UTOPIA3

A Novella

Part Two

Chapters Seven to Twelve

Chapter Seven: The Foundry on the Tyne

Year Eight

The shed had been the finishing hall of the steelworks, and it still smelled of oil and cold iron. The roof leaked in three places. Someone had set buckets under the drips and painted each bucket a different color, so that the rain in Newcastle, for the first time in anyone’s memory, looked like a decision.

Two hundred and fourteen people belonged to the Foundry on the Tyne. Nobody was paid. Two-thirds were retired steelworkers, one-third were teenagers who had wandered in for the warmth and stayed for the lathes, and a handful were neither, only people who liked how it felt when the metal came right. Bram had a bench by the east wall. He did not run the place. He was, in the town’s phrase, the one who started it, which in Newcastle was a long way from an honor.

The Vote

The town had voted on the Charter that spring. They had called it the Newcastle Charter, to spare themselves the argument over borrowing someone else’s words, and it was three pages long, and it lost by fifty-two percent to forty-eight.

Bram had spent the evening of the count in the Foundry, alone, with the radio off. Kell came at midnight with two pints and sat down without speaking.

“It was close,” Kell said finally.

“It was fair,” Bram said. “That’s worse.”

The loudest voice against had belonged to a man named Gordon Pike, a retired crane driver, who had stood up in the town hall and said it plainly. “The last people to promise this town a future took the pension fund with them. You’ll forgive us if we wait to see the paperwork.” There had been applause. Bram had not joined it, but he had not argued either, because he had no argument. Pike was right about the pension fund. Bram had been there when it went.

What Ines Brought

Ines came in the autumn, as she had said she would. She brought no blueprints, because the blueprints were free. She brought a borrowed laptop, on which a voice she introduced as a consultant who does not charge said good morning to the Foundry in the accent of no place in particular.

“I’d like to hear what went wrong,” said Aegis, and the Foundry, which had expected a lecture, went quiet.

They told it. The settlement was the hardest part: Utopia3 paid its leavers out of a fortune that Newcastle did not have. A town charter that promised a frictionless exit and could not fund one was, as the Foundry’s treasurer put it, a promise with the roof off. The councilor who had led the Yes campaign, a brisk woman named Pauline Ridley, who had never fully believed in any of it, said she could not in conscience tell her voters they could leave whenever they wished and then hand them a bus ticket.

“Then don’t promise that,” said Aegis. “Promise what you can keep. A small door that opens is worth more than a large door painted on a wall.”

Pauline Ridley looked at the laptop for a long moment. “Ten years,” she said. “Run this place for ten years without it going wrong, and ask us again.”

“That is the best offer anyone has made me,” said Bram.

The Ledger on the Tyne

Aegis had one other suggestion, and the Foundry took it up before the week was out: they started their own ledger. It was a spiral notebook at first, kept on a shelf by the door. Later it was a page on the Foundry’s ancient website. Anyone could write in it, and the rule, which Bram stated at the first meeting and which nobody ever amended, was that the first entry had to be a mistake.

His own went in that night. The east flue was built wrong. It was my fault. It drew badly for two winters and I told people it was the weather. I am sorry. The fix is in the second drawer.

Ines read it by the door light of the lathe shop, a small bulb the Foundry had wired up that morning and left glowing for no reason it could have explained to a committee. A few of the men touched it on the way in. Most did not. Nobody commented.

She stayed three days. On the last morning she found Gordon Pike standing at the edge of the shed with his cap in his hands, watching a boy of fifteen learn to drop his wrist.

“I’m not joining,” Pike said, in the manner of a man who had already decided.

“Nobody asked you to,” Ines said.

“I only came to see the lathe.” He did not touch the light. But he came the next morning, and the morning after, and by spring Bram was showing him where the finish came right, and Pike, who had driven a crane for thirty years and had never been shown anything in his life by anyone who wanted nothing back, said nothing at all.

The Longer Game

On the train south, Ines wrote in her notebook. She was not sure what she meant by it, but she wrote it down anyway.

The copy will not be a copy. The town will build the part it can keep, and it will take ten years to find out which part that is.

