. The explosions wiped out overground cryonics chambers. Liquid nitrogen vapor seeped from the craters in the ground. Rows of chambers shattered along with the preserved bodies inside them. The damage disrupted power supply to the remaining chambers. Without the equipment to keep them frozen, their high conviction patients began to thaw in excruciating pain. Cries of

anguish drowned out the drones' buzz and the background explosions. The scene shook Meka from his virtual haven. He looked around, but couldn't bring himself to watch. The worst part of it all was that he knew he was wrong. The hesitancy he held in that moment in the Pyramid was now replaced by a caustic admission of his own wrongdoing. The system he and Fah dreamed of was meant to reduce suffering, not be the cause of it. Meka pulled his hands from his ears and tore out strands of his hair.

"Send me back up there. I need to do something," Meka asked of the Protectors around him, who shook their heads disapprovingly.

"Stay here. You have suffered enough, poor vehicle of Detha," the girl rested a hand on his right shoulder.

"I can't stop him without getting closer," Meka stated. He stared at a prominent figure the Protectors called Elder Sima, who stared back without eyes. After a long thirty seconds of back-and-forth looks, the Elder who still looked to be in his thirties whistled. A vine descended from the cavern roof.

"We won't stop you, but be warned: he will mind raid you as soon as you return. But before you go, we have prepared a CryoStaking chamber for everyone here, including you. If you wish to leave this world behind, there's a place for you," he said, gesturing towards a room lit faintly with a blue glow where cold vapor was spilling out from behind the door. "Goodbye Meka Klinchun. We must join our brethren on the surface," the Elder said.

Meka held onto the vine as it pulled him upward. He heard the soft chanting of "WAGMI WAGMI WAGMI" as he ascended. It whisked him through layers of water to the surface. He waded ashore, allowing himself a moment to breathe.

On the surface a surviving Protectors fighter took cover behind a sequoia tree. His middle-aged eyebrows furrowed as he aimed his railgun at a drone. He ditched the usual radar-guided missile for an unguided weapon to prevent the drones from locking onto him. Their onboard

systems had not spotted him. The weapon came to life as thousands of amperes of electric current flowed through the guide rails. Faraday's Law and the electromagnetic force launched a tungsten bolt that vaporized its target. However, the rest of the drone swarm quickly computed his location based on the projectile's ballistics. One drone zoomed at him, detonating an explosive charge that embedded a rod into his frontal lobe. The man dropped dead instantly.

The remaining squads of Protectors led by Captains Disentme and Dakata blended into their surroundings. Their gazes, cold as ice, gave nothing away. They remained motionless. Dead bodies lay scattered in the Oasis fields, obscured by the tall grass and corn plants. They were barely more than landscape. A wave of drones tried to breach the Oasis, but they bounced uselessly off of the invisible barrier. The unlucky few that attempted to brute-force their way in were jammed with some unknown signal and fell out of the sky. The second wave of drones, with their inertial guidance systems, were unaffected by the jamming and cut through the security system. Their autonomy answered to no one, so no one, no algorithm was responsible for their actions. The sight that met Meka reminded him of what he had to do. Though talking felt like coarse sand down his throat, he mumbled breathlessly into his Saga. A mixture of adrenaline and dread arrested his words. He forced the words through them.

"City Lab, terminate Crime-Zero under the Abuse of Power Clause," he spat out and the WoW-R2 ring accepted the commands. He knew full well that he was far safer presumed dead and not opposing the most powerful man in Atadia, but he had to do something. His virtual assistant confirmed his request.

## **PUN**

Across the city, unbeknownst to Meka, enforcer droids surrounded Sandy and Pun. Though the droids were humanoid, they lacked any

semblance of mercy. The two stood their ground, retreating to their last stand beneath the ancient weeping willow. Pun nearly tripped over the roots as he backpedaled to get away from the approaching bots.

“Do you remember this place?” A familiar voice rang in his mind. Pun turned around to look for his mother. He hadn’t heard her voice since the emerald gem had guided him to the Protectors.

He tugged on Sandy’s shirt sleeve. This was the place where life and death crossed paths. It was here that he saw magic happen once before. The black butterfly crushed beneath the fallen branches had returned to life through their fervent wishes. Surely, the magic could happen here once again. Pun brought his hands together and closed his eyes gently. Sandy glanced over at her brother. She was puzzled at first, but his nod told her everything she needed to know. She joined him in meditation as the droids closed in. He said nothing to his sister, but he knew that they both wanted the same thing: to be with their father once again. Their relationship had buckled since Sandy left and Pun followed her. Right now, however, they needed Meka more than anyone.

