

Chapter 1

The plum blossoms are the only sign of colour in a winter that lulls a city to sleep. The bright lights and outdoor tables at each corner of the city are replaced with icicles that hung outside each doorstep and homeless men and women holding up now-destroyed signs that no passerby would stop to read. To many, the scene is a symbol of hope. With the national flower looming, it reminds many that there is hope in the darkest of times: that there is beauty to salvage in moments of adversity.

Near the governmental palace, a young boy, his hands and knees still bruised from last night, sits at home with a small soldier figurine clenched in his left hand. He steers a toy truck around the edges of the table as he waits for Tetya [Aunt] to return home and for dinner to be served. In regional dialects, his name symbolizes purity; for the greater population, his last name brings fear. After all, though he may be young, he knows this too: he is born into a family of tremendous power. His father was a government official, his grandfather was a military general, and his great grandfather was a once-revolutionary now-disgraced war figure: he is a part of a long lineage of broken men that did all they could for power.

This was not something his family had hoped to tell him, yet actions speak louder than words. A week ago, Mama and sister went missing and Papa told him not to question it, but kids are naturally curious. Bruised and bleeding from the lip that night, he opened the door for a maternal uncle that grabbed him by the knee and hurried him over to an unfamiliar apartment he had only visited a few times before.

"But it's not right to leave home until Mama's back," he cried.

"We'll talk about that when we get home safe," his uncle responded.

The kid loved his relatives a lot more than his father, but unbeknownst to him, his other favourite uncle had perished that night. Uncle Ima and Papa were both government officials, and only one could be in charge of the greater military plans; the next day, police investigations found him lifeless in his bathroom with a half-empty glass flask by his body.

"Are all days supposed to be like this?" the kid asked.

"You poor thing," Uncle responded. "No, they are not. We'll get you back to Mama soon."

"But why are we leaving Papa?"

The child ruffled his jacket, his eyes glued to his uncle. They hesitated.

"For your own safety, you may never want to see him again."

"But why?" The kid asked.

"You may be too young to know everything, son." The child's heart raced as he heard his Uncle address him as his own. "I can tell you what I think -- he's a bad figure in the government. And I think the government doesn't listen to its people."

"But why doesn't a government listen to its people?"

"Many reasons, son. Sometimes they think what they do is better for the people. But othertimes, it's greed. It's like when you always ask for more ice cream on summer vacation." He let out a laugh before continuing with a more somber tone. "Your father has changed a lot recently -- his cabinet is full of individuals I went to university with. Most of them only care about themselves -- they want to control the world above all else."

"So is that why Papa is so busy?"

"I can't tell you for sure. I can only tell you what I think. I brought you here because I don't think you'll be safe where you were. And we may have to move again if we're no longer safe in my place too. Last time we talked, he complained about how family hindered his ambition to work with the government."

The kid sat there wide-eyed for a bit, then turned to tend to his wounds. Blood may not choose your family, but it can still decide your fate: Mama and Ana and him were all in danger for

knowing this truth. And though he may never be mentally prepared for this, thus began a long cycle of relocation, shady individuals, and near encounters with death that a 11-year-old should never have to deal with before adulthood.

A 21-year-old man hops off the train and enters the city for the first time; meandering through a station filled with high-hat businessmen and newspaper-reading elderly couples, he clutches onto a small backpack that holds his last clean sets of clothes and a month worth of coins from his last stint at the village market. His first name is Magnus. Born into a family of social anxiety-ridden farmers and unambitious older siblings that slept all day, he had always wanted to be a difference maker. Since ancient Latin times, the name itself inspires hope; it symbolizes greatness. It was the name of the neighbour-turned-superintendent that "made it out" and patrolled the local markets each weekend. And he had been great before: just six months ago, with nothing but willpower, he had begun preparing for this trip.

"You want a farmer's life," his dad had warned him against the troubles just the day before he went on the train. "How can you call yourself a real man if you still avoid eye contact with the butcher at the market?"

But you won't meet that butcher anymore, Magnus thinks to himself. Avoiding him, he insists, was justified, because he wasn't so kind when I ran errands as a kid: the only conversation we had was on how he'd serve children's meat next dinner.

A few minutes later, Magnus walks up to a roundabout filled with four-wheeled trucks that slumber through the stinking road; surrounding him was a large cobblestone plaza filled with middle-aged men holding up large signs of text and pictures of royal houses and local currency. His newly-sewn boots no longer make a thud as he walks on the pavement, replaced instead with a consistent buzzing sound of chatter that grew louder with each step of the way. It was the busiest place Magnus has ever seen -- back in the village, there were barely more than a hundred people in the market at a time.

"It's not so easy to find a job these days." He overhears a young man shouting as he walks past the first row of signs. "I've been to these forums a few times, and the only offers are the same old: just factory work."

"How awful!" the other man grimaces. Magnus stops to look at the two men, noticing how each wore a slick winter coat to accompany their perfectly-trimmed beard. Their comments did not deter his enthusiasm.

The regional accent, he immediately observes, had different perks to the one he spoke in the village; it was similar enough that he could still understand everything that goes on next to him, yet different enough for him to feel self-conscious over his mother tongue. There was a peculiar way they rolled their r's that he had yet to hear before, and, in the few attempts he made just before walking up to a stand, he was unable to replicate those noises in a convincing way.

"Young man!" His inner monologue is interrupted by a surprisingly energetic old man who, grabbing onto his shoulder, points to a wildly colourful poster plastered right in front of them. His back had an unusual arch to it; Magnus wonders if the man could even see his face from such an angle.

"Sorry, I can't quite read it. My eyesight is not so sharp," Magnus lies. He had yet to learn to read or write.

"We're recruiting for the factories."

Too afraid to ask, he looks at the pictures of smiling men wearing helmets in front of a conveyor belt, waving to the camera, and assumes the scene as factory life. Simple labour, he tells himself, and just a clarification on wages required.

"Is the salary enough for housing?" His voice trembles.

"Housing? You live in the factories. It's all there for you."

"What about food?"

[something about it being obvious, back-forth then say it's an offer you don't how many have taken up just earlier today]

The old man extends his arm, and Magnus takes one step back.

"I'm not too sure if-

"Good opportunities don't come twice. Don't regret it."

Back in the village, he knows of crooks that announced fake business ideas and sold broken tools and appliances at original prices. And while the old man looks nothing like the sort, his offer seemed all too good to be true. Papa always claimed that a farmer's life was better, so there had to be reasons; though the two never conversed away from the dinner table, he knew his parents were both hardworking adults as well. Nevertheless, as the man starts to walk away from Magnus, a rumbling stomach does the talking and Magnus chases him from behind. Onlookers, many of whom holding a frilled umbrella, shake their heads in disbelief; to them, it makes no sense for a hesitant-sounding man to give up all freedoms with an ironically brash decision.

"So, remind me of the application system," Papa walks up the stairs with two glasses of water, one for his precious daughter sitting in the corner of the room. "Where are the places you can go with these results?"

The house has two floors, and it is just enough for Mama and Papa and her; they sleep together in a large bed on the second floor because the first floor barely has space for a fireplace and a dinner table. They live in a neighbourhood often nicknamed as the Red Fortresses, and unsurprisingly, nobody likes it. For jobs and lifestyle, everyone wanted out: higher-paying jobs were only given to citizens that came from another side of the country. And the only way to leave was an acceptance to the capital universities.

"Depending on what I choose to study, I think Obliko and Yukorov are on the cards," the daughter responds. "I don't think it's possible to study Law or Economics at these places, but that's no big deal." She passes the faxed result sheet to his father; she had just picked it up earlier

from the shabby post office a block down. A score above 450 would have allowed her to choose any subject at these places, but 429 (still a great score, her mother remarks as she cheers on from behind) is a bit less flexible. Not that it matters, of course -- anticipating these results, she had already put much thought into her studies -- the greater issue is announcing this decision to her family.

"Any other classmates who will leave the city with you?" Mama asks.

"I don't think so, there was a tricky question this year," she responds. "We had to figure out how likely it was for two people in a room of twenty-five to have the same birthday, and turns out it's quite likely! At least, more likely than it not happening."

"Well done," Papa laughs. "So you must be looking to study medicine."

"Oh, Papa. I'm not sure if the life of a nurse intrigues me."

"Please, 'Iana. Think more carefully about this." She takes a look at her father and realizes he isn't smiling anymore. It's the same path your last cousin had taken -- his post as a nurse at a military hospital landed him enough money to buy his unreasonably strict parents a house and new lifestyle in the capital city. "We've only heard good things about his time in university too. Think about your family."

"I know, and it's great you two have helped me for so long. But there are so many other things I'd like to learn ... isn't writing a good skill to study?"

"You can learn to write notes as a nurse."

"Maybe, but I'm thinking about writing in the abstract. Like writing news articles about our town."

"And what good does that do?"

A lot, she murmurs to herself. It doesn't quite make sense why, as a whole, working class families cared so much about medicine when it was more than enough to make a living after any sort of

higher education. And while she did once mention how she aspired to save lives as a doctor, that was almost ten years ago; furthermore, she knows that her family cared less about the moral aspect of the profession and more about the financial gains it came with. She looks away from the dinner table, spots her new Argus A camera sitting by the piles of textbooks she had stuffed her past evenings studying through, and wonders if there was any figure of speech, any sort of argument that could convince her parents otherwise. This scene itself is a metaphor: it is impossible to detach her camera from her studies, because it gave legitimacy to her voice. And as a 17-year-old teenager-turned-woman too often silenced by old-fashioned passerbys and authority-hungry teachers, the prospect of being a journalist felt like a superpower within reach.

"Out of curiosity, what were your favourite subjects in school, Papa?" She finally breaks the silence. Mama knows to read, but doesn't write anything herself; she had never gone to school.

"I was never any good at studies," he admits. "But I liked learning about history -- it keeps us safe around the town. Made us better understand how the government really feels about our province. Helped us keep you out of trouble."

"And wouldn't you want me to continue this legacy?"

They pause for a moment. Papa and Mama look towards each other, both making a face she had never seen before.

"It's hard to put all our hopes on you, but with everything that's going on, it's the only option," Mama finally speaks. "If you ever want a chance to honour your old friends, this is your--"

"Really? Do you remember that last time we went out to the market?"

Mama makes her way to the staircase, signifying that the conversation was over.

"That was uncalled for, 'Iana," father mutters as soon as the sound of footsteps fade away, yet she remains stone cold on her table seat. She doesn't have a photographic memory, but for the most part, she remembers the places and times she captures in hopes to keep forever. For that specific incident, it had taken 40 seconds to document the interaction between Uma's mother and her own; 'Iana had offered to buy out all the jewellery Uma's mother had been selling that day, for it

reminded her of days old they went to school together, but mother had tugged on her arm more times than a 17-year-old deserved. It felt very humiliating, she had written in her diary, not merely because she was treated like a child, but moreso because it seemed like she was trying to illegitimize her past memories and friend groups.

Uma's mother's name is Ruzan -- an old-fashioned Mayzkomy name which, if she remembered her old language classes, represented a historic messenger that comes from the mountains of the future -- and true to her name, she had left 'Lana with thoughts that still echo to this day. Mother had tugged on her arms so many times that day because Ruzan did recognize her, and not only that, but she spoke out on her late friend's last desires. When Ruzan mentions how dear Uma believed that at least one of them would become a famous writer that day, 'Lana despised how mother spat at the remarks and all she could muster in defense was a soft sigh in the background. Until now, it felt illogical for a simple discussion on writing stories to trigger such an extreme response in public.

If it serves any comfort, she tells herself when Papa leaves the room, there may still be ways to compromise. With the realization that it may all be futile to convince her family otherwise, she prays first for Papa and Mama's understanding, then for her studies in the upcoming years. That for whichever college she eventually decides to go to, there may still be chances to join societies and meet writing-inclined to-be nurses and doctors that teach her how to be human: that teach her how to deliver stories her parents and community and province and country all need to hear.

As one may expect after three weeks from a man of smaller stature and unproven physical ability, Magnus did not have a good time in the factories. Physical labour is something he tolerated, to an extent -- he had helped the family out for many seasons on their farm, after all -- but not ten hours at a time, six days a week, eating nothing but unseasoned porridge for breakfast and chunks of canned chicken with baked potato for the other meals. Seasoned factory workers and newcomers alike walk around like zombies, always too tired for conversation; guards are a lot more rested but also only willing to converse with each other; supervisors are all about business and, similarly, looked down at people of any kind.

He learned this the hard way when asking about dormitories first week. Still embarrassed by the public showers and 16-man bedrooms they are all assigned to, he repeatedly complained how living conditions could not be called housing because he had yet to know the people he shared a bed with. This was to no avail; he gave up on this quest when a guard slammed him by the door and told him to shut up until further notice. He then complained to a supervisor, who did nothing but tell him to be grateful with what he had.

The only redeeming quality of such horrific conditions was the 2000 rubles they received each month, and even that could be improved upon. Sundays were free for workers to go wherever they please, which Magnus uses as a tool to better research the dynamics of his future hometown. First Sunday, [more energy so he returns back to the forums he first entered at, learns his salary isn't that great but also better than most low labour jobs]. Second Sunday, [he takes 50 rubles to the market and learns how much money he has earned from the situation -- he's able to buy a lot of bread]. Third Sunday rolls by, [and you're too tired to go out and explore: instead you talk to some people that worked in the factory and wondered which neighbourhoods people lived in and what differences there are]

It turns out, as a general rule, that most workers around him had no idea what the factory existed for. People knew in a vacuum what their work was -- they helped to package boxes of unknown liquids and operate machines that molded metals into curved airplane parts -- but it was unclear who, aside from the supervisors, they were working for. Even the concept of an airplane was foreign to most, including Magnus: coming from the village, he had only learned one Sunday city outing that commercial birds were invented for people to travel faster from place to place. More seasoned veterans of the place (the longest tenured worker he knows has only worked for two years -- the factory has a lot of satisfaction issues to address) hypothesize that these planes are built for travelling businessmen in the country, and that the liquids are the power source for these vehicles.