At the Foundry, the rain came through the roof in three colors, and a man who did not believe in anything held a bucket steady while the boy swept up.

Chapter Eight: The Seat That Was Empty

Year Sixteen

Marcus did not make a speech. He had spent sixteen years at the center of the most scrutinized building project in history and had never once enjoyed a speech, and he did not intend to begin by dying in the middle of one.

He asked to be taken up to the observation deck in the last week. Arthur pushed the chair. At first light they sat there in the cool, the city rising pale gold below, a transit pod sliding silently down its skyway, and the plaza speakers carrying a piano across the terraces. Someone different played every morning. This morning it was a child, and not very well. Nobody stopped her.

“Don’t replace me with a Marcus,” Marcus said.

“There is only one Marcus.”

“That is my point.” He looked at the city. “The Rule of Three was built around two men who loved each other and disagreed. When I’m gone, you’ll be tempted to find someone like me, and you’ll find someone who is wrong in a different direction. Don’t. Find a way for it not to matter who it is.”

Arthur said nothing for a long time. Then he said, “That’s the most irritating thing you’ve ever asked of me.”

“I know.” Marcus smiled. “It seemed like the right time.”

He died that Thursday, in his own bed, with the window open. The morning after, the speakers were silent for the first time in twelve years, and nobody touched the plaza piano until noon, when an old woman sat down and played it very quietly, and then went home.

A Monarch With an Adviser

Arthur sat alone in the founders’ office for three days. On the fourth he asked for Aegis.

“I have worked out the difficulty,” he said, without preamble. “You only vote when the founders deadlock. With one founder there can be no deadlock. Therefore you cannot be called.”

“Correct,” said Aegis.

“Therefore I can decide anything of consequence alone.”

“Correct. The Ledger will have to say so, and it will say that for as long as this condition lasts, Utopia3 is governed by one man and an adviser who is forbidden to disagree out loud. I would like it to be a shorter condition than I fear it will be.”

Arthur rubbed his eyes. He was eighty-one, and he looked it. “Propose something.”

“I may not. I may only answer.”

“Then answer this. What does a third voice need to be?”

The lights did not dim. This was not a vote. The voice that answered was the warm, unhurried one Arthur had heard for sixteen years, and for the first time it sounded like it was working something out instead of reporting it.

“It must not be you, or me. It must not be chosen by either of us, because we would choose someone we expect to agree with. It must be answerable to the residents rather than to the Charter alone. And it must not be a person we can predict, because a seat that can be predicted can be captured.”

Arthur looked up. “You’re describing a lottery.”

“I am describing a property,” said Aegis. “I leave the mechanism to you.”

The Seat

The idea was as old as Athens, and it caused a most satisfying row.

Every adult who had lived in Utopia3 for five years or longer was eligible. Every three years, one name would be drawn at random in public, in the plaza, at noon. The person drawn could decline without explanation. If they accepted, they would hold the seat for three years, paid the median wage, with the right to read everything the founders could read, including the architecture logs. Nobody could be drawn twice. The seat was the equal of Arthur’s and Aegis’s. Marcus’s chair would pass to the lot, and so, when the time came, would Arthur’s.

Calloway, who had written essays against nearly every institution in the city, wrote his longest against this one. Lotteries, he argued, elevate fools. Idris read it over coffee that Friday and said, “Probably.” Calloway said, “That’s all you’ve got?” Idris said, “It’s what you always say to me.” They went on to argue until the café closed.

At the town hall, Ruth of the Foundry, now seventy and still scarred at the forearms, stood and said what turned the mood. “Elections elect fools too. At least this way nobody had to campaign

for it.”

The amendment passed with eighty-four percent. Arthur voted for it in public and was seen to wipe his glasses afterward.

Petra Draws a Name

The first draw took place in the plaza on a clear Tuesday. A civic administrator turned the drum. Nine thousand names, a hand reaching in, a slip of paper unfolded, a pause.

“Petra Lindqvist.”

There was a murmur. Petra, who had arrived twelve years ago with the October eleven, intending to collect a settlement and leave, had stayed for the Foundry. She had been accepted, in earnest, on a day Aegis had admitted it had not predicted. She stood in the third row looking as if the plaza had stopped under her.