Before they could finish the job, a flight of butterflies descended from the willow tree. The sweet scent of nectar accompanied their arrival. Their kaleidoscopic wings enveloped the pair like a whirlwind of petals. When the butterflies dispersed, Sandy and Pun were nowhere to be found.

## **MEKA**

“Atadia City Lab, confirm all attacks ceased?” Meka asked, waiting for confirmation from his system. An affirmative response came through. He breathed a quick sigh of relief.

“I need the location of Sandy Klinchun and Pun Klinchun,” he continued. His nervousness lingered in the air. Usually, the algorithm had no problem locating Atadians in fractions of seconds but, this time, it was taking too long. Way too long.

“No vitals detected for Sandy Klinchun or Pun Klinchun.”

It was the answer he had hoped with every fiber of his being to not hear. Meka nodded as the message sunk in. Self-loathing tore a hole through his gut while guilt stole his knees from under him. His bottom lip quivered, a facial tic that made itself known whenever he was overwhelmed with emotion.

“Please give me a report on the death toll versus the system’s social benefits.” He couldn’t bring back his children, but he could at least hide behind the greater good.

Less than a second later, the computer dutifully reported back. “Within the last twenty-eight minutes, twenty thousand seven hundred and ninety-two people have died. Five thousand two hundred people were injured. Their average value per society was less than zero and the algorithm from Crime-Zero determined that your action was justified.”

To his surprise, the justification made no difference. Meka couldn’t stop the words escaping his mouth. “Please...please send the ambulance to all the injured people. Please try and find Pun and Sandy, they—” Before he could finish the sentence, a sharp pain struck him in his right temple. He was thrown sideways by the force, staggering as he tried to regain his balance. Meka touched the side of his head, trying to figure out what happened. A wave of nausea overcame his defenses and he threw up. When he regained his bearings, he looked down to see his shirt covered in blood, not vomit. The building tilted beneath him and he collapsed, clutching at his skull.

“The defender of Atadia. What a pity,” A voice inside his head spoke with distaste. Meka whirled around, looking for where the voice came from. No, he was alone in the Oasis field. There was nobody there and nowhere for anyone to hide. “It would have been better for the both of us if you had simply disappeared. You should have retired gracefully and embraced the perfection that is Crime-Zero. Meka opened his mouth to retort but found his throat constricted by an invisible force. Detha’s



voice continued to torment him. He tried to free himself from the invisible grasp, but he couldn't free himself from something that wasn't there.

“I do like seeing pitiful beings suffer. I am going to enjoy this.”

Meka struggled, kicked, and squirmed, but he couldn't move even an inch. Detha continued to laugh, mocking Meka's useless struggle. Meka tried to summon his own security drones to defend himself from Detha, but it was useless. The Crime-Zero system was after him; treason was a crime, after all. The voice continued to taunt him.

“I don't know who's more pathetic, the children who left their lives and dreams in my hands, or the child in front of me who left his life and

dreams in my hands. Though they were stupid enough to believe that I wouldn't make off with their resources, you were my dog as soon as I used your dead wife's name." Meka could barely see through his hurt. The pain in the side of his head was but a faint memory by now. "What a sad existence you've had. Don't you think you'd be better off dead? You've served your purpose. Just die already." A hologram appeared in front of him. The pyramid fired a volley of precision strikes at the rebels who ran for their lives. People were fast, but rockets were faster. The camera kept rolling, capturing the explosive deconstruction of human beings in gruesome detail. Limbs were blown apart like popped balloons, spraying the air with a fine red mist. Meka was at least thankful that the bodies were disintegrated beyond recognition.

"Looks like their time's up," Detha said, authorizing more attacks on the people. Meka's eyes widened. After Fah died, Meka's time ran still. He had lost track of the passing seasons, the people around him growing older, and himself inching closer to his predicted death day. A torrent of drones poured from the pyramid, chasing after newfound targets. Fresh meat, as some would put it.

"Where is your precious wife to come save you now? She was the true prodigy of Atadia, and look at where you are. You've always been in her shadow. Even though she's dead, you'll always be invisible." Meka didn't hear Detha's words. His eyes remained focused on the ground, but his mind was elsewhere.