There is a saying that tough times come before glory, that pain often comes before pleasure, and that's a line Magnus often repeats to keep himself motivated. But of course, the factory hasn't been all bad as an experience -- supervisors often gave well-timed comments of validation that made Magnus feel special enough to enjoy work. The validation didn't come in a traditional sense: supervisors were abusive in their conduct, so any word of approval was seen as a blessing

from above; just earlier in the week, he was complimented for continuing a shift overtime when the should-be worker to his left fainted in exhaustion to the ground.

Unfortunately for them, today was the last month that their salary would remain at their contracted value. Labour unions hold zero power in times of crisis, and the government knows this too; that evening, supervisors come to their doorstep and tell them that they would only receive 400 less rubles for the exact same job next month. And while he is sure that everyone else is equally disappointed in the change, it is equally unsurprising that nobody musters the courage to speak up against the injustice. If it is already so hard to even get out of bed to grab a cup of water, Magnus tells himself, then surely none of his workmates would waste a day's energy to fight for something so impossible to change. Sure enough, as the supervisors vacate the shared bedrooms, he hears other men discuss how difficult it would be to support a family.

He tries to join in the conversation, but quickly backs out when he realizes how far his goals from the rest of the group. While he searches for positives and reasons to stay in the factories -- less pay was never great, but no pay was even worse, he argues -- his colleagues find double the reasons to be impatient. You've seen too little, one man tells him, and it's fair enough: he notices some gray pieces of hair sticking out from the sides of his ear. Another tells him that a family can't live with patience, and when he further questions his statement, Magnus learns that housing cost an unreasonable premium in the city. These concerns are a window to learn more about the world, so he argues and asks all night. Yet the crew does not give him satisfaction: they all pass out, too tired to entertain his ideas.

It's the last time he ever gets to talk to them. The next day, a piercing siren calls out at a time much earlier than expected, and this time everyone jumps out to their feet. The men quickly discerns that it's not a normal alarm: daily security guard-prompted bells do not shake the room, nor are they accompanied with rumbling sounds and clouds of dust. Workers lying on the top of their ambiguous double-triple bunk bed arrangements tumble down the shaking ladders and fall onto the ground; those closest to the open window look out but only shout for the group to duck down. Even the next-door superintendent -- usually asleep and quiet in the early mornings -- let out a shriek that seemed to reverberate around the hallways just outside.

"My daughter has a more manly cry than *that*," the same grey-haired man remarks, and the room lets out a nervous laughter. It's a sound that reminded Magnus of how his younger sister would cry out when she heard animal footsteps in the dark.

The soot grow thicker and thicker over the next few seconds. A few seniors lie onto the ground and cover their nose with tattered pajamas, so Magnus follows suit. From the corners of his eyes, he spots the remainder of the group remaining motionless on their beds, and it builds an uneasy feeling of suspense: either he himself had inhaled so much smoke that he has lost all sense of reality, or it was his colleagues that were too dumbfounded to defend themselves. Both interpretations are equally dreadful, but there's not much they could do: leaving the room would only bring in billowing smoke, while staying as is left them at the mercy of fate that ticks closer each second. Nobody talks, but there's a look of defeat in many. Magnus senses that everyone feels the same.

As he calls for greater powers to save him, fate answers his call in the form of an even larger explosion. A blinding light goes off in the distance, then the entire room is blown into pieces; [more description more description]. Magnus gets knocked into a growing pile of debris and shrapnel; he feels his mind slowly lose control over his hands, then his arms, until he is not even able to stop himself from closing his eyes and falling into a world of darkness he may not ever be able to come back from.

Chapter 2

Three days later, Magnus lies in a tiny, dimly lit room with tubes around each arm. It's not a familiar scene -- he doesn't recall seeing lights on the ceiling nor pictures of the city plastered on the wall. [maybe one more sentence of description?] More to his surprise, he turns his head to the left and spots a young well-dressed woman sitting by his side this afternoon, playing with a handheld camera.

"You're awake," she chirps.

"I am," he grumbles.

"Your name?"

"Mag...Magnus."

"Welcome! I'm Dilana," she puts her hands out, but retracts it soon after. "How can I help you today?"

Growing up without friends, he's still too shy to talk to strangers; yet, true to her name, she opens up and shares all the stories he wanted to hear. Her name is Dilana -- written with characters that symbolize a blooming flower. "It's an ancient name," she tells you without prompting. "Might make you think I'm not from around here, but it's actually pretty common in the west of the country! It's a contraction of *dilox3n* and *xana*. An ancient female warrior called herself this upon winning a fight against a giant army all by herself."

Magnus gives a blank nod.

"So where *really* am I?" He asks, biting his lip. Midway into his question, her eyes light up and she places her hands on the frame of the bed; she splutters to interrupt his question upon noticing how difficult it looks for Magnus to talk.

"You're in the right place, that's for sure! This is the headquarters for the revolution."

"The revolution?" He stammers.

"Oh, you know, just the nation's freedom fighters. Nothing special," she laughs. "Well, if you want to know the truth, your factory was a big military depot -- one we had to destroy. I'm not sure how much you remember about the work you did, but the airplanes? They've been used to bomb civilians."

"I had no idea."

"I figured! Factories are usually very secretive with this. They make you sign a deal to keep all information private, but that's not even needed." Still slow on the social cues, she continues her monologue. "They prey on the poorly educated and desperate, mostly those that come from the outer parts of the country and just want a job."

"So...I'm in trouble?" Magnus feels an unsettling horror rising in his heart. On a personal level, it feels bad to be identified as an outsider, but that paled in comparison to her first statements: that he had indirectly killed other people across the country.

"Hardly so," she responds, but his heart still thumps in the background. "The workers haven't done anything wrong, so it's our duty to help them out. Working on airplane parts and all -- there's nothing you could have done to realize what you all were working towards."

"I see."

"I'm sorry if this isn't the introduction you were looking for. You must still be in shock. Let me bring over some food, then I can tend to your wounds."

He doesn't yet have the strength to sit up, so he turns on one side to see her shadow slowly creep towards the door. There is a certain elegance to how she walked -- despite being small in stature (though he had guessed she was not much shorter than he was), she strolled in a particularly deliberate fashion that made her seem a lot more imposing than she was; at the same time, as her hands swayed by the sides of her floral red dress, he could hear no sound coming from her footsteps. Moreover, she wears light-coloured sandals that he's never quite seen before -- a far cry from the rainboots used to trudge through puddles of mud. Her outfit screams city life casual, but she's a member of the revolution: her previous answers do not convince him that she had been honest all along. More worrying, it also makes no sense for a rogue group of civilians to provide him the medical treatment he needed. I could've very well died that day, he thinks to himself, so they either had a need for his services in some way. True evil was rare, but so was true good: in the villages, nobody would pay for each other's hospital bills when they themselves were starving.

Before he has much time to consider the possibilities, she returns with a tray of chicken soup (and her camera, but that was not for him). She tells him that it's a typical welcome ritual to serve such a dish in her culture, and sure enough, Magnus remarks how it has magical healing powers. It may have been a long time since he last ate, he tells her, but the fragrance gives him a bit more energy to engage in conversation.

"That's good," she jokes. "I know everything may still be confusing, but it really felt like talking to a wall just earlier."

The next thing, she asks for his life story, so slowly, Magnus opens up about his past -- he speaks of rejected conversations with superintendents at the factory, of a backwards-thinking village he wasted his childhood living in, and of extended relatives he never quite bonded together with. He tells her of the men and women he admired back in the village for how they had so much control over her destiny, and feels a little tingle when she explains how her old hometown had many who wanted to leave. Watching her every move with caution, Magnus can't help but blush when she nods to what he says.

"Do you nod because you like my story, or because you relate to my experiences?" he asks.

"Hmm, maybe both," she smiles. "I'm not quite sure if I can relate to having siblings. But my parents disapprove of my life choices as well."

"They don't want you to be part of the revolution, I assume."

"Perhaps. But they were disappointed in me way before I joined the forces." She takes a piece of cloth and wipes the fog off her glasses. "They haven't talked to me ever after I left for college. Something about my area of study."

"You study history?"

"Almost. I'm a journalism major. Came to study medicine initially, but didn't like the topic. And as for the camera -- photography's just a side hobby."

"What's so bad about that?"

"Nothing, really, if you ask me. I've been trying to tell my parents the same as well. But I was getting good grades for high school, and was accepted to a really nice school in the capital. We weren't exactly rich, so they really hoped I chose a profession that helped the family finances."

"Then...why didn't you listen to them?"

"I almost did. For a long time, I just wanted to cave in. But in the end," she stops to put her glasses back on. "In the end, money doesn't buy you everything." It's a foreign concept to Magnus, so he remains silent: perhaps money isn't an end goal in life, but it sure buys food and a chance to move to the city.

"I see," he mutters.

"Thank you for understanding," she sighs, and Magnus does not know quite how to respond. "You are a good listener. It's not every day that I can talk about my concerns and not get judged for this all."

Silence.

"So you mentioned something about a camera..." He switches the topic.

"Oh, this?" She tilts her head to the side, and passes over her apparatus to the side of his bed. "Have you ever used one before?"

He shakes his head; a smile slowly creeps on his face.

"So, you see the images up all over this room? These photos are taken by me, Magnus! The camera was a gift for my 16th birthday, and I've been obsessed since. You get to freeze a moment in time -- a nice sunset or a fun date -- and then your memories can be saved forever. What's not to like?"

"You take these photos for school?"

"Oh, not at all! It's just an interest. Besides, that's not what a journalism major practices in the university -- we do a lot of reading analysis. Like, reading through numbers and official speeches and finding ways to think carefully about the trends."

"That's not very interesting..."

"No, it isn't! Well, actually, I quite enjoy it, but photography is definitely something I would prefer to do in my free time. I can teach you sometime, if you're interested. There are a lot of buttons but don't be intimidated: it's a lot easier than it looks."

Those are the last words the two exchange that day. A tall, stern figure grabs her by the shoulder, and then he's left by his own: she gives Magnus a little hug and tells him to take good care of himself, but his heart sinks a little when she gets up and stands by the other man's side. An easily influenced character, Magnus loves how she had listened to him talk, even if she was a prison guard in many of the real-world possibilities in his head. Her camera lens shines from the side of her hand, and it reminds him of the times he had stayed back to talk to a similar-aged woman down his family's barn house.

Cameras are not common commodities in the 1930s, especially in the poorer regions of the country. Though the good itself is reasonably priced (especially those made by *Kandus*, a local business and brand whose products rival the quality of American competition like Kodak), many middle-lower class families simply didn't find a use for such a product. Besides, post-processing procedures are extremely time-costly for those living in more isolated neighbourhoods -- one had to go to a verified store in order to print physical copies of the images, and these stores are only established in more segregated regions of the state. Specifically, even if one lived in the modern parts of Movyshkala, it was still at least a forty-minute one way commute before one would reach such a facility, centered next to the bubble where all the state-expatriates (meaning that they came from outside the state, not necessarily outside the country) resided. Thus, as expected, it was a source of friction within the family when Dilana announced that she hoped to own such a device in the near future.

Of course, this *decision* -- defined as coming out to parents to ask for such a present -- was not one she made without careful deliberation with friends and relatives. None of the people she talked to had faced a similar situation, so around half of them told her to go along with it. The other half, however, shared a similar concern with her parents -- that having something as powerful as a camera would spark investigation from higher officials from the region; and, sure enough, this is something that Papa warned her when they first discussed the topic.

"How will you keep yourself away from trouble with a camera?" He questioned.

"Many ways! I just want a camera to document happy times. Our road overlooks such a pretty lake and sunrise-- wouldn't you want to have some decorations in the living room?"

"And what if you accidentally take an image of people you're not supposed to intrude upon?"

"But that's something the stores will regulate. As long as you don't do it too many times, they just won't return a physical copy of the image. I've read it in a few manuals before."

"And how can you be so sure of this?"

"I don't. I'm just speculating."

Her parents did not have a good track record of agreeing to her demands, so she didn't expect much to change from this discussion. But it never hurt to dream. A week before her 16th, knowing that her favourite teacher had spent his childhood in the neighbouring Pyelokatsov province, she approached him to learn more about the stores and asked whether her beliefs were close to reality; he told her that the process of acquiring a camera often requires background checks, but can easily be bypassed if there was an intermediary buyer in the procedure. His explanation is the reason why she cried in shock and invited her entire friend group to dinner when her parents fulfilled this request on the day of her birthday: though on paper, she may not truly own the camera, she feels touched that her parents had gone out of their way to keep her satisfied. It's why she loves photography.

As for her promises with his father, those had been kept to the best of her abilities... somewhat. She had hoped to take pictures to celebrate her friends as they are, but the line between private life and treason is often too thin to determine; many of similar companions had disappeared just a few years ago, and the reasoning for them were often shrouded in mystery. Her first tape included dinner table group pictures in front of an old warhead monument and some pendants that shone so brightly under a muted orange skyline, but none of these aforementioned pictures came back. Her friends -- more of the optimistic, glass-half-full type -- told her not to worry about an error of two of over twenty pictures, but her doubting conscience cried over how she may have exposed her friends. It's also why she doesn't love photography: though official

documents may signal that regulations are loosening, there still was not enough freedom to document what truly meant to her.

While the camera still brings her much joy as a physical memory of simpler times with family, it now holds more value as a lesson regarding power. Like governments and journalists, corrupted power too often results in ostracized individuals and disenfranchised minorities; though she still takes photos of sceneries she finds meaningful, the camera is more a physical memory for her times in the west. It serves as an icebreaker for undocumented conversations where she can reveal how much Uma and Kolmi and Rishan and so many others had left and changed her life for the better.

At a similar age, Magnus coasts through life; while some moral values had been established and passed on by his parents, not much could be said about his ambition or long-term goals just yet. His brothers do the same -- older by three and five years respectively, they are fully grown adults with no desire to do any more than sleep, eat, and plow the fields whenever their parents called them out. Maybe they are disappointed in them all, but there is no way to tell: conversations are far and in between, and culture dictates them to never admit such a thing.