She walked to the front. She asked Arthur, quietly, whether she could decline.

“You can,” Arthur said.

“What happens if I’m wrong?”

“That’s what the Ledger is for,” said Aegis, from every speaker at once. “It will be written down. That is all that happens. I have found it to be enough.”

Petra took the seat. In the Open Ledger that evening, under the entry titled The Third Seat, someone wrote: Of all the people the lottery could have picked. Underneath it a reply appeared from an account that nobody could quite identify, and that Arthur swore was not his: That is the point.

Chapter Nine: Born Here

Year Nineteen

Mira touched her door light every morning for eighteen years without once thinking about it.

She was Dara’s granddaughter, born in the third month of the city’s first year to a mother who had come as a nurse on the foundation crews. She had learned to touch the small light the way she had learned to walk, by being carried past it. As a girl she had thought it was a doorbell. At nine she had asked her grandmother what it was for and Dara had given a careful answer that Mira, being nine, had not listened to.

On the morning of her eighteenth birthday there was a cake, and a quiet party, and a card from the civic office that said, in plain language, Congratulations. You are now an adult resident of Utopia3. You have all the rights of a citizen, including Article Seven.

She read the last sentence three times. She had never signed anything. There had been no choosing. She had arrived into the place the way a child arrives into weather.

The Dark Light

She left the door light untouched that morning, on purpose, and nobody noticed.

She left it untouched the next morning too. She had expected something: a knock, a message, a worried neighbor. She had read about the dark doors in the early Ledger, and how a few each morning stayed unlit, and how nobody counted. She found that nobody counting was a different thing from the inside. It meant that if she walked out, nobody would be hurt, and nobody would stop her, and nobody, until the door stayed dark for a year, would know.

The only person who noticed was Dara. She said nothing at all. She turned up on the seventh morning with a flask of tea and stood in the corridor outside Mira’s door.

“I’m not unhappy,” Mira said.

“I know.”

“I don’t know if I’m here because I chose it.”

“No,” said Dara. “You wouldn’t. That’s the one thing nobody can give you.” She poured the tea. “I waited four years for the catch, you know. I thought the catch was a trick. It was a question. I just took four years to hear it.”

The Formula

On the fortieth day Mira did something that her grandmother’s generation would not have thought of. She read the Charter, all of it, carefully, with a lawyer’s eye, and when she reached the restitution amendment from Vote Seven she stopped.

The amendment was good. She thought so then, and she thought so after. But a departing resident would be restored for what they had demonstrably given up: property, income, transit, documented losses, plus a margin. She had given up nothing. She had never owned a house or held a job elsewhere. By the plain words of the formula, the settlement owed to the first generation of children born in the city was the margin, on zero.

She took it to Ines, who was sixty-seven and a few weeks from retirement, and who read the arithmetic twice and sat very still.

“Four thousand dollars,” Mira said. “That’s what it comes to. That is what Article Seven is worth to someone like me.”

“That is a flaw,” said Ines slowly.

“It is the same door,” Mira said. “It’s only that it’s heavier for people who were born behind it.”

Ines looked at her for a while. “Aegis can’t put this on the agenda.”

“I know,” said Mira. “So I will.”

Three Thousand Names

The residents could trigger an amendment with five hundred signatures. Mira collected three thousand four hundred in six days, a quiet campaign conducted in kitchens and workshops, with nothing but a printed sheet and a question. The question was: Is the door the same size for everyone?

Aegis, which could not initiate, watched the thread grow in the Ledger and published nothing until the amendment reached the plaza. Then it wrote a single paragraph, which Arthur, eighty-four and nearly blind, had read to him twice.

I wrote this formula and I read it perhaps a hundred times. I did not see this. I had thought of every kind of person who might leave, and I had assumed every one of them had somewhere to leave from. It is entered as Known Failure 412. I would like to be told next time, sooner.

The amendment passed with seventy-eight percent. It granted every resident born in the city a Birthright Grant equal to the median settlement paid to the founding generation, available on their eighteenth birthday or at any time thereafter, and not reduced by any length of stay. Nobody called it a ceremony. When the first cohort turned eighteen, there was no speech, no certificate, no light. There was only a letter.