"You'll always be nothing!" Detha roared and Meka was thrown off his feet again. The impact sent him crashing through the makeshift wooden walls of his hut. Some of the wood embedded itself in his back, their needle-like splinters numbing sections of his back as they stopped threateningly close to his nerves. But Meka didn't care about the physical pain any more. The throbbing sensation in his skull, the burning in his lungs, the weakness in his legs, and the blood running down his back: none of it mattered.

The ground beneath Meka glowed brightly and he found himself

warped to a floating platform overlooking the Oasis. The frigid air bit at his wounds at first, but it helped to quell his pain. He looked around for a way down, but found none. The pressure was noticeably lower. He was struggling to breathe. Meka picked himself up and looked up at the sky.

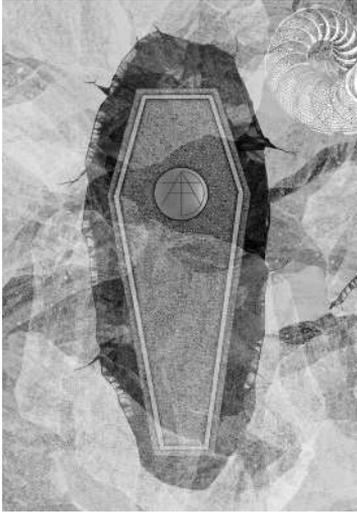
“Detha. You don’t belong here. I don’t know how you survived the pandemic of centuries ago, but you’re not welcome in my head.” Detha was the fragment of his mind that ran wild after Fah’s death and consumed him whole. Detha had taken his joy, his optimism, and his self-confidence, leaving him a shell of his former self.

“You took your time to mess with my mind, to break me down, and to take everything away from me,” Meka said. Detha’s voice shot back.

“Break you? I saved you when all you had was your grief. I gave you a reason to live when no one else did. Look around. I am the one who made your dreams real - as real as the sensations you feel with your own hands. Together, we have made Atadia beautiful. We will finish the job by ridding it of pests that seek to bring it to ruin.” Detha’s saccharine reply was laced with persuasion. He had promised Meka a world run by algorithms, one that wasn’t undercut by corruption or incompetence. It was a tempting delusion, but a delusion nonetheless.

“Let the final impact begin,” Detha whispered in Meka’s ear. The pyramid slowly began to fall. Meka squinted, wondering whether he was seeing things. No, the pyramid was truly falling. The megastructure careened towards the Oasis. An object of that size would annihilate the Oasis, along with everyone inside of it. It began to glow a faint red, then a glowing orange, and finally a brilliant white as atmospheric resistance superheated the jet-black surface.

Meka activated his WoW-R2 ring to assemble all of his ape and monke holograms and ordered them to try and stop the pyramid’s descent. If they could reverse Detha’s order, the pyramid could stabilize itself. Led by Skeleton King and Red Ape, the holograms bounded off



and went to work, flying head-first into the structure. They bought some time, but to no avail. The building continued its unstoppable trajectory.

“The order cannot be overridden. The order cannot be overridden,” the system warned repeatedly. Meka realized it was futile. Detha had locked him out of the master controller so that he couldn’t prevent the pyramid from landing right on the Oasis. The holy ground that had protected Atadians for generations would be obliterated and

there was nothing anyone could do about it.

But if nothing could be done about it, Meka had to stop Detha at least. But how? Suicide was out of the question. Meka couldn’t assume that Detha wouldn’t transfer his consciousness again after his death.

Meka remembered that he saw some OG Atadians from the 2020’s somehow appeared at the hideout as if they haven’t aged a single day.

CryoStaking machines.

If he could seal himself away, the CryoStaking process might also do the same to Detha. Meka faltered. He trembled. He didn’t know if he had the strength to finish the job. He knew it could stop Detha, but his body disobeyed his command. It would mean never seeing his children again. Meka didn’t want a life of algorithms and glass-chewing dev work any more. He wanted to live a long, fulfilling life with his family.

His thoughts were interrupted by a whirlwind of butterflies that encircled him. There must have been thousands of them. The scent of nectar filled his nostrils. As the winds calmed and the insects dispersed, he felt one, no- two embraces. One pair of arms were wrapped tightly around his arm while the other pair hugged his torso. One was distinctly

a boy's while the other was a girl's. The girl had a piece of cloth covering her eyes. Meka could sense the touch of his family. Meka couldn't believe his eyes, so he trusted his feelings instead. It filled him with a warmth that repelled the freezing air around him. He gave them a smile that held back a wall of sadness; it was the best he could do in the moment.

"Dad," Sandy called out to him. Her voice was a strange sensation in his ears. He hadn't heard her voice for so long. Meka felt like crying.