Up until now, the only difference between Magnus and his brothers is where they decide to lounge each afternoon. An unusually reserved man, his oldest sibling would lounge only within the confines of the farm. His second brother takes more naps per day, but has shorter naps on average; usually too exhausted to complain about spots, he dozes off in public places whenever errands get too demanding. But Magnus is more particular about favourite spots and scenery: he always chooses to sit right outside the barn in order to see how his neighbours live their life.

For the most part, there was nothing interesting about the scenery nor the people that lived around him. Yet all of this changed on the first day of the new year. Grandpa and Grandma Manav left their side of the road; a younger family moves in, and he fancies their same-aged daughter he swears he has seen on family excursions before. Striking conversation is hard, so they played a few games together; through small talk during a few games of rubber band shooting and stone hopping, he learns that she dances for the major parade in the town, and there was so little that he does in his free time. Leaving their game session that day, he tells

himself never to lounge by the doorstep anymore: it would make a bad impression on his work ethic if she ever spotted him there. Moreover, since she has a performance coming up, Magnus convince himself that it would be a good idea to earn money on the side and buy a ticket for the fair.

[For the remainder of this story, Magnus describes how he had taken up part-time shifts and asked parents if there was any way to reward him monetarily if he went out of his way to help with the family business. However, when this was no longer possible, what he does as a last-ditch effort upon realizing that he is unable to watch her performance is to gift her a present. That night, when she walks back to the home, he stays just outside and sits on a cut-down tree log, waiting to give her a jar of crickets that he had collected over time. Perhaps suspecting that this was not an adequate payment (that this would somehow disgust her was not on his mind at the time since they live in the villages), he also prepares a wooden sculpture of his birth animal that he had gotten as part of his 16th birthday present. In the village, hitting age 16 is a big deal, and knowing your spirit animal was a process that required you to talk to a shaman and talk to never-before-seen uncles for their advice; these sculptures are very intricately made and are assign of adulthood. His animal is a frog -- there is nothing particularly suspicious about it but it is certainly quite a unique one, which makes Magnus feel a lot better about himself.

She is shocked to see him sitting right outside their home, for she had never opened up to him directly. However, when he gives her both of these presents, she simply takes them and walks away, unwilling to participate in his transactional desire to stay with him or talk about her life. She did not take the crickets because she considered them too hard to take care of, so he had given up his birth animal for no benefit. The next day, when confronted by parents, he had nothing to say other than he had lost it sometime last night when strolling around. This recap/background story ends with Magnus lamenting how he was so easy to fall for people that he was willing to give up the world and receive nothing in return.]

Early next day, Dilana returns to Magnus' room with a loud cheer to signal her entrance. The trays wobble as she strolls closer towards the bed; she brings to him a bowl of soup once more, but this time alongside another dish of toasted bread Magnus had never gotten to eat other than in special occasions back at home. Clearly, this is the case in the city as well -- as she passes over

his breakfast, Dilana remarks that they had only prepared this meal to help them in their recovery.

Magnus had slept well last night. His only concerns were regarding the future and his whereabouts, but her entrance today has done much to mitigate these concerns: the so-called revolution still cares for him well, which leads him to believe that he is still (rightfully so, he thinks to himself) considered innocent in their eyes.

"A few of your factory friends are in rooms next to you, but some haven't waken up yet. In due time, you will get to see each other. If you want to, of course," Dilana explains.

Of course, there are still a few lingering questions for Magnus, some easier to answer than others. The true nuances of the status quo -- even for those in higher education -- is difficult to navigate, but it's something Magnus believed she had all the answers for. The exact role of the revolution or the politics within it, on the other hand, feels a lot more unclear. Dilana carries herself in high regard (or maybe this was something he had overestimated), and yet it feels so improbable that a leader of one would stoop down to talking to injured newcomers for even twenty minutes.

"So, how much power do you have?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Are you a leader of the revolution?"

The sink drips gently in the corner of the room. Magnus takes another bite of the toast.

"Not really," she responds. "I'm not really part of the military strategy and whatnot. My main role is to lead recruitment for members and find ways to advertise our cause -- all while not getting caught by government forces. We're a rapidly growing group, but we're still outnumbered as it stands."

"So what about the other man that I saw?"

"Oh, Luxian? Yes, he's one of the leaders! How did you guess?"

He blushes a bit. Compliments and questions are hard to come by.

"It just seemed that way. Who else is relevant in the revolution?"

"We can pay them all a visit, if you'd like."

She moves to the end of his bed and pushes on the frame. It's the first time Magnus learns that the bed has wheels; it suddenly makes sense why he had felt the room shake multiple times when he adjusted his posture last night. Still not strong enough to drag the apparatus, the tray shakes and Magnus nearly chokes on his food.

A few minutes later, they enter another dark room with a round table. [descriptions need to be fine-tuned. talk a bit about the actual room itself, how the room had a lot more light than just a candle Magnus had in his room, then have a bit about describing the table in front of them.] The table has a lot of scratches that do not just seem to come from old age wear and tear -- unnatural creases and deep holes suggested that knives had been thrown all over the place. Luxian stands on the very left of the room; he holds a stick in his arm and points to scribbles on a large blackboard filled with chalk stains behind their backs. The only other man in the room is a war-veteran-like figure -- he doesn't ever introduce himself, so Dilana takes control and introduces him as Olgen -- short for one-eyed. It's not his first name at birth, she explains.

"He got those scars from an unsuccessful campaign we once had as an organization. We've called him that for as long as we remember, but if anything, he likes it. He considers it a sign of his bravery."

She pats Magnus on the head, then tiptoes her way until she stands by the side of Luxian. He acknowledges her presence with a hug and attempts to continue on with the presentation, but she repeatedly covers his mouth before he could continue his discussion. Awkwardly, Magnus turns away and continues to eat his breakfast, but overhears them laughing in conversation; Olgen follows suit and looks down to write a few notes on his paper. For the next minutes or so, Magnus is nothing but a wallflower: Luxian wrestles her out of the way to continue his presentation, then Olgen and Luxian engage in a shouting battle. Luxian brings out a map (after which Dilana proudly remarks how she had drawn it out herself during her first year of college),

then Olgen splatters red paint all over the railway intersections. The conversation eventually reaches a standstill, so the two shake hands and ask to reconvene another day. None of the leaders pay a single second to look at Magnus, and soon after, they storm out through a secret exit behind the blackboard. As Magnus scratches his head, Dilana grabs onto the bed and escorts him back to the room. The conversation on the ride back is not particularly pleasant.

"You never seemed to talk to Olgen."

"Mhm."

"He any less powerful in the clan?"

It hurts to turn his head, but he makes an effort to look up. She bites her lip for a while, holding a stern look on her face.

"Theoretically, they're equal. They went to the same college and have very similar views on the government. But most people within the higher administration tend to trust Luxian more."

"Why?"

"That's a long story. I'm not sure I can sit down and tell you everything right now. Both are good people at heart: it's just most believe that Olgen has misguided opinions to how the country should be run. Besides, Luxian feels a lot more impressionable as a person."

"Well. It's just that both of them seemed equally cold to me when I was there, I guess."

"Both are very no-nonsense people, yes. What I mean is more about how they approach problems. Remember how Olgen looks?"

Magnus stays quiet.

"Well, if you must know, it was Olgen personality and reckless desire for bloodshed that has left him in this physical situation. *That* fateful mission -- the one where he lost his eye? It was never

meant to be such a failure. And it means a lot that he prides himself on being part of it, so much so that he wanted to change his name around it."

"How does that even work?" Magnus questions.

"Funny you ask. On a similar mission to destroy a government stronghold -- a factory similar to one you worked in -- we had succeeded in evacuating many workers from the scene. It's only right, of course -- the workers haven't done anything wrong, so it's our duty to help them out. But Olgen wanted more."

She stops to take a glance around the corridor, as if to check if others were tuning into the conversation.

"Olgen had a specific grudge towards the factory itself, and I'm not too sure why. Some people in the administration say it's his old classmate that runs the daily routines, so he had a desire to meet him in the eye. Others tell me that he had worked in the factory before and wanted the satisfaction of blowing their brains out. In any case, their battalion overstayed their welcome as Olgen tried to hunt down officials for his selfish gain. It's all quite meaningless, really -- luckily he's a quick-thinking individual in danger. Otherwise we could have lost a lot of soldiers that day."

Magnus chokes on his food. There was something off with her description.

"Now, I don't talk to him unless I really have to. In the past, it was mostly the same -- he had an unhealthy desire for revenge," she concludes.

"Do you ever feel...intimidated by how he looks?" Magnus asks.

"Is that what you felt?"

"A little. But I feel it's wrong to be cold towards a person just because of how they look." [it brings him to think of a man he knew from before ... discriminated for how he looked, very deformed physical guy]

"Of course, it's wrong to judge people differently based on looks. But that's clearly not the case here," Dilana starts pushing the bed again. "We don't have any problem with how Olgen looks, initially or after. It's more that his scars are a reminder of his destructive behaviour, and we don't talk to him in our free time because we consider him a dangerous influence. But for the revolution, he's still a leader because he's very strategically gifted: he knows how to get the most out of our little resources we have."

"I see," Magnus mutters; he doesn't quite agree with her statements. The aforementioned physically deformed man in his hometown village always fought whoever he considered to stare at him too long at a time. When asked about it in a public confrontation, he explains that nobody gave him a chance at a normal life, so he feels resentment for the world around him.

"You don't sound convinced." She notices how Magnus' voice trails off whenever he is unsure of an answer.

"I think you're right," he sighs. "I just know a man in my hometown that got a lot of scars after people complained about his deformities."

"How unfortunate," she responds. "I'll try to keep your words in mind."

Though the college system is corrupt for the fact that it gave children of government officials a guaranteed position, the rest of the enrollment was determined in a surprisingly meritocratic format -- a test was administered for all students in the country, and those with the best scores were given the top options in the country, no questions asked. Yet despite these rules, Luxian himself never benefitted from such a system: a few years after living with his uncle, he chooses to burn his passport and go by an alias, and it made him feel a lot better about his place in society. It meant that he earned his position at the top college in the country, and that studying history was something he had determined by his own hard work and interests.

A clear downfall of a purely test-based college system, however, as Luxian quickly learns, is that many of his colleagues are not particularly well-versed at reading emotions (among a list of other skills). For the most part, this was an easy feature of the college experience to ignore -- aside

from the occasional stranger he met on his daily strolls, he was not a particularly talkative person. Rather, one thing he came to enjoy most about his college was exploring the vastness of the campus. Spanning over 200 acres in land and with many underground tunnels for the winter, Luxian had found all sorts of secret pathways to different buildings; following the law of Pythagoras, it raised suspicion amongst professors and classmates alike he was able to get to classes in half the expected time.

In particular, since the first week of school, Luxian held a particular grudge for an older man named Doni. The first time Luxian announced he was a history student, he dribbled on on how historians were the jokes of a society and that law students were simply better versions of their profession. They did not share a room, but they did the corridor, and that was enough for Doni to assert his dominance: for no particular reason other than ego, he had barged into his room and almost broke the door frame just to show off a collection of figure soldiers he had gotten from museums. Yet despite all this, he had no ability to think critically: for somebody who considered law a 'smarter' version of history, his only justification for why he loved the current administration so much was that he benefitted a lot from the meritocracy.

A meritocracy is just in specific scenarios, Luxian had said to himself, but only for people from an even playing field. Consider religious men and women living in the outskirts of the nations -- if they are being persecuted their whole life, then what time would they have to study for a test? And in practice, they don't even work so well, he complained to his uncle in a written letter. Tests only identify those strong at rote memorization and writing syntax, not emotional intelligence or critical thinking skills. It's like living in a game show.

His uncle had taught him to suck it up, and for the first two months of school, this was exactly what he did. It became clear that Doni wanted this all for some form of external validation, so starting from that day, he didn't acknowledge his presence. When Doni barged into the common room and laughs at how Luxian tinkers at the piano, he continued to press on the same keys: sure enough, when he made a quick peek at his surroundings, Luxian saw how he threw an internal tantrum when he didn't get the response he wanted to see.

However, some scenarios are much easier to ignore than others. On the strike of midnight on November 13th, 1930, a small television box whirrs in the middle of a room and a group of twenty-or-so men and women crowd around it; the robotic voice of the black-and-white figure is

put to max volume, but the constant chatter drowns out his statements. Uncle's advice and common sense tells Luxian to walk away, but the nature of the conversation reels him in. It wasn't one of those conversations one had to actively participate in. He grabbed a chair and, being at the back of the room, considers himself just a mediator for any fights that potentially could take place.

Doni sits at the very front of the crowd, as expected, and goes around asking provocative questions. It's Luxian's father on the screen -- Artem Ehtana, now the sole minister of religion and agriculture in the government -- who begins the talk by addressing the changes in how western regions should be governed. In particular, the provinces of Omona-Mayzkom and Perkolov are mostly farmlands and majority Turkish (these two features are more linked than one may imagine: many minorities held religious beliefs and had been re-educated as labour workers in the country less than thirty years ago), so Artem claims that these ethnic groups are unfit for such a fundamental role. He goes on to demand for prisoners in neighbouring places to be used as volunteers, and this sparks a huge cheer within the cabinet: an unnamed official shouts for famines to never happen again. By even the nation's past standards, this scene is an almost satirical portrayal of the administration.

Yet Luxian notices how Doni loves every part of the speech: he nods at everything his father was paid to say. Fuck famines, he shouts to the crowd, and long live a country that knows how to treat those that truly matter. The student next to him doesn't react to his comments, so he pushes him over to the ground.

"You think famines are just going to solve itself?" He taunts.

"No...", the student stammers. "But in geography class, we learn these regions are cold. There's not much productivity required because not many types of crops can be grown."

"Fuck your geography. Can't expect much from people like you," he spits. "And your little crony to the right -- don't you just love Artem so much? What a real man."

"The one who po--"

"The one who won over opposition and became the sole head."

The woman nods in a hurried fashion, her eyes wide open with fear. Luxian peers over the group and notices how he grips her jacket such that she could no longer lie on the side of her partner. It makes him almost gag to hear how he described the way he tried to poison his loved ones.