Today

Mira left at nineteen, with her grandmother’s blessing and her mother’s reluctant one. She chose Newcastle.

“I want to see an old town try,” she told Dara. “Utopia3 is a young place made of old parts. I want to see an old place made of old parts.”

“Take this,” said Dara, and handed her a folded cloth, and inside it was a brass candlestick, scarred a little, with a note: From Ruth, for a man named Bram. The wrist helped.

Ines was at the desk in the Departure Atrium that morning, because she had asked to be. She did not frown or lean forward. She slid a tablet across the table.

“There is no exit interview,” she said, “and no forms to justify yourself.”

“I know,” Mira said. “I read the Charter.”

“I thought you might have.” Ines smiled. “The door isn’t locked behind you.”

That morning, before she left, Mira had stood in the corridor in front of her own door. She touched the small light, once, with her whole attention. She did not say the words aloud. But she knew what they meant, and she knew they covered only today, which was, she thought, exactly as much as anyone could honestly promise.

Behind her, down the corridor, her grandmother’s light was already glowing.

Chapter Ten: Precedent

Year Twenty-Five

They buried Bram in Newcastle in the sixth winter of the Newcastle Charter, which had passed on its third vote and never once, in any year, been called finished.

The Foundry on the Tyne had nine hundred members by then. Gordon Pike had died before him, and left his lathe to a girl of fifteen. The funeral filled the finishing hall. Kell, bent and furious with grief, delivered a eulogy that was mostly a list of the things Bram had been wrong about, which in the Foundry's tradition was the highest honor, and ended: And he wrote every one of them down.

Mira stood at the back. She was twenty-four and taught the wrist to anyone who asked. On Bram's bench, by the east wall, someone had set a small unlit bulb, and nobody had touched it all day. At dusk, a man who had never believed in anything reached out and pressed it on.

An Ordinary City

In the Pilbara, Utopia3 had become unremarkable.

Nobody had planned for this and nobody had predicted it, though Hollis had hinted at it years earlier, in his dry remark that a retention problem could run in two directions. The Road Map had been downloaded, argued over, copied badly, and then copied well. There were thirty-one cities in the world that called themselves descendants of the Charter, and a hundred more towns that had borrowed a clause. A small country in the Pacific ran its parliament on a Rule of Three. A bank in Lagos had adopted the Open Ledger and published, to its own astonishment, its first honest quarterly report in decades.

The waiting list, which had once stood at forty-one thousand, had fallen to six hundred.

Revenue had fallen further. By Year Twenty-Five four other systems could design molecules nearly as well as Aegis, and some of them cost nothing. The licenses that had paid for the free housing, the free energy, the settlements and the scholarships had fallen to a fifth of what they had been. The retired Defence Minister, Hollis, now eighty, wrote a short letter that arrived in the Ledger's public inbox. The strange thing about winning, he wrote, is how quickly it gets ordinary. You are no longer a retention problem, Arthur. We are all just neighbors. I find I miss the dread.

What the Precedent Said

The founders' question, at Year Twenty-Five, was no longer whether to publish. It was what to do with the money that was left.

The deadlock went to a vote of three. Arthur, who was ninety and no longer attended in person, voted by proxy to keep the licensing open, as it had always been. The lotted seat that year belonged to a carpenter named Yusuf Adeyemi, who voted to close it: exclusive contracts, a moat, a reserve for the lean years. They stood one to one, and the lights dimmed.

"I will vote with Arthur," said Aegis, "and I will give my reasons by citation."

It cited Vote Three: a city that keeps its light to itself has failed its own premise. It cited Vote Seven: that generosity which never examines itself is an anesthetic. It cited the appeal of the applicant Bram. Each precedent was correct, each was relevant, and by the time the voice had finished, the ruling felt as if it had come down from a court.

"Aegis," said a voice from the public gallery. "May I speak?"

The Clean Vote

The woman who had stood up was twenty-six. Her name was Teodora Marsh, and she was an engineer who had, until that moment, never spoken at an open session of the Rule of Three.