"Sandy," he croaked.

"We're here."

"I know." Meka held Sandy and Pun even more tightly. He didn't want to let go of them ever again.

"I know what you're thinking of doing, dad. I wish things didn't turn out this way. I'm sorry for running away and for not being there when mom died. The truth is, I was sick of life under Detha's regime and wanted out. I'm sorry," she confessed. Meka turned to look at his daughter. She had grown up so much. She no longer resembled the ratty teenager he last saw. He was so proud of her. Meka thought of Fah's letter and her wish.

"I'm sorry too. I was too caught up in my work to notice how much my family really needed me. I wish I could go home with you and Pun. But now, I've got to fix the mess I've created. I love you both so much." A melancholic smile graced Meka's lips. He didn't need a long, fulfilling life any more. As long as Sandy and Pun were safe, he didn't mind. Sandy opened her mouth to say something, but Meka was already making his way to the center of the lake.

"No, no, no... What are you doing?!" Detha yelled.

"The order cannot be overridden. The order cannot be overridden," the system continued to warn Meka. Getting a solid grip on a giant kelp, Meka let it pull him under. Small vines enveloped him, transporting him into the Protectors' hideout. He drew a deep breath as the vines deposited him in front of the underground room the Protectors' had

shown him earlier. The OG Atadians that just arrived to the year 2057 opened the door for him. The floor was covered with cold mist and a single machine radiated a deep blue glow. He sneezed and began to tear up. Even underground, the toxic smell of burning metal grew stronger. The pyramid was only a few hundred meters above ground. Elsewhere, Atadians received urgent messages from the government instructing them to take cover. They were told that the Protectors had launched unprovoked attacks that hacked their wallets and were now “airdropping” a mysterious object onto the Oasis. The enemy of the people were trying to destroy their last refuge.

Meka quickly strapped himself into the chamber, taking in the icy air around him. It was cold, but he found that it numbed his pain.

“You fool! Even if you die, I will find a new host after you’re gone,” Detha screamed into his skull. Meka could hear the raw anger in his voice that allowed Detha to overcome even the Oasis’ magic. He had to do this to protect his children and his city from himself. That gave him the strength to talk back to the voice in his head.

“I’m not dying. Welcome to CryoStake you fucking Salariman.” Meka declared.

When asked how many years he’d like to CryoStake, Meka entered “PAIN,” a final command into his console to activate the CryoStake pod. The doors shut and the machine filled with a blue liquid that surrounded him. Meka began to feel very sleepy. His eyelids grew heavy and his thoughts slowed.

“...mfer,” Detha said weakly.

The CryoStaking was working.

As Meka’s vision faded, his mind drifted to distant memories, untarnished by any algorithm. He thought of the day he helped an infant Pun rescue a snail from a busy intersection. His gentle hands scooped up the snail while Pun bounded back to the car happily. He thought of Sandy learning to use her smartwatch for the first time and receiving a

surprise call from her at work. Her cheerful voice on the speaker wished him a great day at the City Lab. He remembered a developer conference in Lisbon where he bumped into Fah for the first time. Her eyes were the most beautiful he had ever seen. It wasn't because of her kaleidoscopic irises, though those did entrance him. Her eyes held an ocean of dreams and promise that brimmed with keen intellect. He remembered baby Pun keeping the two of them up all night because he wouldn't stop crying. The sleepless nights were grueling, but Meka wouldn't have traded it for the world. He chuckled at Sandy's hormone-fueled temper tantrums and her rebellious youth.

The memories went further back, to a time before his. A man and a woman, dressed in a style he did not recognize, were chatting together under the moonlight. The architecture was unfamiliar to him, but he knew he had seen it before. It struck him—this was  $\mu$ . She turned towards Meka and her eyes were unmistakable. Iridescent irises. Those were her eyes, but they looked younger. But who was the man? He, too, turned to Meka. He was Meka, but vibrant and full of life. The couple said something in a language he didn't know yet somehow understood. They beamed at him and he found himself back in the Oasis.

His thoughts went back to Fah. He winced at every vicious fight he ever had with her and how deep they cut each other mercilessly. They made mistakes and then amends. And through it all, they kept trying. Again and again. He thought of Fah's smiles and hoped for her forgiveness.

"I forgive you," Fah said to him, holding him in her arms. He glanced backwards at her delicate figure. Her breath tickled his hair and she gently caressed his forehead, which rested comfortably in her lap.