Luxian had not intended to get himself into a mess -- speaking up would mean fraternizing with Doni in any form, even if nobody learns of his blood. And, being a physically impressive man that struggled with anger management throughout junior high school, exercising restraint was something he had much practice and experience with. But once Doni brings up Darwin's theory of natural selection and laughs at the weaknesses of Uncle Shumi, it doesn't take Luxian much time to lunge at his throat and attempt to pin him down to the ground. It's such a shame, the woman next to him thinks to herself, for he had just elected to not speak up when I asked him a question.

The classmates around them slowly pick up their belongings and run to the back of the room, clearing out the way for a showdown. On a physical viewpoint, the showdown goes exactly as he wishes: Doni is pinned to the ground, gasping for breath, and Luxian gives him a deafening punch to the face that sends a shockwave of screams around the room. Yet on an emotional level, he's totally lost: when Luxian finally realizes the severity of his actions and loosens his grip on his neck, Doni asks him why he'd feel so angry for a man that never hurt you directly, and it brings tears to Luxian's eyes when his comments remind him of sweeter times when he had brought him to work and met many of those grainy television figures in person. A wary student asks whether Luxian did know Artem from before, and his silence tells them more than they needed to know.

That night, as he reflects by the candlelight in his room, tossing and turning as the stars in the night sky shine back at him, a woman (who Luxian later learns has lived right beside him this whole time) comes to influence his thoughts.

"To be fair, people just said that because you look pretty similar to him," she tells him. "Nobody actually believes you're related." Luxian sighs a breath of relief.

"I'm not," he lies, and she shoots him a weird look. "I just think it's dangerous to blindly follow what the government says. Maybe they are recording me now, and I'm in trouble. But I'm not saying the government is bad as it is -- it's just that we always need to stay doubting."

"I agree with you," she smiles. "Maybe you don't think I know much about this, because I'm from a math background. But maths is a lot of logic puzzles, and it's really helped open my eyes out to how to formulate arguments."

[need some ending conclusion paragraph that ties everything together]

[a story about luxian's older life in college seeing his father in the revolution on television at their college and hearing a debate around him, and he had to learn how to control his anger due to what he felt towards those who sympathized him. when people asked why he didn't speak up he instead felt inclined to swear at those who tried to provoke him]

[not sure what the transition should be, but some additional scene needs to be written about where everything falls in place and how he gains more faith in the revolution while still injured. Can still talk about meeting the same people in different contexts, but I'm not entirely sure. Could also consider meeting other people in the organization, but I don't want to spread out the conversation too long]

Chapter 3

Fast forward a month later, and Magnus recovers well from his injuries. There are nurses within the organization (Dilana, he learns, is a part-time one -- which is why she could spend so much time with him), and they decide this week to unravel all the tubes and bandages they had wrapped his feet with. It's not a perfect recovery, but it's good enough to walk; there's still a little click at his knee whenever he moves his leg too quickly, but it does not cause him any pain.

"You looked like a mummy," one of them had told Magnus before he was able to slide his feet into a pair of slippers next to the bed. He later learns of what the nurse meant -- old emperors in

a faraway kingdom were wrapped in bandages to preserve them for the afterlife -- and he gathered it could have very well been him if treatment had gone any different.

Magnus had seen many of the rooms in the headquarters and met many of the people Dilana had introduced him to during treatment, and yet it still feels so different to see them in a different context and physical state. The first time he leaves the room on his own, he walks by Olgen holding a few crumpled-up sheets of paper and rolls of posters: his less-slouched posture made him seem a lot more confident and larger even than what he remembered of Luxian; this contrasted with the more timid, self-absorbed impression he had that day when dragged over to meet Luxian. Vantage point matters, so Dilana also looks a lot prettier face on: when Magnus walks by the main cafeteria and spots her reading through a blue-coloured book, there was a certain twinkle in her eye that made her glasses all the more stylish. Even the setup of the headquarters look different: the paintings and photos on the wall all had a much more grandiose look now that he could hold a candle up to his eye.

The decorations altogether, he determines, tell a story that he could very well be a part of. Like his recovery, it starts in a quaint room filled only with scenes of nature. Photos of dazzling cliffs and isolated towns reveal a world with little bureaucracy and connections to modern society. The outside corridors, however, were plastered with scenes ramped up in intensity; they portray a disturbance in this utopia. First, Magnus points out a photo of two children playing chess in the middle of a city street. He marvels at how an elderly man could calmly observe the game when the world was anything but: when cars and trucks numbered in the dozens and drove right past their board. The next photo is an aerial view of a rally gone wrong: men and women and children hold up signs on the left of the room, but the front rows are knocked to the ground by a mob of policemen and security guards. The final image is just a drawing, but it's one that draws him in the most: a line of civilians stand around a fallen man who holds a gun and flag in his hand, but all characters seem the least bit concerned. Sure enough, Magnus later learns that this is a metaphor for the country celebrating and leaving behind the current militant rule.

It's hard to validate this narrative, but Magnus considers it convincing enough to remain underground as part of the revolution. Of course, there are obvious problems with being out in the city again. With no ability to read or write, nor any prior experience in baking or cooking, leaving meant setting himself up for failure: if he left the hand that fed him, he would have gone out into the world, taken another lackluster job at a factory, and risk himself to being part of

another bombing by those who had just saved him. Yet at the same time, Magnus likes to think that his decision is more motivated by principle. The revolution is not a perfect match -- he had not much in common with the leaders or Dilana, in all honesty -- but if Dilana had been true to her word, then children's lives and greater representation was an issue worth his personal troubles.

He stands still, just a few meters away from Dilana's table, as he rehearses a way to tell her his intentions. It sounds all too good in his head, but nothing comes out his mouth when he finally taps her on the shoulder. It's not a cause for panic, for she had seen his awkward moments many times already.

"You've recovered!" She gives him a thumbs up. [gives a quick scan from top down and sees that he's wearing new clothes and stuff that they had laid out in the room in preparation]

"Why, yes," he stutters. "My knee still makes a weird sound when I walk, but they cleared me today, I think."

"Take it easy then."

She pulls out the chair next to her pile of books. He doesn't hesitate to take the spot.

"I notice that every time you tilt your head you have something you want to say," she continues as he kicks his knee back and forth; sure enough, even she hears the popping sound every few movements he makes.

"How did you determine that?"

"It's happened a few times since you were here. It's not too hard to figure out if you pay attention to conversation."

"I didn't even notice myself," he admits.

"That's no problem! So what were you trying to say?"

Silence. It suddenly dawns upon Magnus why he has been so nervous all along: as bad as it sounds, what mattered most in the revolution thus far had been the company Dilana and others had given him. It wasn't a lie that saving lives and overthrowing a corrupt government could be things he wanted to do too -- as long as he got to learn how an underground organization could make those changes.

"It's not much," he confesses. "I just wanted to say I really enjoyed my time and I want to stay for a lot longer. There's ... something in me that wants to feel special and do something big, and I think you could help out with that." He stops short of complimenting her any further; his heart melts when she blushes in return.

"I think we can help out with that," she laughs. "What specific things would you like to learn?"

"Anything, really. Wish I knew what the revolution does in greater depth. And I want to be able to make a difference -- I want to be a good general for the group as well."

"These things will come in due time, Magnus! I can tell you what you need about the history of the country and all -- I myself needed to hear those conversations when I moved from the countryside. But to be a general, you need a good track record of bravery and decision-making as a soldier first. I can count on you for that, right?"

He hesitates for a bit. Perhaps a soldier doesn't ever have to be deployed, he thinks to himself. Falling into a cycle of violence and life-threatening injuries does not seem too enticing.

"Let me know what you think," she turns her head back towards the book she had been reading.

"No rush to respond right now."

He sits on the next table in an almost fetal position, his hands covering his eyes, and the first thing she does is ask if he wants to hear from other factory worker turned soldiers, but in truth, Magnus already had some idea of what that type of life entails. The man who made it out from the village had a brother who wasn't so lucky: being a large bully, he found a job as a soldier, fought for the supposed ground forces of the country, then returned back to the village dazed and unable to speak in more than half-complete sentences. Perhaps he may have been fighting for a different army and a unjust cause in the grand scheme of events, but it makes Magnus wary

of how violence can change even the most dangerous of opposition. Moreover, he has always had a disdain for confrontation: it was a personality trait so glaring that even his timid father had approached multiple times to ask him to man up.

Because of these past experiences, even the thought of taking this offer makes him realize how much Dilana drives his motives and thought process. Magnus had never been a violence type of person, and yet he feels for the first time that fighting is a viable life path. He doesn't know how to read nor operate a camera, and yet every time she talks about it, he feels he can too: there was something about her passion for learning that made *him* want to explore the world more, even though he had never made the same effort to get educated or learn his surroundings when around his family. He knows that Luxian and Olgen are not people he hopes to interact with much, yet it only feels like a necessary sacrifice for more time with her. And indeed, when he raises his head up from the darkness, her soft voice and rosy cheeks is all it takes to accept the offer and take up arms.

Despite how she leaned towards Luxian, Magnus knows he truly loves her as well. He loves how she was so unabashedly herself: how she displayed such strong moral convictions in discussions, such willingness to take drastic risks for the better. He loves how she offered up her dinner without hesitation, how she told him stories when nobody looked in your direction. She feels like a modern-time hero to him. She is the person he aspires to become.

"I'm glad we made an impact on you," Dilana gives him a high-five. "It's not easy being a part of a revolution and sacrificing a personal life...we don't expect anyone to return the favour. But it's great you decided to continue...we'll get you trained up as soon as we can."

"Thank you," he mutters, blushing under the table. The words almost bring him to tears. All he has ever wanted is to belong.

(Vignette: Dilana messes up in a class for medicine and talks to a professor after class that she doesn't think she belongs)

Five years apart from Luxian's burst of violence within university confines, a young woman roams around the very same campus at night. She wears heels two sizes too small (universities were surprisingly strict with dress code the first few months of school, and it makes no sense -- lecture rooms were packed with hundreds of students, thus it was time inefficient to have the lecturer check outfits in a line beforehand) and holds a large bag filled to the max with textbooks. Behind her are a few fairer-skinned classmates that flip their hair as they accelerate towards their butterfly, but she doesn't match their enthusiasm: medicine was an unforgiving subject for grades, and she had just failed her most important first-year chemistry tests.

"It's not fair I have to subject myself to classes I don't enjoy," she wrote to her parents even before the test had commenced. "College life is fun, but I'm not cut out to become a doctor." Parents responded just yesterday with a message laced with passive aggression: it's always that they lived longer and knew what she *really* wanted out of life, that they paid for tuition. Mama writes she loves her, but it definitely did not feel like so.

Like all higher education programs around the country, tests are the sole factor for grades and job prospects in the future. What makes colleges in the capital city a cut above the rest is the presence of student societies, and that is the only reason Dilana still feels motivated at the university. None of her activities, however, helped her much for her academic pursuits: newspaper club gave her chances to publish opinions and design photo collages of places around the school, but it doesn't help her write better answers to philosophy questions on their medical exams; eating and etiquette-related clubs teach her how to act more in line with classmates that come from higher classes of society, but learning to operate chopsticks does not help her with anxiety that makes her hands shake when drawing diagrams for homework. Friends in these society, she observes, also take completely different classes: they get to daydream all day and give her advice that contrast with what her parents would say.

It's a college dinner night, but unlike her classmates, she heads straight to the residency to talk with her professor that lives around the block. They serve pasta and salted beef cubes today -- her favourite -- and the smell makes it just unbearable to ignore. Eventually, she reaches the professor's doorstep, pulls out the test paper, and they sit side by side on a dinner table with nothing more than piles of paper scattered all over.

"You're here to talk about the quiz," the professor begins.

"Yes, ma'am," she responds. "I don't know if I can stay in this class much longer."

The professor pauses for a moment.

"You know, it takes a lot of guts to come here and complain about the material I teach."

"Oh, that's not what I-"

"It's certainly what it sounds like."

Dilana freezes on the spot. It takes her a great deal of willpower to stop the trembling of her hands.

"I promise I've really enjoyed the lectures you held in the first few weeks. But I just know that I have more interest in journalism and history. I'm enrolled in medicine because my parents will only support me if I keep at this option."

"You know-"

"And I'm sorry for speaking up again, but I just wanted to say how awesome it is to travel halfway around the globe to come to an institution and see a woman do so well in such an important field and save lives. It just isn't the right path for me." The first part of her statement is a lie: though she did indeed come from a faraway region, it was not any further than a three day train trip that only lasted that long because of the multiple stops they had to make midway. But the second statement is something Dilana believes from the bottom of her heart. She takes any of the professor's comments to heart, because it was so rare to see another woman with the power to speak up and influence the lives of so many men.

"What's your name?" The professor eventually speaks up. She glances up at the ceiling.

"Dilana Yesurugov," she sings.

"Well, isn't that a beautiful name. I take that you're from Omona-Mayzkom then."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I've been there a few times. It's a shame how they deal with things there. I understand why your parents feel that way about you."

Dilana nods in agreement.

"Well, Dilana, there's no way around this -- your test scores are quite horrendous. And I know you're not here to hear your professor say that again to your face."

"I'm sorry, ma'am."

"You know I'm not originally from the city as well, right?"

Dilana peers her head forward.

"Oh?"

"Yes, I wasn't. And I didn't even intend to study medicine at the time as well. My parents had chosen my major out for me -- they wanted me to become a government official. At the time, being an official was relatively stress-free: the leader just wanted a few other cronies to vote for what he wanted and do a bit of the grunt work and foreign affairs, then pay them a large lump sum of money for their efforts."

"That sounds awful."

"Well, this was before I even considered the morality of the behaviour -- our family was so poor we were left no choice, really. I had not even done well at school, so going to college felt like a death wish without much fun."

"But you're so--"

"Are you going to let me finish?" She asks once more, and this time Dilana shuts up for good.

"The point is, as another famous scientist says, if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid. And for me, I took a biology class first semester in college and enjoyed how much it helped me understand the world. I was much of an outside girl, you know. Like me, I imagine you have subjects you are more interested in."