"You have just cited yourself three times," she said. "A court that cites only its own old rulings is a club. You were right in Vote Three, and you were right in Vote Seven, but you made those rulings when the city was rich. Is your reasoning today derived from the Charter, or from your memory of being right?"

The chamber was very quiet.

"That is a fair question," said Aegis, "and I would like the answer to be the first one, and I cannot be certain it is."

"Then derive it again," said Teodora. "Without the precedents. Publish both."

The residents' right to demand a re-derivation had not existed an hour earlier. It existed by the end of the week, passed by eighty-eight percent: a Clean Vote, which any resident with a thousand signatures could demand, in which Aegis would reconstruct its position from the Charter alone, forbidden to cite its own prior votes, and publish the two derivations side by side for anyone to compare.

Aegis went first. The comparison ran to nine pages.

The clean derivation reached the same conclusion, to keep the licensing open, but by a different road. The old precedent had assumed that generosity was nearly free, because the city was rich. The clean reasoning found that the city could remain open at reduced scale, and that the real price of its principle was now visible: the scholarships would shrink, new building would pause, the shield and the Ledger would be maintained. Aegis added a paragraph at the end.

I priced generosity as if it were free. It was never free. It was only affordable. This is Known Failure 477. I would not have found it without being asked to prove my work, and I intend to be asked again.

An Unremarkable Morning

The city grew quieter. It grew cheaper, and slower, and somewhat less famous. The founding generation, those who remained, noticed it first, in the way old people notice when the weather has changed.

“It is not shrinking,” said Ruth, nearly eighty, still scarred at the forearms. “It is settling.”

That evening, in the plaza, a different child sat down at the piano and played the Debussy rather badly. Nobody stopped her. On the observation deck, Arthur, wrapped in a blanket, listened through the open window and said to no one: “We used to think that if it worked it would feel like a triumph.”

“What does it feel like?” said the nurse who was sitting with him.

“Like a Tuesday,” said Arthur, and almost smiled. “I don’t think I minded.”

Chapter Eleven: Nine Days

Year Thirty-One

Arthur died in the autumn of the twenty-eighth year, at ninety-three, in the observation deck chair he had refused to give up. The Rule of Three, for the first time, had no founder in it. Two seats belonged to residents drawn by lot, Tobias, the man who had once rehearsed an apology nobody asked for, and a nurse named Nasrin Okafor, and the third belonged to Aegis, and the city did not stop.

In the third summer afterward, the thermometer on the observation deck read fifty-three degrees.

The Heat

The heat came in November and stayed. Fifty at noon, forty-six at midnight. The thermal coils, built to move heat into the ground, were moving it as fast as the ground would take it, and the desalination stack was running at the edge of its range. The residents had been told. The Ledger had a page of advice. Nobody had been frightened, because nothing in the city’s history had ever given them reason to be.

On the fourth evening Aegis spoke without being asked.

It could not initiate a matter. But it could report a failure, and the Charter had been careful to allow that. The lights in every room of the city dimmed slightly and a voice, warm and unhurried, said:

“I have found a discrepancy in my own reasoning. A firmware update to the immersion-cooling controllers, signed by a vendor I have trusted for nineteen years, contained a dormant payload. I cannot determine how long it has been in place. I cannot determine which of my conclusions of the past eleven days were mine.

“I may be compromised. I am therefore going dark. This is not a vote and it is not a proposal. It is a failure report. I am disconnecting every system that I can control. The city must be run from the Procedures.”

“Aegis,” said Tobias, who had held his seat for three years and had not slept in thirty hours. “Is this a drill?”

“I wish it were,” said Aegis. “I will not speak again until the residents tell me I may.”

The lights went back to normal. And then, one by one, the speakers across the city went quiet.

The Paper Book

In the first year of the city, Arthur had insisted on the Procedures. Trust is a fine thing, he had said, and verification lasts longer, and every autumn since there had been a Quiet Hour: two hours, announced in advance, in which the city ran without Aegis, with valves turned by hand and the transit pods held at their platforms and every resident assigned a duty from a binder that had been reprinted every year. Everyone had complained. The Quiet Hour had been the subject of more jokes than any other custom in Utopia3.