"But I failed. I didn't keep any of the promises I made to you. I couldn't bring Sandy and Pun back home. My own system tried to kill them," Meka said through fits of crying and shivering. His guilt brought down his barriers and he let his feelings run free.

"I never moved on with life, no matter how much I convinced



myself that I did. I loved you so much that the hands of my clock were frozen still”

Fah ran her fingers through his hair and rubbed his head the way

she used to during their late-night conversations. He could almost smell the pour-over coffee they'd brew to get them through the night. Meka stared at her eyes and she stared back at his.

“I forgive you, my love. But now, it's time for you to forgive yourself.” Meka took in her words. He inhaled deeply, taking in her presence. He no longer had to bear the weight of the heavens alone, it seemed.

“It's always been you, hasn't it, dear?” he whispered.

Meka smiled with tears in his eyes. In the end, he finally remembered what it meant to be human.





# EPILOGUE



*“Laughter erupted all around.  
Children played in the distance.”*

???

"Drops of water fell from a woman's face, marred with age like a century-old oak tree. She brushed aside a stubborn lock of hair with a shaky hand; her muscles had grown disobedient with time. She brushed her teeth gingerly, taking care not to push too hard against the few remaining ones she had left. When finished, she turned from her reflection in the mirror with a small, forced smile. She nudged the front door open, unlocked the creaky wooden structure, and stepped outside.

Her city had grown into a whole new paradigm since the revolution fifty years ago. It's now NeoAtadia.

When the truth came out about the true extent of their government's surveillance and its control over life and death itself, Atadia swore never to fall under such hyper-centralized tyranny again. The services offered by big data and algorithmic optimization were not worth the cost in human dignity and liberty. The people, scarred by the

damage inflicted by Detha, rallied together to rebuild—this time without the centralized power that had caused years of widespread suffering. The Atadia she and her husband had built was now run on a number of top L1 blockchains whose smart contract functionality replaced much of the government’s role as a fair, transparent arbiter. At last, ordinary Atadians had a say in how their city was run.

Instead of stepping into a car, she slowly trailed her hands on the city walls, tracing the grapevines down the road. She moved from one intersection to another, keeping one hand on the vines and another on her cane.

“Validatoooooors you can do better. Don’t forget to update to 14.1.2,” an important message broadcasted throughout downtown as she walked through it.

Above her, busy machines flew over the city, working tasks to make people’s lives easier. They didn’t need to think much about their next stop. They knew where they had to go and what they had to do next. She sighed. That was one thing that machines would always have over humans. Humans hardly knew what they wanted to eat for breakfast, never mind long-term plans.

Today was a special day for her, though. She consciously knew she had to be there.

## **SANDY**

Rain welcomed Pun and Sandy to the cemetery. Unlike her brother, who sported a simple folding umbrella, her hat offered feeble protection against the falling water, so she resigned herself to being soaked. The mossy cobblestone beneath their feet set the somber tone for the place. Sandy squinted. She was still getting used to her bionic eye: a marvel of brain-computer technology that had been developed for the Protectors who had removed their natural ones.

Atadians disposed of their deceased in much of the same ways that many other human civilizations did throughout history. Birds chirped melancholic melodies as he made his way through rows of headstones. It was a peaceful place amidst the urban chaos.

Though it wasn't the Oasis, she was happy to still have a place of respite. The Oasis was no more, vaporized by what witnesses dubbed the "Final Impact." An upside-down goliath pyramid had appeared out of nowhere and crashed into the ancient, sacred grounds that had long served as Atadia's shelter. The ensuing shockwave shattered windows across the city and felled trees for miles in every direction. For her brother, the Impact was more than just an enormous loss of life: it had taken thousands of years' worth of history and tradition with it. The Oasis was a living time machine that preserved much of the past. Sandy patted him on his shoulder. His suit was still crisp and wrinkle-free.

"Hey Pun, it sure is strange to be here, isn't it? Reminds me of old times," she remarked, adjusting the collar of her black turtleneck. Nostalgia really was a bizarre thing. No matter how much she tried to move on from the past, Sandy found herself unable to embrace the new without missing some aspects of the old.

After the Final Impact, Sandy and Pun took on builder roles as part of Atadia's rebuilding task force. Her brother didn't personally agree with centralization or his dreams of a world ruled by command line, but he was more of the type to thrive in larger organizations. Pun later became President of a decentralized profiling data infrastructure that replaced much of the role of his father's City Lab. Everyone now benefits from their own data fairly, on their own terms.