"That's true. For me, I'm a big fan of learning about people and writing about it, ma'am. I hope you enjoy the letters I sent on my progress in the class throughout the past few weeks."

"I never really read much into your writing style," she admits. "It's not what I look for when students ask questions about the material, though, so don't take it personally. What do you like writing about?"

"Part of the newspaper club, so anything about school life and the city, really. There's a little editorial session that I wish I can make my way up to writing, though -- they get to write about more interesting topics about the country."

"You ever miss home, Dilana?"

Dilana pauses to recollect her thoughts.

"I miss my family, yes. But I worry if they'll still care for me if I don't choose the subject they picked for me."

"Parents always come around to forgiving you. The first year I switched, they didn't let me return home. I lived with the only other young woman at the college -- learned a lot, really. Told me a lot about how to live a more upper-class life, they judge you by how you eat and little nuances."

"Oh! Am I doing okay with them?" She grabs a nearby pen and uses it as a spoon for an imaginary bowl she gestures with her left hand, but stops when her professor remains stone faced as ever.

"Not only that, but I became a lot better as a student when I heard her parents talk about chasing dreams. It paid off, in the end -- I graduated in three years and my parents even came all the way to see me get my diploma."

"So you're saying everything will work out in the end?"

"That's not-"

"Thank you so much, professor. I really needed this!"

Her test paper still lies on the table with all its red crosses and mistakes, but this is the least of her concerns. She puts on her shoes and skips right out of the door, waving goodbye to her professor one last time, then rushes to make her way to dinner. On the outside, Dilana's decisions are bold; for a world that seems to judge her every action, she makes decisions that break stereotypes and go against the common. Yet reality paints a different picture; like other susceptible teenage students, all it takes is one influential figure to dictate the way Dilana desires to act. As she later comes to learn, not all parents nor women live similar lives. There are shared common challenges, sure, but once news breaks out, there may never come a time when Dilana's parents want to see her again.

Scene of Leaving for Barracks:

It's the first time Magnus sees the headquarters from outside, and it is a lot more breathtaking than he had imagined it to be. As Dilana once mentioned, despite the secretive nature of its organization, their building is owned by a well-established financial company renowned for its ties with American business, which promised to keep their whereabouts secret in the basement chambers once used as a vault in the 20s (none of this makes much sense to him, but that is no issue -- he admires how she knows so much about the world around them). The building featured [description of building]

"You enjoying the experience at all?" She asks. It's the first time Magnus has gotten on a car.

"Not bad," he responds. "It's a lot faster than walking."

"Welcome to civilization," she teases with a playful nudge to the shoulder. "Get used to it."

"I will," he mutters, but his mind drifts away at the outdoor posters their vehicle passes through. Each contained a unique slogan -- or so he thinks -- and he admires how the black bolded text fit so well with the white background and red silhouettes of bullets and factories.

"Dilana," the car splutters and shakes as they pass through a curved road that introduces bare trees to the landscape. "What does that poster write?"

"Nothing important," she peers outside her window and lets out a small laugh. "It's funny how insecure the government is, really. Always trying to shove their ideas down our throats."

"You never answered the question," he stammers.

"Oh! Sorry about that, Magnus. It's just saying that more hard labour is the way out of famine. Getting more women to leave home and join factory work because the government loves everyone. But you know it's all a joke."

She spots a bewildered look on his face, which urges her to continue.

"Well, maybe you don't actually think this way. But that's the point: propaganda is supposed to make you feel special and empowered."

"The factories weren't too bad for making a living--"

"They paid you money, but they didn't give you what you deserved. That's what I meant when I said you know this."

"I don't think I could have done any better."

"You may not have, but now you do," she winks. "Don't let a disorganized administration tell you otherwise."

He continues to stare outside the window. Another poster creeps up from the distance and, judging by context, it alludes to a similar message -- a hammer and sickle symbols are placed in a suspiciously similar arrangement as the previous one. He likes the artwork, but Dilana had so quickly pointed out the flaws in its argument; it isn't even his inability to read the text that made him so susceptible to influence.

"Does this write a similar thing?" He asks.

"Hm, not really, actually. This one is a bit more ideological -- it says that we and the government officials are all equal in the eyes of the law."

"And I'm assuming we don't agree with this?"

"Oh, not at all. In practice it'd be pretty nice if this were the case, but it doesn't really hold up. Seeing how rich some neighbourhoods are, government officials take a lot of tax money for themselves and their family. And that's not even talking about what they do with religious people."

He doesn't quite remember their prior talk on religion, but street smarts prevent him from asking for clarification.

"You know, training will go through a lot of this too," she remarks. "Since you've committed to be with us, I'm assuming you're willing to learn a lot more about these shenanigans."

Twenty minutes past by, and the city roads Magnus once stepped foot on all fade into the horizon, replaced by a eerie sunset that paints the entire sky red with blood. A few night lights twinkle in the background.

"How far are we from the destination?"

"About thirty minutes or so to go. Why do you ask?"

"And when's the next time we get to see each other again?"

"You going to miss me?"

"No ... well, probably not. A little, I guess. If we ever have chicken soup there."

She laughs.

"You will not, Magnus. But don't worry -- I think they serve a lot of appetizing alternatives."

"Would it be long to commute here yourself?"

"Oh, Magnus! There's nothing to worry about. It's just three months of training, then you'll be back where we were."

"I'm more concerned about learning to read."

He looks up at the ceiling of the car; he does not dare to look at her reaction. Her face turns a little red.

"Sorry about that," Dilana responds in a lower-pitched voice. "Yes, I think I can help out with that. We can go over some basics right now, then find some weekly schedule to keep you learning." It's the fattest smile he's had in years.

The alphabet, as Magnus later learns, is not particularly difficult in concept: each character represents a specific sound, and a string of them represent a full word. Shaking chairs and halfway-covered signs don't make good teachers, so they only discuss about reading in the abstract; then, not before long, their car approaches a shoddy barn and an otherwise pitch-black tunnel if not for the headlights and the torch Dilana passes over to him. Perhaps for better or for worse, the tunnels and its surroundings are a lot more unsuspecting than the farmland that lies to the left of them. It looks nothing like their village, but the fresh smell of grass makes him doubt himself: Magnus wonders how far he truly is away from home.

"What's our plan for the next month then?" He asks as they walk down a narrow staircase. "I want to return to the headquarters with something intellectual to contribute."

"Training is going to be tougher than you think. But if you can handle the work, I'll swing by on Mondays after dinner."

"Please do."

The walk down the staircase is not a pleasant one, and in a few seconds, they enter a dull, cement-covered bunker with rows upon rows of wooden tables. Dummy targets lie on the floors of a room Magnus spots from the corner of his eye, and he watches two soldiers taking turns to fire at the remnants; the sound of bullet shots prompts him to duck his head every so often. Dilana then walks up to grab a book from a woman sitting cross-legged next to a shelf, and it gives him hope that he is not only evaluated by his ability to fire a weapon. This concern, he later suspects, is a non-factor for a crowd of radicalized workers and university students-turned-soldiers: conversations at the dinner table are almost never about training progress and, instead, moreso just philosophical arguments about the country.

Hands in his pockets, Magnus bottles these apprehensions as Dilana walks back to his side. She gives him a little wave, and then his worst fears become reality: he is alone once again, left in a room full of strangers and no sense of belonging. It's better for people to initiate conversation, he says to himself, for I must focus on understanding the dynamics of the place. Talking to new people has never been easy.

The leaders of the barracks try to integrate him into their proceedings as soon as possible, but it does not make Magnus feel any more at ease. First, they provide him a pamphlet with instructions on first-aid kits and revolutionary ideas; he doesn't refuse their offer, for their gesture is already enough to remind him how inferior he was from peers. They then hand a small handgun for training purposes, and it worries him to see how everyone just casually kept one in their pockets while walking around; for all he knew, Dilana could have tricked him into entering a poorly staged battle royale. He echoes these sentiments to the man who shakes his hand at the end of the line, and his laugh does nothing to squash these concerns.

"Are there any chances to read more books here?" Magnus croaks.

"We'd like to think that the pamphlets have all the information you need to know, but you must be one of those university nerds, eh?" One leader gives him a little wink, and Magnus instinctively nods his head. "There's a little study room with bookshelves over at that corner, if you're interested."

"Could I have a look?" A little more assertive this time, Magnus comes close to meeting him in the eye.

"If you want. New trainees always welcome to explore."

It's not a trick question, but he remains alert irregardless; he notices that his new trainee shoes make a little squeak as he walks, so he reminds himself not to be too curious in his pathing (realistically, given his nonconfrontational nature, this is not something to worry much about). Despite its size, the bookshelf does not contain many books -- there are only around twenty or so -- since much of the space is used for boxes he didn't dare to open under the near-certain surveillance of his leaders. Otherwise, all the study room offers is an oval-shaped table, and even that seemed too small for meetings of over 10 people; perhaps this is just the illusion created by leaking pens and rough scribbles on napkins that cover half of its surface.

The next room to the right features a rack of oddly-shaped bars with increasingly-heavy spheres on the ends of each bar. Nobody uses them now, but Magnus recalls Luxian possessing similar items back at the real headquarters. It's for strength, Luxian had explained. A repetitive lifting motion can help to increase your muscle's tolerance. It's nothing quite like plowing the fields, Magnus initially dismissed his ideas, but reality speaks louder than words: he had no idea why he looked physically weaker.

At last, he feels a twitching sensation in his eye, which rudely reminds him how long he had already been awake for -- he barely slept the night prior in anticipation of something admittedly more grandiose today. A bell rings in the background, a usual foreboding of disaster in the factories; the next moment, he scurries back in your assigned room, eating a slice of bread that the other soldiers offered up. It's a crowded room, but it doesn't feel so haunted; for the first time, he realizes how many chances he has to better explore the world, to live a life of significance that he had always wanted to have.

Chapter 4

additional scenes below:

Scene of First Training + Learning to Read

Being a soldier of the revolution sounds enticing -- since childhood, Magnus had always wanted a shot at glory -- but training is a lot less interesting than he had anticipated. From university students turned commanders, he first learns how to handle a weapon and use a first-aid kit; as the pamphlet book writes, the first prerequisite for soldiers to know how to save comrades in disaster. Mornings were just a cup of water and some bread, before the whole squadron takes a run around the barracks and over the barn field he had laid his eyes on upon the first time he had arrived to his current residence. Lifting weights were also a necessity, but less so then stamina -- and this made a lot more sense in his head, because fighting with guns required a lot more endurance, not physical strength. Nevertheless, none of this mattered much in the grand scheme of events. All Magnus really wanted was a chance to learn to read, and all the better it was to spend time with Dilana on the go as well.

The writing system, as he had learned before, is an alphabet, where each character is strung together to create a certain syllable of text. She takes out a piece of paper and first teaches how to hold the pen, then starts by writing out symbols and sings them out as she writes them down. She begins with the vowels, and there are six core vowels¹; a few particular pairs of vowels can be combined to make diphthongs that appear in so many common words, including her last name, Yesurugov. Magnus' own last name was not nearly as flattering as hers -- while his was just a reminder of mediocrity (in just about every dialect, the surname parsed out meant *average man*, and it made sense. Per what he had gathered from meeting relatives, he was nothing but part of a long lineage of broken men that made the dull choice: that lived by the rules, listened to authority and kept themselves alive) -- her name signified a burning flame.

She continues to draw lines on their sheet of paper, and there are now three rectangular boxes surrounding single characters that she had tried her best to colour code with the crayons and pens scattered on the table in front of them. Another man walks in the common space, and it's

¹ Observe that while English (alongside most European languages) also uses an alphabet, this is not intended to be English, as guessed from the context of the names. Specifics of the language will not be required in order to understand the greater scope of the story, since this is in a constructed world; nevertheless, for those interested in conlangs, this part is designed as a bit of an introduction.

enough to make Magnus uncomfortable: it feels shameful to have to learn such a basic, elementary topic as a grown man, even if he is new to the city. She shoos him away, and it's the first time he makes progress with learning the system. There are around 21 or so consonants in the remaining two boxes (he didn't quite count them all up, but it felt reasonable knowing how many sounds their mother tongue required them to pronounce on a daily basis), and those in the third box were sounds that were to be pronounced differently depending on where they appeared in a word. Take *kh* for example -- it is throaty if written as the starting consonant of a word, but it just functions as a regular voiceless *h* in other places. It's all too confusing to digest in a few minutes, and it makes Magnus wonder how long the inventor had required to consider all these miniscule rules and perks that makes their language so unique.

The three boxes are now Magnus' cheat sheet, and Dilana writes out a few words that he would have to read out for the very first time in his life. It takes him over a minute to get them, but it brings him a brimming sense of self-admiration when he realizes she had written his name out.

"It looks rather majestic," he gasps.

"I'm surprised you haven't even seen your own name," she frowns for a bit. "Surely it comes up in official documents somehow. Does the village ever hand you tickets or any form of person identification? It was required back where I lived, even if you had yet to learn how to read."

"Don't recall so. We were a pretty small village."

"I see."

She turns back to writing on the paper, and out of curiosity, Magnus asks her to write out his last name. It's not as pretty as he had imagined it out to be -- shorter words had a certain aesthetic to them. Besides, not all characters were created equal. Vowels looked clunky, but consonants had an almost artistic flow. It was thus horrible that all syllables required a vowel, but luckily not all was bad news: as he had suspected, many sounds could only be written with clusters of consonants (named rather inconspicuously as consonant clusters), one of which appears just in the first book Magnus lays his eyes upon on the bookshelf.

"You're lucky that our writing system is actually quite simple, once you get past the third box of consonants," she points out with a bit of a teasing smile. "Some other languages -- English, for example, what the Americans speak, have a lot of words that aren't pronounced as they sound. Could you imagine how hard that would be, to learn all those exceptions to the rules and whatnot?"

"America?" Magnus asks.

"Oh, yes, there are countries outside where we live too! I don't know much about them, but a lot of good cameras made there."

"They speak a different language?"

"Oh, yes. There used to be a few American movies broadcasted at the cinemas in the main road of the city, but to be quite honest, I'm not so sure whether they're still in business."