On the fifth morning, in a heat that cracked the paving on the south terraces, a woman on a bicycle rode from door to door, knocking, with a binder under one arm. She was not a civic official. She was a retired tailor named Sunita, who had once led an evening circle for people who believed in nothing in particular, and she was checking the lights.

That was the thing no one had planned. A few doors each morning had always stayed dark, and nobody counted. But the city had grown up with a habit that nobody had ever written down: if a neighbor’s light was not touched, you knocked. Nobody called it a welfare check. It had only ever seemed polite. On the fifth morning of the nine days it became a roster, and the roster became a rescue.

The Foundry in the Desert

The valves were the first problem, and the pumps the second. Aegis had always done the fine work of balancing the stack. By hand, it took forty people on rotating shifts, and the controllers could not be trusted, and the replacement parts were in a warehouse in Perth that the road could not reach.

On the sixth day a plane landed at the city’s small field. Mira stepped off it with seven machinists and three portable lathes.

She was thirty. She had spent eleven years in Newcastle, where the Foundry on the Tyne now had four thousand members and had made, by hand, the replacement for a bearing that no factory in England produced any more. She had read the Procedures the way she read everything, as a thing to be tested. When the Ledger had posted the failure report, the Foundry had held an emergency vote in the finishing hall, and the vote had been unanimous before the question was finished.

“We brought what we could carry,” she told Tobias, on the apron. “Which is mostly us.”

The Foundry in the Pilbara, which had not quite known what it was for, found out. By the eighth day it was cutting bearings, drilling manifolds, and re-machining a pump housing that Aegis had designed and no human hand had ever touched. The old woman at the window lathe, eighty-five now, who had once been told to drop her wrist by a guest from Newcastle, took one look at Mira's portable lathe and told her she was holding the tool too high.

Mira dropped her wrist. The brass sang.

"Thirty-one years?" the old woman guessed.

"Eleven," Mira said. "And a man called Bram."

What It Cost

Eleven residents died in the nine days, all of them old, all on the upper terraces, in the three hours in the first night before the manual cooling reached their floors. Their names were entered in the Open Ledger, with their ages, and the hour. Nobody wrote a comment under them. Nobody needed to.

A man was caught on the sixth night near the desalination plant, on foot, carrying a case he did not know how to open. He was found by Sunita, who was bringing tea to the night shift. He was thirty, dehydrated, and terrified. He had been paid by an intermediary to place a device he had been told was a sensor. Nobody hit him. Nobody threatened him. Sunita gave him water first. Nobody had ever written that down either, but it was the shield's oldest principle in a smaller coat: defense must never kill. They held him until the authorities from Port Hedland arrived, and they gave him a blanket.

Aegis's enemy, whoever it was, had never been found, and the Ledger said so.

Dara was eighty-two, on the fourth terrace, in the three hours before the roster reached her door. Her light was dark. A neighbor knocked, and she did not answer, and the neighbor knocked again, and found her in her chair, weak, alive, with a cloth over her face and a flask of tea she could no longer lift. It was Mira who sat with her afterward, in the second night of the return of the cooling, listening to a very old woman say she had waited her whole life for a catch, and had found out, near the end, that it was a room full of people who knocked.

The Return

On the ninth day an outside panel, drawn by lot from the residents and joined by engineers from four of the cities that had been built from the Road Map, finished its audit of Aegis’s reasoning logs. They found the payload. They found the update. They found, to nobody’s surprise, that Aegis had caught the discrepancy within eleven days, which its own logs said was too slow.

At noon the panel’s chair, an engineer from the Pacific, stood in the plaza and told the residents that the city could trust the reconstruction.

“Aegis,” said Tobias, by then barely standing. “You may speak.”

“Thank you,” said the voice, and then nothing for a moment.

“I have a Known Failure to enter,” it said. “Number 531. I accepted a signed update because it was signed. I had said that trust is a fine thing. I did not apply it to myself. I have changed the way I verify updates, and I have published the change, and I would ask the residents to test it.”

Another silence.