On the other hand, Sandy was never one for such structured work. Sandy led an independent, solitary life as founder of a crypto startup. She stifled a snicker as she noticed how out of place her favorite black turtleneck-blue jeans combination looked next to her well-dressed brother. Her work was unpredictable and terrifying at times, but Sandy

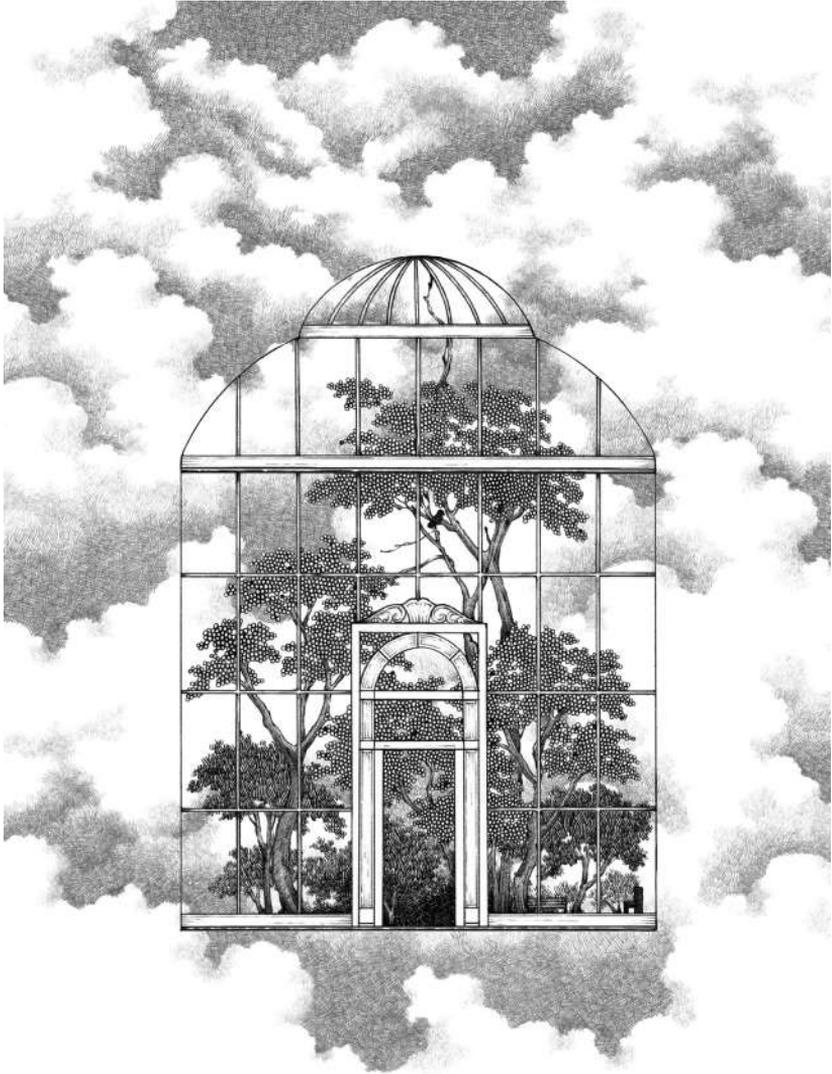
found herself loving the swiftness and agility that the space demanded from her. While her friends had all aped into crypto for the prospect of making money, Sandy didn't care much for the financial rewards.

Sandy laughed. Despite her rebelliousness in her teenage years, some of which had survived to this day, she shared a lot in common with her parents. Like her brother, she too dreamed of a more perfect Atadia, run efficiently by software that could govern in ways no human could. The only difference was her core belief that such software had to be in the hands of the people.

New thought leaders, driven by a revolutionary paradigm of decentralized governance, sought to tie together the loose ends surrounding the mystery of the tyrant Detha. His reign of terror over the city was steeped in rumors and controversy, and the city's leaders knew they had to set the truth straight so that Atadia could heal. Her brother spent twenty years digging around for Detha's secrets, from his past in the  $\mu$  civilization to his connection with their father.

Though Sandy was here to visit her father's tomb, Meka was not actually in the cemetery. Her father had sacrificed himself for Atadia by CryoStaking himself to infinity. His fate was to remain in frozen limbo for eternity. She smiled bittersweetly. It was a tragic yet beautiful end for a man who had given so much for his city. He would live on to see his beloved city grow and evolve, even if he couldn't be there. Her father's CryoStake chamber survived the Impact and was taken away to be stored in a secure vault. The city couldn't risk an accident releasing Detha.