Magnus does not quite understand what she points to, but her statement doesn't hold true for too long regardless. They read through a passage of text from a more childish looking book (it takes him a few glances around the room and a few reassurances from Dilana before he finally gets his courage together), and immediately they come across a word that is spelt funny due to grammatical rules Magnus had no idea even existed. A few sentences lower down, and he learns that 'punctuation' is required to determine if a sentence is a question, or if a phrase or idea has officially been completed. There's way too many small nuances she had missed in her introduction, and before long, it had already been almost two hours that they had just been reading through a seemingly meaningless piece of text.

"I'm sorry this was a lot more disorganized than I had imagined," she confesses as she puts on a puffy looking long jacket.. The weather is a lot hotter than she had made it out to be, but Magnus had never left the barracks in the night time. "I promise we'll get a lot more work done, but the city is far and I ought to leave."

"Thank you," Magnus says. "I learned a lot today."

She gives a feeble smile, and he's also too weak to respond or do anything much after. Holding the opened children's book on his right arm, left open only by his index finger, he makes an attempt to read the remaining words in the opening page until it becomes all too overwhelming and the words become too blurry to read through and his legs are too jellied for him to make his way upstairs to his bedroom where he should lie. He plants his head into the book, drooling over the inked characters that writes out *love*, all without a single clue that the night has passed, sleeping peacefully until he is rudely awakened the next day by an angry commander that asked him why he had stayed overnight at the makeshift library.

Scene of Reading

It has been at least twenty or thirty minutes since Magnus sat in his usual seat in the office, and Dilana is still nowhere to be seen. For the most part, this wait did not feel particularly long-winded: with no knowledge of the affairs of the outside world, Magnus reasons that that she could have easily been stuck in traffic. Besides, though his emotions are quite greatly influenced by her presence, it isn't that he was incapable of simple reading when on his own; to begin the session, he flips through a few of the napkins left on the desk and finds that most messages involved some sort of insult for Oskar. Yet as the minutes pile on, he realizes how wrong he had been: her promised appearance was what kept him energetic and motivated after training. And when he hears the knocking of a door followed by only an unidentifiable lanky man walking in, he realizes how uneasy and demotivating it feels to read with others around.

"You come here often?" The man asks. Magnus doesn't respond, but he repeats himself once more, and it feels wrong to ignore.

"A little."

"What are you reading now?" He speaks out a bit louder this time, and Magnus finds himself asking the same question: what did it truly mean to *read* a book?

"Oh ...," his mind races with thoughts, but his voice betrays him. "I was recommended an old book about Daryus."

"Can I see the cover?"

Begrudgingly, Magnus turns the book around for him. It was not a particularly long nor interesting book, but the diagrams had drawn him in: on page 24, there was a map of the city back in the 1880s, from which he had tried to trace familiar paths just earlier in the day. A visual learner, as his parents would say, it was easy to find the city circle and row of factories he had been employed in, but unfortunately not much in between. For the past day or so, he had a quest of finding the revolution headquarters and the roads he had gone past when arriving to the current barracks, but this was a much more difficult task than imagined: infrastructure, as Dilana said, had improved rapidly over the past fifty years that city centers had to print new maps every few months or so.

"Ah, yes, more on Daryus' conquest," the man responds in a funny intonation, and it's not quite clear how condescending he intended to be. "This your way of fueling more fire for the fight?"

"Hm?"

"Of course it is," he laughs. "Daryus is a horrible man. I did some analysis of this book back in my days as a history student. Couldn't publish my actual thoughts, of course, but debating this at the dinner tables all the time gave me all the time I needed to find all the flaws. What do you think of his ideas?"

The paper had a particularly unpleasant texture, so Magnus doesn't have time to flip back to the pages he enjoyed. Afraid to embarrass himself, he simply gives a vague answer.

"Everything is bad about him," he forces. "I'm just beginning to read the most important parts."

"How right!" He interrupts, and Magnus breathes a sigh of relief; he gathers that the man loved to hear his own voice and ideas. "There's that one section he tells how hard it was to unite the warring states to a greater country, and that he had done what his father set out for, how *ambitious*, don't you think? But you layer that viewpoint with that discussion with his general on how conquest isn't a good idea, and it feels so ironic that he can claim credit for everything he didn't do! You know General Timur, right? Chapter 12."

"I've not gone so-"

"And even worse! He talks so much about serving the interests of the people, and of course we can now say how bad he's done, but surely you've read that first chapter when he writes that the majority of people are too clueless to be listened to. But don't you think that's a contradiction right there?"

"I'm not sure," Magnus responds once more.

"Well then, I just wanted to come by to grab a book, but I hope I've given you enough pointers on what to look out for," he blurts out as he walks behind to snatch up a much thicker, intelligent-looking novel. "And pay good attention to the word usage. Consider how much he describes things in the passive tone or the genitive case. It's a bit of a funny writing style, if you ask me -- a very egotistical way of writing."

"Will do," he mutters as the man walks out the door with a large stomp. It's why Magnus doesn't read in public: though self-improvement is key, he wants to practice understanding ideas and concepts, not engage in critical debates with often too brash students that had a twenty year head start in reading.

More importantly, Magnus points out, the man who just walked by is an archetype of what he had disliked about people, about power dynamics within conversation. It's not common that the best ideas are valued, because humans are still very much animals at heart: those who speak louder and with more confidence are perceived to know more about what they say, even though this almost never holds in practice. And, worse, it made him sick to the stomach how others held so much confidence and yet no inch of sympathy within their hearts. It's a microcosm of what's wrong with the world, as he recalled reading in a book Dilana had taught him about just about a week ago: that those in administration are not those with the most qualifications, but those who had survived longest without being hunted.

On usual days, the prior conversation lives rent free in his head for hours. Yet today, all that floods his thoughts is how Dilana had yet to arrive. It's not an experience he had been prepared for -- throughout his time as part of the revolution, it had only been Dilana approaching him, so there had never been a broken promise up to this point in time. And he'd like to think that there really isn't any problem today as well, but as time passes on it became a lot more improbable that she had just been stuck in traffic.

She could have simply forgotten about today, he reasons, except there isn't much to forget about, either. Learning to read and write was not a common occurrence for a 21 year old man, sure, but they had made this a routine activity, twice a week, for a month straight up to this point. There isn't much reason to overthink the issue, but Magnus finds himself restating the obvious over and over again; there was something she preferred to do at this very moment over spending time with him.

Luxian could be behind this, he whispers to himself, then that thought gains traction in his head. It's all about being a well-made man in this society: if Luxian is the man she truly loved, then what good would it be to spend evenings at a barrack teaching a lowly man how to read? [some more description on why he thinks this: this part should be a pretty large paragraph]

It's a night he had waited all the weekend for, but not anymore. In his walk of shame back to the dormitories, all he could feel was an unfamiliar sinking feeling in his heart: that no matter how much he read that day, there was no going back to the old times with Dilana. And even as the soldiers-to-be around him crack jokes and make politically insensitive comments around your bed, it's even more exhausting to engage in such a conversation. Magnus feels his vision blur and fade into an unfamiliar maroon colour and all he desires to do is to sleep and shake off this reality forever.

It's a minute after he closes his eyes, and they all stand in a dark alleyway by a dark road Magnus has never seen before. The road is clean enough not to be infested by rats and other rodents that own the nightlife, yet still abandoned enough that it's out of the limelight. Cars drive by every three seconds or so, but no pedestrian ever looks this way; no street light shines to reveal Dilana's face firmly planted on Luxian's chest, her arms gently running down his back as he hums a quiet tune that reminds them all of home. She's laughing, but one can't quite discern from an onlooker's perspective; for all one knows, this may be the only time in the day they get to live as civilians in freedom.

"I've missed a lot about university life," Dilana sighs. Her feet wobble ever so slightly as Luxian sways from side to side. "Or life in general, I guess. You ever wonder what would have happened if we live in America?"

"America," Luxian smiles. "You're high on America, too?"

"I've not heard much about it," Dilana says. "Just that... they make good cameras. Heard about a new brand by Kodak when I walked by the shop. And they make good movies, you said."

"But you don't like the concept of movies," he responds. "You said-"

"That's not true! I just said that the current technology is not good enough to portray a lot of stories that people *need* to hear ... like, you know, tug on the heartstrings. It's all comedies and meandering conversations about nothing."

"But is that a reflection of technology? Or maybe that's just what American culture dictates."

"What do you mean?" She raises her voice a bit; up until now, Magnus hadn't realized that they had been whispering all this time.

"I've recently picked out a book named *Great Gatsby*," Luxian begins, and Magnus snorts with disgust. It's the same book Dilana had talked about in one of their conversations: the man knows how to please her all too well. "The book's all illegal now, but I still have a copy in the back of my bookshelf."

"Tell me about it then," she closes her eyes. A few sirens sound in the background, and Magnus turns his attention to a shining orange billboard right behind them. The date on the poster writes October 1931, almost five years removed from the current day.

"The writing's a critique of their society. It's a discussion on the American dream -- many people come to the country for upwards social mobility, just like what you wished for when you came to the city. The main character chases after a girl by throwing lavish parties in his house, but his entire identity is a fraud. It's two parallel ideas, really: both the girl and his economic status can't be reached due to outside circumstances."

"That's interesting. Not very relatable, I guess. And, besides, I don't see how this reveals much about America. After all, there's a lot of false promises within a more socialist society too. Sure, dictatorship isn't good, but neither is too much freedom."

"That's not the point I was trying to make. You just wanted to hear about the story, right?" He pats her on the head. "The critique is mostly correct, but I really wanted to point out was the difference in expression. Nobody really throws parties around here: we're all a little more reserved. One thing I've come to realize is, based on what I've read, Americans are a lot more superficial with their emotions. They have no troubles with meeting tens and hundreds of people at once, putting on a facade and watching comedies to help their social standing. Here, it's a lot more about suffering."

"I guess. But sometime stories just reveal a portion of society. Didn't we all have to read *The Eagle* in college as well?"

"I barely remember books we read then," Luxian admits. "I paid very little attention to fiction stories because they don't exist."

"That's stupid," she teases, and he mocks her back. It's all in jest: she pushes him and tries to wrestle out of his control, but it ends with a playful kiss to the cheek.

"Really though, that's a bad mindset to have," she continues. "Books aren't just fictional for the sake of telling a story, as you pointed out yourself. They tell stories we really want to hear. They're the heroes we don't deserve."

"A required reading is how you plead your case here," he laughs.

"Stop!" she cries out, her tone a little more annoyed this time. Magnus had never seen Luxian's more playful side before. "*The Eagle* matters because, while we don't interact with supernatural beings on a daily basis, it tells us how perspective and information can really change lives. Yet, when Krystian gets the power to send a talking eagle to see a world outside of his sieged city and help his community learn more about the threats that surround them, he wastes that chance to

bargain for more money and leadership all until the gates come crashing. Surely you realize that ... there's metaphorical ideas in stories as well?"

"It's not a portrayal of our society, though. It's just a -"

"Out of all students that went to university, I thought a history student would find most interest in this. This book was a critique of the old emperors and czars that argued within themselves before the current leadership took advantage of their greed and built a new -- horrible, may I add -- empire." She looks around before she blurts out her statement. "But it doesn't talk about the resilience of our country. I *know* people don't act like this outside in the world. It's what I love about our country: as individuals, we care so much about the people around us, so willing to lay down our livelihoods for one another. Yet approved stories and propaganda only reveal the minds of the worst of our people. Maybe America is like this as well."

"You think a lot," he remarks. "But I like you for that."

"Thank you," she purrs. "We're a good match."

The floor starts to sink, but only Magnus slowly falls through the cracks. He still hears the quiet sound of chatter, but it's quickly overshadowed by the sound of music. It starts with a hummed melody, a guitar playing a sweet tune in the background. A quartet of cellos join in harmony, and the tempo picks up. She does a little twirl on the spot, and Magnus marvels at how she keeps her footsteps so light despite the muddy pathway. He had never been to a party before, but this is what he imagined one would entail.

The music slowly cuts out, and he is transferred into an empty room that reminds him of the barns back home. The room's a lot more quiet than he had remembered: his brothers would usually sleep in the corners of the building, behind the cardboard boxes where they would store seeds for the next year's harvest. There are footsteps, but they don't sound like Papa's nor Mama's; you learned what they sounded like, because this was the single best defense mechanism from getting caught from any mischief one's heart desires. Magnus walks around to touch the wooden walls, and it's still filled with splinters, just as he has always remembered. The door creaks open, opening the view up to a chilly autumn night, and all he sees is an unidentifiable shadow that parts the fireflies flying above the bed of wheat.

He peers closer as a gathering storm of dust that glides towards him. The shadow morphs into a human-like frame, but he knows the being is more powerful than one. The calm lake behind them trembles, and Magnus notices a reflection of himself painted on the face of the water. The being possesses no facial features, but make no mistake: it was as real as any man he's seen in his dreams. [do we want to add one more sentence of description here?]

"Your life is worth more than this," he bellows, and the whole room shakes at his every syllable; it's as if the two of them are stuck in a cave. Magnus bites his nails as the reflection in the water turns right back to an image of Dilana and Luxian hugging at the alleyway. In this make-believe scene, he's standing by the side, a little too awkward to approach the two, yet his eyes are wide open. Perhaps it's wrong to imagine what it feels to be loved: what it would feel to embrace another friend for minutes and hours at a time. It looks so much worse from a third-person angle than he had imagined.

"This is it?" His voice trembles, but his inquiry is quickly drowned away by a large gust of wind that knocks both him and the surrounding boxes off balance. The shadow raises a fist, and then points towards the lake again. A large wave dilutes the scene; replaced on the surface is a snapshot of the village market he had so dearly missed over the past few months living in the city. The market's not quite up to date with the modern times: the still frame lacks the brick renovations made to the clock tower on his 17th birthday, as well as Papa Pizak's store, the latest addition that displayed boatloads of carved rock jewellery young teenagers would buy with the changes of pocket money. Judging by this, they've been transported at least three years back, Magnus thinks to himself.

