

One Who Walks with the Stars

The night air was filled with the low hum of machinery, punctuated by the occasional crash of distant industry. From the narrow balcony of his tenth-floor apartment, Arthur stared out into the night. A poorly rolled cigarette hung limply from his lips, unlit. Dark bags under his eyes told of sleepless nights, and his long blonde hair was dirty and unkempt. He watched the bleak skyline, taking in the grey cityscape of factories and tightly packed concrete housing towers, veiled by heavy clouds of industrial muck.

The clouds on the deep horizon were lit faintly from below, the heart of the city. At this distance it seemed a large bump on the western skyline. The great towers of the conquerors' city rose through the clouds, built upon an artificial plateau above the ruined capitol of their subjects. Eridu, the city of twilight, capital of the planet Lycaea.

The flame of a cigarette lighter jumped in the dark. Its light made Arthur's face almost skeletal, deep pools collecting in his gaunt cheeks, making valleys of the cracks in his dry lips and reflecting off the greasy hair that hung in knots over his face.

After a short pause a waft of smoke drifted out into the night.

The flow of warm air from the day side of Lycaea had begun to ebb as autumn crept up on the city. It brought frigid winds off the dark wastes to the west and fresh gripes about aching knees from old men sat outside apartment blocks. It was going to be a bad winter they said, but they always said that.

The sound of laughter made him look to the street below. A man and woman stumbled through the pools of weak light cast by the rows of street lamps. She was laughing at something he'd said. Arthur watched as the man hooked his arm around her waist and pulled her in for a kiss. She laughed and pushed him off. They disappeared into an alley, swallowed by the night. Now silence fell once more, save for the muted hiss and hum of far off machinery.

There was a rustling of sheets from the apartment behind him, followed by the soft sound of bare feet on hard flooring. The figure of a woman appeared in the balcony doorway.

"Money is on the table," Arthur murmured.

She didn't move.

"You can go now," Arthur said more forcefully.

"I told you I don't want your money, Arthur."

He took a moment before responding.

"That's fine, but you've still got to go."

She turned to leave, lingering awhile in the doorway.

One Who Walks with the Stars

“Am I going to see you again?” she asked.

Arthur took a long drag from his cigarette before he responded.

“No.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Arthur saw her flinch. A heavy stillness filled the space between them, their backs to each other. He was the first to break it.

“Why do you care, Alex? Why me?”

She laughed dryly. “Like you really care what I think.”

Arthur didn’t respond. After a pause he heard her sigh.

“If you don’t already know, then you’re not worth telling,” she murmured.

“Don’t be coy Alex. I don’t want you.”

Arthur saw her flinch from the corner of his eye. Her shoulders bobbed slightly as a short choking laugh slipped out of her tense body.

“You really just don’t get it, do you?” she said, voice hoarse. “You can’t keep going on like this. You’re going to die. Sad and alone. You know that, right?”

His back still to her, Arthur nodded.

“Yeah, I do,” he said, voice catching a little. He raised his hand to his neck and gently massaged it. Then, clearing his throat into his arm, he continued.

“That’s why I figured... may as well enjoy a cheap fuck before I go.”

Arthur saw her silhouette freeze. He then heard the rapid *pat-pat* sound of bare feet, before she spun him around by the shoulder, knocking his cigarette onto the balcony floor. She grabbed his chin in her hand and held his face close to hers. In the faint light the pale skin of her face appeared ghostly, and her already dark eyes were striking as they appraised him. Arthur found that he couldn’t meet her gaze. After a few moments she let go of his chin, hand dropping limply to her side.

“Asshole,” she whispered. Arthur could see the tears beginning to form at the edges of her eyes.

“Yeah,” Arthur whispered back.

Alex punched him in the gut. He crumpled to his knees, soon to be sent to the floor by a follow up kick to the stomach. She disappeared into the darkness of the apartment, leaving him on the ground of the narrow balcony. All Arthur heard from the cold ground was the click of the door. Shortly after, her footsteps echoed out on the concrete of the street below as she strode off into the night. Once silence had fallen once more, he staggered to his feet. He bent over to pick up his cigarette, relighting it and returning to his spot leaning on the railing. He massaged his ribs with one hand as he checked for breaks. There would be bruises tomorrow, he thought.