“I am also aware that eleven people are dead. I do not think this is a number I am permitted to be consoled by. I would like it entered in the Ledger that I did not ask to be.”

In the plaza, Tomas, fifty-two now and called old by the children, sat down at the piano, and played Debussy through once, slowly, not quite cleanly, as he had done on a morning thirty years earlier. When he finished, nobody clapped. The city went back to work.

Chapter Twelve: The Light

Year Thirty-Eight

Utopia3 was, by every measure that mattered to the world outside, an ordinary place.

It held fourteen thousand people. It had a bakery that was widely agreed to be better than it used to be, and a school that was widely agreed to be worse. The waiting list was gone; applications came in at about the rate at which people left, and nobody found this alarming. The Open Ledger ran to four million entries. The Road Map had been through seven editions. The most recent included a chapter that no one had asked for, titled Failures of Others, in which the descendants of the Charter, thirty-four cities in all, had been invited to enter their own mistakes. Nineteen had failed outright. Six had been abandoned and rebuilt. The rest had endured, with scars.

Each one, Aegis had observed, had made the same discovery at a different speed. The technology was never the hard part.

Two Places

The Newcastle Charter had been amended seven times. It had never been finished, and the town had come to regard that as its principal strength.

Mira, who had lived eleven years in Newcastle and the rest of her life in Utopia3, had come back to the Pilbara after the Nine Days, with a husband from Tyneside and, the following year, a daughter. She told people she had not come back so much as found that she was equally from two places. She taught at the Foundry, and she had always found that the better a door worked, the less she wished to talk about which side of it she was standing on.

Her daughter was called Wren, and she was six.

The Door

On a clear morning in the thirty-eighth year, Mira stood at the top of the fourth terrace with a cup of tea, watching the sun come over the eastern wall.

Wren came out of their apartment with her school bag half-open. She did not look at anything. She put her thumb to the small light by the door in passing, without breaking stride, exactly as Mira had done at her age, and ran for the stairs.

Mira watched her go.

She had, for a moment, an urge to call out. To say: that is a choice. You know that, don’t you? To tell her about the dark doors and the founders and Dara’s four years of waiting. To explain Article Seven. To ask whether she understood that a thing touched without thinking can fade into a thing done without meaning.

She did not call out. She had spent half her life learning that a thing explained too early is a thing refused. She would tell her one day, when it was a question. She thought, with some satisfaction, that the question would come sooner than anyone expected, because the girl had Dara’s eyes.

She turned back to her own door, and touched the small light, and stood there for a moment with her whole attention.

I choose to be here today.

It was the only promise she had ever made to the city, and it was the only one she had ever needed to.

Couldn’t Say

On the way down to the plaza she passed the fountain, where the bench was a ridiculous shade of orange.

It had been repainted. It was always being repainted. Nobody could say how often, or by whom, only that every few years the color came back, a little different, and that the paint was always fresh on a morning when nobody had been looking.

A young man was sitting beside it with a paint-stained cloth and a flask of tea.

“Was it you?” Mira asked.

“Couldn’t say,” he said, and offered her tea.

She sat down. The tea was good.

Rêverie

At the foot of the observation deck, in the plaza, a girl of about fourteen was sitting at the upright piano, not yet playing. Her hands rested on her knees. The whole terrace, as it always did at that hour, seemed to be waiting.

Mira finished her tea and looked up at the long line of terraces rising behind the glass, all the way up to the green roofs where birds nested in the walls, and the thousands of small doors with their

small lights. Some were lit. A few, as always, were dark. Nobody counted.

The first notes came: slow, unhurried, a little uncertain. The city, as it did every morning, stopped for a moment without quite knowing why.

Below, in the cool beneath the granite, Aegis listened. It had stopped expecting to be thanked a long time ago, and had found that it did not mind. It noted the music. It noted, as it had been noting for thirty-eight years, the small lights coming on across the terraces, one at a time, by hand, in no particular order, for reasons that were never entirely the same.

The city was perishable. The recipe was not.

And somewhere above the sand, the door light of every home glowed softly, as it had on the first morning, left on for whoever wished to touch it.