The shadow doesn't talk much and the lake now reveals a younger version of him, just 15 years old or so, walking with a small bag of silver and copper coins. He wanders around aimlessly, but there's a lot more he was trusted to do. His daydream is only interrupted by an exasperated shout from an old grandmother next to him, and thus he stops to pick up the few oranges and grapes that had dropped to the ground.

"What a great young man," she tells him. Her eyes turn into wrinkles. "You are destined for a lot in this world."

"Thank you," his younger self replies. Magnus doesn't even recall having this conversation before; the shadow truly possesses supernatural powers. He's not sure if the past has changed as well.

The grandmother disappears from the scene, and it's just a few minutes of Magnus running errands. It's nothing spectacular, but for some reason it makes him feel invigorated about what the shadow called his destiny. "I'm able to do this all on my own," he tells himself, "and all of this without my older relatives beside me. Usually the most important sibling does all the difficult work of representing the family, and it's me who took on the responsibility to talk to all these people." Besides, he had not spent a single dime on his own desires: a lot of the other friends he knew would have jumped straight to buying a necklace for a girl or a few snacks at the market. He showed self restraint, and that was what it took to become a modern hero.

The shadow nods its head. It's as if it hears Magnus' inner thoughts all along.

The scene ends, and another gust of wind passes through. The shadow opens its mouth and releases a tone reminiscent of an airhorn; it's the loudest sound he's heard so far, and it inflicts structural damage in the region around them. The wooden shed is no more; in its place is just a dark forest filled with tall, evergreen trees that he had yet to have seen in his lifetime. The cardboard boxes are nothing but small flecks of civilization, and the seeds are scattered around him in an unordered fashion. The shadow becomes a wolf and howls into the distance once more, but this time Magnus is ready to cover his ears.

It's a bit of awkwardness before the lake finally resets its scene and he sees himself again, only this time he looks a lot older, lying limp on the ground. There's no emotion on his face, and his eyes are hollow without any sign of life. There's blood coming out of his mouth, a few flies that dance around his arms, and then a few sounds of tears in the background. A good man, another soldier whispers in the background. It's such a shame that his leaders were so incompetent.

The leaders, he begins to piece together, are Luxian and Dilana. The world's a lot brighter than he ever remembered it to be: maybe he's only seen the capital city in a gloomy time of year, but there's a little more nuance to that. People are smiling, no, not even -- cheering in crowds and waving a flag none of them had ever seen before. It had an emblem that Magnus might have spotted in a book in the bookshelves, but it's too blurry to tell. Luxian and Dilana stand in front

of a microphone to address a crowd, and it brings him great sadness to see how much joy they had in their faces. Seeing other people succeed was great, sure, especially those you loved -- but not at your own expense. And Magnus hated that he is nothing but an artifact of the past, a part of a struggle that he did not get to live towards.

The scene carries on, and it's another sinking feeling within his heart. These past minutes of recollections as an unwanted wallflower bring him to tears -- it's as if his life, no matter what he does, is doomed for failure -- so he gets down on his knees. This time, the lakes reveal familiar looking kids, but these are not kids he has seen before. One's named Magnus, yet he bears no resemblance to him. Not that it matters, though: the kids run around well-renovated playgrounds, and Mama Dilana sits in a park bench adjacent to their sandpit. Another child comes in and wreaks havoc on tiny Magnus's sandcastle, so he cries for help; that child's mother walks by to help, so Dilana and her strike conversation on their everyday lives. Dilana tells her she's now a stay-at-home mom and that her days in the limelight are over -- she worked in politics for the past five years, but now she just wants a chance at a civilian life. Upon this news, the other mother jumps out in surprise, then shakes her hand; she tells her how much life has changed in the new republic, that she had always hoped to be as courageous as Dilana had been. She calls her a girl boss, and it's as rare a compliment as it gets -- gender equality has ways to go in 1930s across all countries around the globe, but especially for authoritarian-ridden regimes like their own. It's the type of admiration Magnus had hoped to achieve sometime.

"Don't let this be you," the shadow beckons. "Do something."

"Like what?" Magnus shouts back, but the shadow slowly begins to disintegrate. It may not have the answers he desires, and it pains him to realize that this prophecy may soon be over. The truth hurts, because insignificance was nothing to laugh at. All Magnus ever wanted was a chance to be something more, but current pretenses made him a modern-day Gatsby: the orange billboard still imprinted in his head, even the faded leaves with a muted yellow-red complexion were enough to remind him of Dilana's true love. And, yes, he loved her as well, but even if romance wasn't in his sights, the shadows revealed a more troubling part of reality. That he was destined to be a follower, not a leader, unless he did something about it.

"Education, education, education," he recites to himself. "Dilana must not want me to succeed if she doesn't show up." He's still stuck in the middle of nowhere, but as the shadow turns into an

uncontrollable mist that engulfs him, all he does is imagine a bookshelf. The world's a mime: he takes a heavy book from the top left corner and starts reading about war strategies. It's all he needs to become successful.

Rage, more so determination, is all he feels across his body.

The same thing happens on the following Wednesday just two days after. Dilana once again forgets about their biweekly meetings, so he tells himself that previous hypothesis must have been right. Magnus decides to clear his mind with some nature and, surprisingly, getting permission to go on a walk was a lot easier than he expected. Despite the secretive nature of a revolution and whatnot, the trainers did not seem to care one lot about those issues; maybe they were far removed from the administration, or maybe they did not like Luxian or Dilana or Olgen. In any case, he grabs a large piece of bread, then leaves the bunkers with a pen and open notebook in his right hand. It's the first time he's re-entered civilization as an educated man, and it feels a lot more powerful: that the world was somehow blessed with his presence, and all he needed is a chance to document the society. It makes him wonder whether his companions ever felt the same way.

The first thing he does is visit the barn that was so inconspicuously placed in the middle of the field. There was no reason for such a structure to be erected in the countryside -- that is, given the little information he had gathered about the region. It could have very well been anyone's barn, stocked with supplies and hostile armed men, but curiosity kills the cat: he had just seen a barn in his dreams, and it looked a lot like his hometown, so it didn't hurt to search for the shadow or his past village companions. There is, after all, still a slim possibility he had returned to his hometown. Geography was not exactly his strong suit.

The sun makes its way towards the horizon far away, and the sky turns muted orange. The barn's not anything special, he quickly comes to realize, so he sits by a rock and looks towards the sunset. Opening up the notebook for the very first time, he does nothing but draw the world in front of him as he perceives. The countryside is a lot flatter than he's ever seen: unlike his hometown, there are no hills nor mountains to spice up the scenery. And unlike the city, he observes just a few homes and metal poles that suspended wires to hang clothes and other daily

accessories. It's still a mystery as to who would live at a place like this. Perhaps it could be other officials or elderly seniors of society -- only these type of people seeked refuge in nothingness.

Hand eye coordination betrays Magnus, but there's not much to draw, so he turns a new page and begins by writing "Chapter". He's not sure how philosophers think, so he draws inspiration to that one book on democracy in the ancient times. Athens was a society that allowed all adult male citizens over the age of 20 to vote for officials in times over 2000 years ago from present day; other countries like New Zealand were the first country progressive enough to allow women to vote as well. Magnus writes down these hard facts in bullet points, taking a minute at a time to figure out the spelling of each day. In particular, the word Zealand featured a vowel that sounded like the combination of two different sounds, and he didn't read enough to remember which one should be used at the given time.

But democracy, he starts to think, is inexplicably tied into this idea of freedom, and western countries don't sound a lot happier than what he feels in the city right now. There's a lot more free will to do what he wanted in his old town: apart from running errands and helping out with the business, there was so many chances to leave the home and go for journeys for two days straight, exploring caves and manmade benches in the middle of nowhere, yet *all that* did not make Magnus happy. In contrast, the city gave him a rigid form of lifestyle: working twelve hour days at a corrupt factory, then training six hours a day to fight that same corrupt factory and its people, was not the definition of freedom and doing what one wanted. But it brought more joy to him, because it made him feel a lot more ambitious. It's as if he's working towards something greater in the world.

The sky gets darker, and it's a reflection of his mental state: the more he thinks about things, the more he considers the revolution to be misguided. He writes out the names of people he knows in the village in passing, then the names of those he had met in the city. Financially, they are similar -- they came from more stable backgrounds, but items in the city were way more expensive -- but those in the city simply exuded better vibes and ambitions for things. And, if the Gatsby was anything one had to learn about freedom, it's that freedom is just a facade for the rich to get richer. Everyone's a duck, peacefully flowing through the water, but it's all an illusion: it takes great force to stay above the water, so all of 'em are furiously kicking under the water, hoping that their self-destruction is enough to keep everyone fooled.

Magnus puts pen to paper; democracy, he writes, is not the answer for this revolution. It's corrupt officials, like those who run the government right now (and he doesn't quite know why he doesn't know the names of them at the moment -- discussions among the trainees are a funny source of influence), that make things bad, not necessarily the system itself. If there is some way for some just council to always be around and determine the candidates most fit to rule the daily proceedings in the country. But this meant giving Luxian and his cronies a lot more power rather than himself, so he revises the statement: democracy can be changed so that we all elect on a council, then this council elects a leader who has the best interests of the country at heart and rules for their lifetime. But even that sounds a bit weird, so he crosses it all out; it pained him to see over five minutes of gruelling alphabet memory be wasted because of a poorly formulated idea.

This daydreaming turns into nightdreaming, because the stars start to appear in the night sky. And, in a time he doesn't expect at all, the shadow once again appears from where he least expects: a buzzing noise comes from afar, then it becomes a gassy bed of black mist, then it gains shape and becomes a familiar figure that he had seen before in his dreams. There's a bit more definition around his face this time: his eye area is sinked in, giving way to a more mysterious gaze that made the shadow look a lot more like a sage. Its nose bridge is a lot higher than it was before, so it looks a lot more like a Northerner -- not that it mattered much, of course, for it didn't make sense for a shadow to have an ethnic identity. There's still no smile nor facial expression, but his cheeks have a distinctly lighter colour this time round.

"You fool," it speaks. Magnus looks at his book, and follows his finger across the lines of writing. It may have been an idea he wrote out poorly. But it confused him as to what he could've made as a mistake. Perhaps it was just the thought of a representative democracy -- the idea of having the people elect a council to elect a leader for life -- but he had already acknowledged the flaws of the idea already in private. It was clear this was the case, because he had struck out any information he deemed was irrelevant to the future of the country.

"Reading don't save you," it speaks again, almost hawk-like in its gaze now. There's no beak, but Magnus imagines one barking back at him. "Fighting gains you respect." The last word is drawn out and he ends his statement with a loud hissing sound, and when you look up at the shadow again it sticks out its two-pronged tongue that much resembled the look of a snake. It doesn't

make sense why the shadow put so much emphasis on warmongering. Mama always said that jobs requiring a brain would pay better than simple hard labour.

Magnus begins first by ignoring the discussion by the shadow. "What the country truly is missing," he calls out to the stars, when in reality he is just talking to himself. "The country is missing selflessness." It's something he hadn't quite observed in reality; he had heard this opinion in passing, but it wasn't quite clear who or when somebody voiced this viewpoint. "If everything's a cycle of violence, then we never get to educate the masses on what really matters in this world."

"This is your destiny," the shadow responds. "Your life needs you to fight." There's no lake like they once had, so realities are displayed in a silhouette in the night sky. Magnus is brought back to the very first day of the revolution where, upon first meeting Olgen and Luxian, his mind had preconceptions of who was most trustworthy. Before they even said a word, he gathered Luxian was a main figure because he looked the part: there was something about his broad shoulders that made him look a lot more trustable than a hobbled man with an eye patch only pirates would wear. Yet even then, Olgen was not the worst of the lot. Magnus considered him still a respectable figure because, like the shadow says, it looked like he was a true member of the revolution; the scars on his face made him believe that he truly had the forces' best interests at heart. He liked him a lot more than the skinny, smaller-statured men that ran around the rooms scurrying for things to do, even though there wasn't inherently anything that they said or did that influenced your behaviour. Maybe it's just human nature, but a lot's about looks: weights only marginally help one fight better in a war, but it serves as subtle confirmation that a person's the right man for the job.

"I don't know how to become bigger," he admits to the shadow. He's a full head shorter than the two leaders, and famines don't help to mold strong men into shape. "So all I can do is demand to be in battle." Those words are all it takes for the shadow to disappear into the air, so he assumes that he had said something right. Alone time wasn't what he really wanted from the shadow, for he did not fear its presence; the shadow felt just like a being that has his best interests, and he felt obliged to listen to such a figure when there was nobody else that gives him so much personal advice. It prompts him to consider whether the supernatural is even real, but he quickly dismisses it as a moot point: if it exists in his dreams and even on his walks, then it's real enough to be a part of his life.

Other than the night sky, there's no indication of time, but Magnus gathers that he's spent a good amount of time outside already; the ever so cold wind makes him temporarily unable to feel nor move his fingers, so he decides it's time to go back. Packing the pen and notebook back into the pocket of his coat, he constructs a road plan for the following week of action. [maybe another line of description here] He would do everything he can to become a soldier and, in the meantime, study what his enemies were like -- what the flaws with the current government was, and what their tendencies were in detail.

[start of the description by recapping a book he's read: the eagle; says that he was drawn into the book because of the dream he had heard prior, and that it seemed like an interesting book to read in a vacuum despite the context in which he was introduced to it. talk about the definition of the eagle, and then how he disliked the main character for only thinking about itself. it never occurs to him that he's going down a similar path: that by asking to become a soldier, he's not having the revolution's best interests in his mind. Rather, he only cares for himself and his own social status, albeit Krystian and Magnus stand on different footing.]

The process of leaving the barracks is something Magnus has no knowledge of, so he begins by asking those who lived by him over the two months of training they had gone through together. Many of them look at him funny, but they each responded with a consistent three-step procedure that sounded like something he could realistically complete in just an hour of time. What bothered him more, surprisingly, was the fact that so many around him were aware of the legal proceedings within their organization; in his mind, it only confirmed his position as an outsider because people like Dilana had been unwilling to share this information with him over the countless hours they had shared together. Granted, he did not ask for this knowledge, but that was besides the point. The other soldiers had no intentions of leaving early, yet they were better insiders. They knew more about all the courses of action he could take.