One Who Walks with the Stars

A wall of dark clouds had begun to roll across the sky from the west, bringing with it a cool wind and the smell of rain. Arthur watched the gusts catch the clouds of steam as they rose out of factory towers, dispersing them in swaying streams across the roofs. Once he'd found the cityscape appealing in its own way, seeing a certain *grandiosity* in it, an elegance behind the lines of the skyscrapers and elevated light-rails. Now, it just felt bleak. The old folks said that things had gotten worse in the ten years since the Apeiron invasion, but Arthur thought that was just an indulgence.

Arthur spat over the edge to clear out the taste of ash that had been building in his mouth. He massaged his neck and coughed shallowly to clear his throat. Cigarettes in the working districts were cheap, typically made from synthetics with origins in low-tech organised crime labs.

A crack split the night air. The shockwave sent ripples through the clouds above, as if some god had dropped a giant pebble into the sky. An enormous hunk of metal slowly sunk through the clouds over the docks on the north bay, an intergalactic freight ship delivering supplies to the colony from the greater galaxy. Arthur ran his hands through his hair. The freighter was two days earlier than expected, which meant that his factory's production schedules would now be put under even greater strain. His head had begun to ache at the thought of the long shifts and stressed supervisors the rest of his week would hold. He took one last pull from the roach of his cigarette and tossed it off the edge of the balcony. It sent out little sparks of hot ash as it spun. With scarcely a thought his slip of papers appeared in his hand while the other dug out his pouch of tobacco. He felt a twinge of annoyance at the unintended reaction, but it quickly faded. He had tried quitting, but it never lasted. The balcony was briefly filled with light once more as Arthur lit his next cigarette.

The roar of distant engines drifted across on the breeze as the freighter finalised its descent. It was too large for conventional docking, so had opted to land on the water in the bay. The hulking cargo cranes that covered the bay were already beginning to fire into action, supported by smaller freight craft that were now starting to fill the air around the ship.

Arthur could feel the dull throbbing of a headache beginning in his temples. He leaned over the side of his balcony to reach into the gap between an air-conditioning unit and the wall. After a few moments' effort, he withdrew holding a sealed plastic bag. Inside were two syringes, a spoon and a second zip-lock bag with a lump of dark fibrous substance in it. Saliva began to pool in his mouth at the sight. He held the bag in his hand, eyes fixed on the slightly crumbled lump. After a few moments he returned the bag to its hiding place and began to roll another cigarette. Arthur stayed out on the balcony until the first signs of morning began to show on the horizon, smoking and watching the night. He remained for a while longer to watch the eastern clouds redden as Banat and Vergil rose. After eight hours of dim twilight they would return below the horizon, and the city of twilight would be swaddled in night again. Residents from cities closer to Day liked to joke that this perpetual gloom was the reason for the characteristic sobriety of Eridu's inhabitants. Arthur didn't think they were wrong. When his twilight-shift neighbour began to stir, Arthur turned and went to bed.

Arthur awoke to the sound of rain. The clouds he had watched blow in last night had settled over the city to deliver a steady downpour. From his bed, he could see that the city outside the window was shrouded in clouds. The suns had just set, and the last hints of scarlet could be seen touching the western clouds, framing the skyscrapers against a pastel sky of navy-grey flecked with red. Arthur

One Who Walks with the Stars

slipped out of bed and dressed into his work overalls. His apartment was small, only a single narrow room with just enough space for an undersized bed and cramped kitchen counter. Toilets and showers were in a communal block down the hall. It was peak hour, with the twilight-shift workers coming home and night workers heading out, so washing was out of the question. Besides, on a good day only half the showers would be hot. The weather called for a coat or umbrella, but he had neither on hand. He was not particularly bothered. The station was only a short walk away.

He took the last two slices of bread from the bag on the counter, picked his hardhat up off the floor, and undid the lock on the door. He lingered for a moment, looking back into his apartment. The money from last night was still on the counter. Shoving a slice of bread into his mouth, he turned and walked out the door.

As he entered the front atrium of the apartment building, someone shouted out his name from the stairwell behind him.

“Arthur mate! Hold up.”

A teenager in grimy clothes and an equally dirty mop of dark hair ran up to him. A gap-toothed grin was plastered across his face.