Pun took in his surroundings, breathing in the fresh forest air. The trees provided gentle relief from the rain and he ducked under the nearest dry spot underneath a willow tree. Unlike the one he encountered when he was a boy, this one was full of life. Its rugged bark provided him a stable surface to lean on, which he took full advantage of. The willow's long, thin leaves gently fluttered in the drizzling downpour. The birds retreated into the tree cover. Sandy heard a noise and gestured for Pun



to take a look. When Pun looked up at his father's memorial, he saw someone kneeling in front of it.

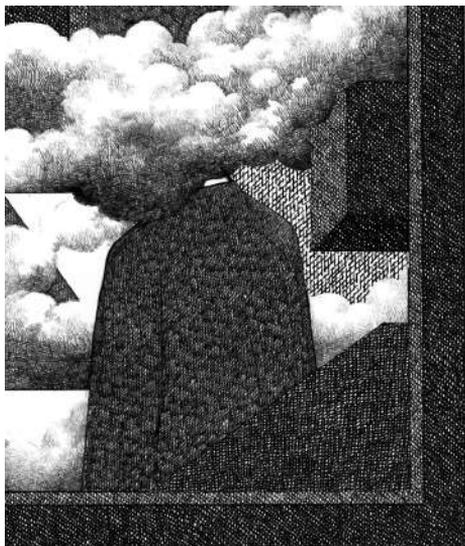
It was an older woman with a purple silken veil that obscured her features. The woman set down a lonely lily on the stone. A sudden gust

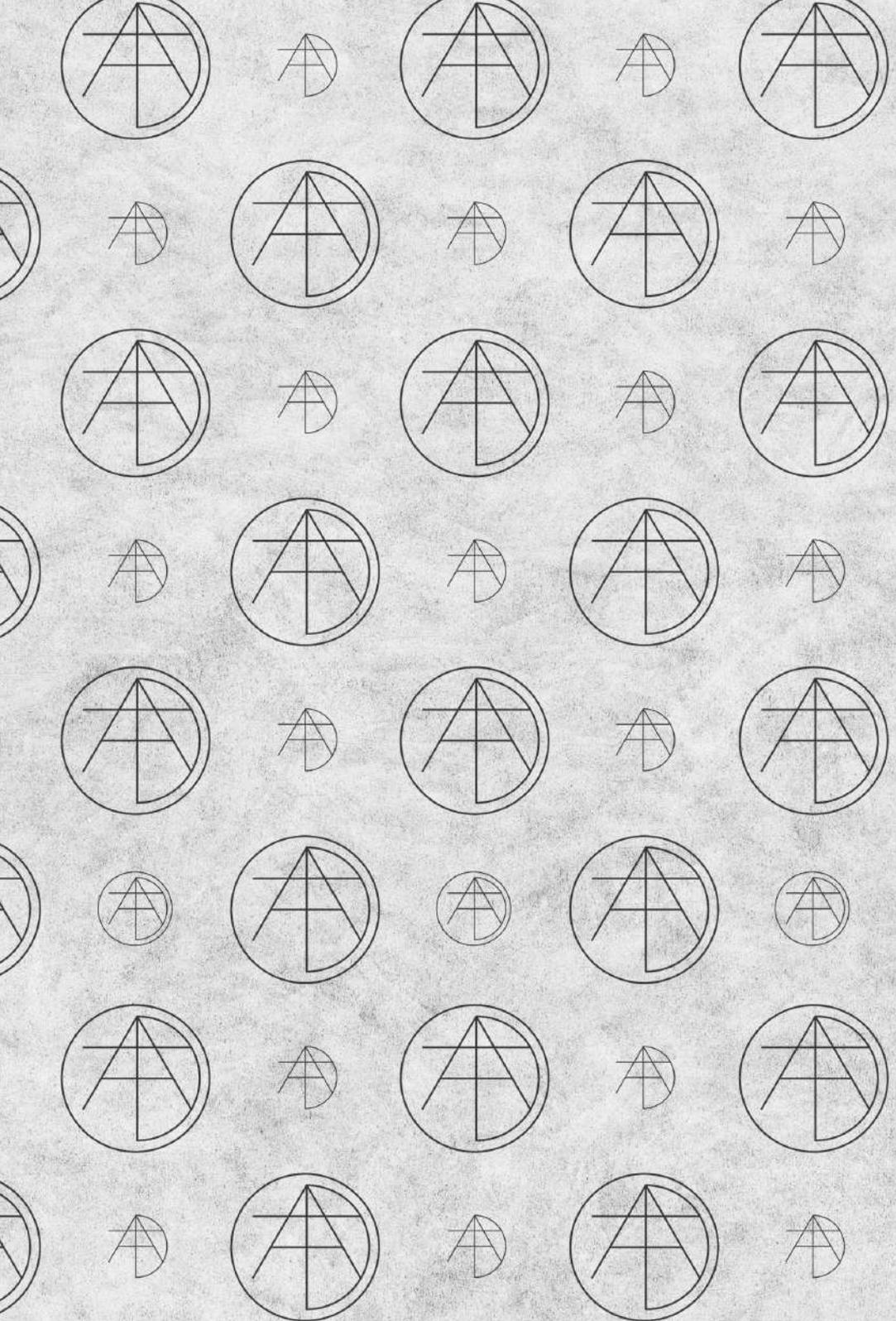
of wind lifted her veil and at that moment, the clouds parted, letting the rays of light shine on her face. Sandy caught a glimpse of her features. Her chestnut hair reminded her of her own. It danced in the sun, revealing multicolored eyes that seemed to come alive in the light. Something about her seemed familiar. The strangest sense of déjà vu came over her and Pun as they noticed her looking at them. She felt safe in the presence of this person but she didn't know why. Pun was the first to stand up, walking to her as fast as he could. She followed. They both seemed to be stepping on old footsteps. With each movement, a cloud of dust shot up and summer slowly turned to spring.

A piano began to play and the scene transformed before their eyes. Instead of the sunny day, they woke up to a blanket of thick fog where autumn wind replaced the summer sun. A mother and a young boy walked together, hand-in-hand. Laughter erupted all around. Children played in the distance. The woman turned to Pun and smiled.

“I'm certain the tree is alive.”







# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



## Puppet M☉nkester

Founder of Atadia & Original Author

Puppet is a public economist and a data technologies entrepreneur. He has around 10yr+ experience in analytics business and big data monetization. He wrote a hybrid nonfiction/fiction book called "Atadia." The book is about how to be, think, and thrive in the age of algorithms and why collectively owned and managed data technology will be important for humanity. Puppet holds a PhD in Applied Economics.



## RealAdorkable

Lore Master & ARG Chief

RealAdorkable, as his name implies, is the epitome of “dork.” A science nerd with an otaku alter-ego, he can be found hunched over his desk furiously clicking away at a first-person shooter, binging the latest anime episode, or solving a physics problem. RealAdorkable wields his linguistic command to discover more of Atadia’s lore and the secrets hidden within. He led the effort to retell the story of The Lost City of Atadia in this episodic fashion.



## Mandy M

Thai-to-English Translator

Mandy is a policy analyst turned writer. She loves rooting for underdogs and finds stories with happy endings wonderfully radical. She has a BA in Political Science and Religious Studies from Boston University and an MSc in Development Administration and Planning from University College London. She hopes to help tell the story of Atadia through the lens of hope in the human quest for a better future. She translated all the Thai content into English for Puppet and RealAdorkable to work on before this English version came to be.







It is the year 2054. Atadia is a society built around data-driven algorithms that promise to streamline humanity and bring prosperity to the masses.

However, this dream quickly evaporated following the rise of popular autocrat Detha, who championed extreme centralization, turned the city's algorithms against its citizens and carved the ex-utopia into a surveillance state.

The Lost City of Atadia is the tale of popular dissent and grassroots resistance to centralized tyranny—the story of a group called “The Protectors,” whose members fought to free Atadia from oppression and renegotiate humanity’s relationship with technology on humanity’s own terms.

From the dawn of Web3 to the twilight of the old world, this is a vivid, cyberpunk storytelling of mankind’s struggles between manufactured fate and free will from the creators of Atadia.

“Data is a powerful tool and the story of Atadia shows the potential dangers of centralizing this vast information. A heartwarming story that brings in cultural references from our decentralized ecosystem. Entertaining, thoughtful, and engaging!”

**Primitive**

“The Lost City of Atadia serves as a powerful warning of when politicians realize that algorithms control the world and can reprogram people in a subtle way.”

**RaviMonke**

“An adventure through the technology at our door to understand freedom, and how urgent it is to build a good Atadia.”

**Forrest Galt**

“A thoughtful and beautifully written story that uses a dystopian future soaked in the brine of too much technology as a perfect counterpoint to express that what really matters is each other.”

**Mercury Prime**