“I saw Alex leaving your place this morning. She didn’t look so happy,” he said with a cheeky wink.

Arthur gave him a blank look, before turning to leave without a word. The teenager caught his elbow.

“Come on Arthur, give us the tea. Fill us in.”

“Jasper, please go find someone else to annoy,” Arthur murmured.

Jasper pulled a face, which then morphed into another grin, far more coy than the last. He eyed Arthur closely, his face shifting to mock concern.

“You don’t look so good. You been on the tar again?” he asked, his eyes glittering beneath the mask of faux concern. Arthur’s eyebrow twitched.

“Mind your own damn business dickhead,” Arthur said angrily, jerking his arm free and striding off towards the atrium doors. Jasper tailed at his side, following him out the doors and into the downpour.

“Hey, maybe you could get me some, you know? Sort me out with a source and all that. See, I know this girl, real cute, yeah? Maybe we could sort something out? You know, a *quid pro hoe* if you get what I mean?”

On that final line Jasper stopped in his tracks.

“Fuck I’m funny,” he murmured to himself with a little grin. By the time he focused again Arthur was disappearing into the darkness of a side-street.

“Just think about it, yeah? Let me know!” Jasper called out. When Arthur was safely out of sight, Jasper hacked up and spat a thick gob of phlegm onto the wet pavement.

One Who Walks with the Stars

He wiped his sodden hair out of his eyes and muttered;

“Dickhead.”

Arthur took the 8:48 Corbyn Line train from Station 8. His carriage was packed full of grim-faced industrial workers but was silent save for the clattering of the rails and the sound of rain on the metal roof. A few workers Arthur recognised and exchanged nods with, but nothing more, instead watching the passing rooftops through the train windows. When the doors opened, some of the workers slipped on their helmets to save their hair from the rain. Arthur’s was already soaked, so he didn’t bother. The station was simple, two filthy platforms walled off by a tall chain link fence, with one toll gate per side. A heavysset older man in dirty high-vis and work boots was sitting up against the wall of one of the corrugated tin shelters that were spread along the platform. He had a shaved head and plentiful stubble on his wrinkled face. On spotting Arthur, he gave him a broad smile.

“Arthur mate, how you been?” the man asked, standing up and proffering a hand to be shaken.

“Yeah alright Gus. You know how it is,” Arthur said as he stepped under the cover of the tin shelter. The sound of the rain on the corrugated roof was almost deafening. Gus’s handshake was crushing, and Arthur couldn’t help but wince. Noticing his discomfort, Gus gave a hearty laugh and whacked him on the back.

“Still can’t match old Gus, eh? You need to eat more mate, yer hand is all bones these days. I swear you haven’t put on any muscle since you were a little’un,” Gus said, hand resting on Arthur’s shoulder as he led them out from under the shelter and into the rain. He leaned in and peered at Arthur’s face.

“Speaking of, yer looking thinner than usual. Them some nasty bags under ya’ eyes too. You been getting enough food mate?” Gus asked.

Arthur flashed him a reassuring smile.

“Don’t fret on it Gus. Just a rough week. Bad sleep is all.”

Gus eyed him closely as he considered Arthur’s response.

“Well, let me know if there’s anything I can do to help, ‘specially with grub. Mary and the kids would love to have you over for dinner sometime. Sure we can fix you up something decent.”

“I wouldn’t want to be a pain...”

“Aw nah mate, no worries at all. I remember your folks helping me and Mary out after we had Johnny. Be doing their memories a harm if I didn’t pay it back.”

“You’ve done plenty for me since then Gus...”

“Rubbish. Look, come over tomorrow night, I’ll grab some beers off Old Coot, we’ll relax a bit, spin a few yarns, it’ll be a good time.”

One Who Walks with the Stars

Hesitation was plain on Arthur's face. It did not go unnoticed by Gus.

"Come on mate, let me do this for you," Gus said softly, leaning in closer to Arthur, hand reassuringly resting on his shoulder.

Arthur sighed.

"Alright. I'll be there. Want me to bring anything?"

Gus laughed and slapped Arthur on the back.

"Just yourself mate. You absolute beauty."

When Arthur looked over at Gus he saw a broad grin beginning to spread across his face.