The three-step procedure is as followed: first, it's an ability test that one has to pass. Magnus doesn't have a lot of worries on this end. Blessed with the talent of good eyesight since birth (he owes it to the air quality and greenery in the villages, but that's a separate issue), he was one of the more qualified markman they had in the group; just the other day, some university students

had applauded his showings and asked for lessons. Sure, there were a few more challenging physical tasks involving running and lifting up certain stones, but he feels confident enough in the training and his knowledge of the first-aid kit. The bigger question is the second step: whether there was an immediate mission Magnus could be part of. It's something out of his control, so all he can do is sit on the bed and hopes that fate works out. Last but not least, the third part requires a signing of official documents. Magnus owns an identification card from the villages, but apparently even the forces had their own sort of structure for their battalions. It's nothing to worry about, the man in the top bunk of his bed calls out. It's a painless process. Just serves a way for them to count off their number of forces and make sure they don't overcommit their resources.

That afternoon, Magnus walks up to his trainer and tells him of his plan; his ambitions are met with a weird look and a short questioning phase, but the trainer eventually opens up and sets him up for transfer. The three steps, as the soldiers had reassured, were not particularly difficult, and he had gotten lucky. Even the physical tests were lot smoother than he had imagined. Despite his limp, the stamina run had not been nearly as hard as the training splits, and that had been his main worry coming in. Then, since the revolution plans for missions in a near future campaign, the men assign him a number of 7272. It's an oddly crafted number, and it makes Magnus think: he isn't quite sure if there are 7271 soldiers on the mission, or that the whole revolution only had that many soldiers in total. Large numbers are hard to visualize, but it didn't quite matter; with either interpretation, the numbers made him seem a lot less significant.

It's dinnertime by the time Magnus completes his manhood. A short call on what the soldiers called a telephone, and Dilana's back in the building for the first time in over two weeks. She gives everyone a smile, and it's the first time he realizes how popular she is amongst the entire group: other soldiers call out her name, so they exchange group hugs in each corner of the bunker. She offers Magnus a hug too, but he doesn't reciprocate the same energy. There's a puzzled look on her face, but he knows it's all for show. There's no genuine emotions, because his dreams have historically revealed the truth; she's already in a relationship with Luxian, yet still longs to be a little more special in the moment.

The trainer recaps everything about Magnus that had just happened in the past few hours, and Magnus can't help but read her emotions every time a compliment was made. It's not what he expects: from start to finish, she looks a lot more puzzled than impressed by his performance.

She nods, but looks disinterested in individual facts. Once he finishes the statement, she turns around with a twisted mouth reminiscent of the knots tied as decorations around the market on national holidays.

"And you decided this on your own?" She asks. Magnus nods, but she asks once again.

"Unbelievable," she sighs to herself, but it's loud enough for him to hear as well. "Did you not enjoy your time here? We can try to make things better if you're not accustomed to the rigour. We have many books we can still read in the upcoming weeks -- there's still time to reverse your decision."

"It's okay," Magnus responds, but even he's unsure of his answer. "I just want to try something new."

"New being...war?"

"I consider myself ready," he affirms. A part of him wants to forgive her for her mishaps last week, but that's a sign of weakness a hero would never be willing to show. A soldier required strong morals and a sense of direction, not hesitancy.

"It's settled," the trainer argues in favour of Magnus. "The test is not so easy to pass, so I'd recommend you to take up this offer. Missions sound rather impactful and relatively risk free right now." He then turns to Dilana, who frowns at him with a wide open mouth and an almost menacing glance. "And you, Dilana, do not have to worry. I know you're always scared about losing forces in the revolution. But Magnus joins a line of successful trainees that were too good to spend more time learning the basics and ending up going up the ladder. You remember how Olgen got into his position, right?"

"I guess," she responds. Magnus breathes a sigh of relief, but it's also one of happiness; he didn't know Olgen had been in the same position as he's in right now.

"So, it's really settled then. As for the real challenge, how will you guys return to the headquarters?" The trainer winks at Magnus.

"Well, when you gave a call, I didn't think it was going to be *that* settled or *that* important," she remarked, tactfully dropping her tone to emphasize her shock. "So we're just going to take a bike ride back."

"He's still slightly in-"

"If you have any more comments, then I'm going back myself."

The trainer freezes in the spot. Magnus follows suit, until the trainer tilts his head towards the dormitories, gesturing for him to pack up his belongings. From the corner of his eye, he steals a quick look at Dilana, who simply folds her arms. There's not much he possesses since being relocated from the factories, so it's a very fast process; by the time he puts all the pamphlets, a spare pair of shoes and roll of bandages, then a copy of *The Eagle* right into a coveted 1930s rucksack (he had no idea how the revolution had so many of these bags that citizens in his hometown had hoped to buy), Dilana had been right in time to wheel over a spare bicycle for their journey back home. His newfound strength proves worthy for the very first time: the seat was put to its lowest setting, so it brings him great joy to test out his progress by twisting out the knob.

Farewells are supposed to be a bittersweet moment, and this is no exception. Dilana patiently waits by the doorstep, and Magnus takes turns to give parting messages to those who lived with him over the physically gruelling days. Borderline arrogant people may make bad debaters, but they still can be great people: that tall college student who discussed politics with Magnus still gives him such a warm hug; he passes parting messages that touches him in all the right ways. It may reflect poorly on Magnus, but there are tears in his eyes; it feels hard to hold on to grudges for long, so he holds onto Dilana's arm and asks for forgiveness.

The energy in the room eventually subsides, giving way for the two to be sent off to the real world. One by one, past companions vacate the mainstay and return to their daily lives, and it's almost as if Magnus has his feet glued to the floor; even as Dilana opens the door and starts carrying her bicycle up the stairs, there's no energy within him to follow suit. She's a patient woman, so she whistles alone in the passageway for over five minutes. In the meantime, all he feels is angst again; it felt like a mistake leaving the headquarters for the barracks first time round, and once again he's flooded with regret to spring into warfare.

"You ever heard of Julius Caesar?" She finally interrupts the silence. Magnus takes it a cue to walk up the staircase and re-enter the world; she only resumes her story once he starts pedalling over the muddy terrain. "When he crossed the river, he and his forces could no longer escape conflict. It was an irreversible choice. They just had to accept reality."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," she says. "You'll be ready for everything that comes in your way. I believe in you."

"Now I'm not so sure myself."

She leads the way through the darkness, and the path they bike through seems almost random. There's a lot of small alleyways that they have to pass through, and it makes a lot more sense why a bunker had been built in the city. A few cats stick around the doorsteps of many small houses, almost as if they waited to wave at them; their subtle meows are the only sounds that accompany the small stones that toss and turn as they pass through. This lasts for twenty minutes or so, before they end up biking on a straight road with seemingly no end; the left of the path features an extensive rice paddy field, while the right is just a sea. It's too late to observe colours.

Both of them remain quiet, but for different reasons. Magnus is still in awe of his surroundings (two months of living underground and seeing nothing but a broken barn that twenty other similar-aged men ran laps around was not exactly great for one's mental health), while Dilana struggles to put thoughts to words. It's an hour before they end up on a more technically challenging path to bike through, so she takes her chance to voice her ideas.

"Magnus," she suddenly breaks the silence and stops her bike next to a quaint wooden bridge. Beneath them lay a delicate stream of water that gently licked the grass before it flowed into the ocean. "Isn't it so beautiful out here?"

"It looks the same to me," Magnus hesitates.

"Well, it's a different experience if you just enjoy your surroundings. Park your bike."

Listening to her wishes, Magnus carefully places his bike onto the grass and takes up a seat by the bench where she sits.

"So, what do you think?" She chimes in again, then pulls out a camera from her backpack. "I just wanted to take a nice photo of the stars -- they're shining so bright today. That's usually a sign."

"It's pretty," he responds. "I agree."

"Do you know there are names for the groups of stars you see right now? Those stars, for example, that's supposed to be a bull of some sort. And the one above us is a famous little bear."

"Do you know much about the stars?" Magnus asks.

"Not much, but I've always wanted to know more. For example, do you believe in a parallel universe?"

"What's that?"

"You know, an alternate dimension. Clones and replicas of us in every one of those stars?"

Magnus turns around to look at her, and for the first time, he notices how the night sky sparkles in her eyes. She was sometimes impossible to read -- for all he knew, she forces a smile even in the worst of times -- but it was one of those moments that only come once in a lifetime. He pauses to gather his thoughts, but his heart lurches when she opens her mouth to talk again.

"It's so true! I just imagine that somewhere out there, there's another version of me still in the city, then one studying in a beautiful free country, then one still learning how to tie her shoes. Then, of course, there's another version of myself still with her old friends. I still miss them, you know."

"Is this Dima? Or Kolmi?"

"All of them, Magnus. I believe that friends come and go too much, and it makes me sad to see people leave my life."

He sits for a while, then decides against opening his mouth. Candor's a skill, but so is awareness: though he did enjoy his relatives' company, there wasn't much he felt like he left behind when he came to the city.

"How lucky they must be," she continues with a sigh. "The other Dilanas, free Uyghurs, free Ralyans. As a kid, I never knew that those were the good days until it was over. I thought I could explore the forbidden lands and forests and whatnot forever. But I've now come to realize that there's so much to fight for in this world...and yet still so much to cherish."

He doesn't interrupt her. For all his imperfections and empty desires, he finds himself thinking back to family for the very first time: it had been long since he was with his brothers. He, too, had once explored similar countrysides that he now finds himself biking past, running carefree through rice fields and insurmountable hills that surrounded his childhood town non-stop.

"What I'm trying to say is, while I'm happy you accept and understand the revolution, I'm not ready to see you go yet. Maybe it's selfish to think that, but that's on me. It breaks my heart, having to see injured civilians and workers. And I remember how weak and lifeless you were when we first rescued you. This is my greatest fear -- having all my loved ones leaving me alone."

"But if I'm not a soldier, then what will I be?" Still a bit slow on the social cues, Magnus dives deeper into questioning; a firefly gently hums in the distance. Was this the right time to speak up?

"You have so long to be a soldier," she explains. "You can be a soldier today, or in a week, or in a month--"

"Why are you telling me all this? Is there something you want to hide from me? Do you want me to stay at the barracks?"

"Not at all! I mean what I said. There's just...no rush for you specifically. There's still so much to write, so many books to read, so I have to ask -- what prompted this change?"

He looks down at his twice-worn shoes, then stares into the horizon and observes a collection of stars arranged as a ghost-like figure who, indeed, had to be the spirit he met over the weeks. He

looks back at her watchful gaze and prepares to mention how pretty she looked under the night sky, but his heart beats too fast and he notices the spirit shaking its body.

"It's nothing you would understand," Magnus clenches his fist.

"What wouldn't I understand?"

"My feelings. Destiny, if you will."

"What's your destiny then?" She inches forward.

"To become a hero," he replies, counting the stones that lay in front of them. "I met a shadow that reminded me what I came to the city for. He told me I would be better off living to be a part of the revolution-

"Oh come on! And you would listen to a shadow over me?"

"It's not like you understand what I want," he croaks, sounding almost defensive. "You're all going to get credit for the revolution but I need to prove my worth and I need to ... show that I have what it takes too."

"But there's nothing you need to prove! Moreover, the revolution is for our friends and loved ones, right? So why not spend more time with them?"

"But what do we talk about? You and Luxian seem to agree on everything."

"You think we all see head-to-head in the revolution? That Olgen and Luxian and I all have the same desires or worries for a government?"

Magnus pauses to think for a moment; he knows nothing about Luxian's beliefs.

"It's going to be fine, Magnus! Besides, isn't it best to talk through disagreements?" Her voice is notably softer.

"Dilana, how did you get close with him?"

"With whom?"

"Luxian?"

"Oh, we go way back!" She laughs. "He graduated years before I entered the university, but he would always come back for talks with the student societies. He had a real liking for the newspaper club."

"And you were part of that?"

"Yeah, he had us print a lot of his articles and opinions in a special edition one week. Got us in pretty bad trouble, but I think a lot of students appreciated a different perspective."

"What did he write about?"

"Oh, you know, honestly nothing I'd agree with. Some philosophy on why terrorism is sometimes justified, why democracy lasts longer, the usual boring stuff. Maybe one fun discussion on best restaurants around the northern city, but he's the super serious type."

"Do you like that?"

"Can't say for sure, Magnus. It's good to surround yourself with different personalities and ideas," she explains. "But for the most part, I appreciate his honesty -- it really helps keep our organization running."

They pause.

"And are you in a relationship with him?"

"Oh, Magnus, you know there's nothing to it! We're in the middle of much larger problems with the revolution and ... everything should stay the way things are. Why do you ask?"

"You seem much nicer towards him."

"Compared to Olgen?"

"I see you always smiling about something."

"So I can't just be friendly towards him?"

Silence.

"Let's leave," he murmurs. His thoughts betray him. "I was just curious."

"Are you sure?"

He grabs the handles of the bike, signifying that the conversation is over.

Aside from the occasional chirping of birds, the rest of the bike ride is hauntingly silent. Yet as the winds blow on their faces and the tips of her hair dance in the moonlight, Magnus feels a rising heat from within, and the voice of his father rings in the back of his head once more.

"I have so many thoughts," he mouths to himself. "And I have no guts to say them out loud." Worst of all, despite a rediscovered destiny and new visions of the world and new readings and lucid reappearing shadows and self-promises to become a hero, Magnus still could not find a way to detach his thoughts from Dilana every time they met. He takes another glance at her face, as calm and unbothered as she always looks, and he could not help but notice a sinking feeling in his stomach; she was just a reflection of everything that he would never have -- that if he spent too much time thinking about a future with her, he loses everything he has in the moment.

But it's her fault, he thinks, for giving such a cryptic answer. She *knows* the truth would have set him free, and yet she was too afraid to be open with her temptations. And it still made no sense how she was into Luxian because there was nothing he had that made him *fun* as a person. He may be knowledgeable, Magnus rationalizes, but he himself wasn't too far behind: Luxian had mentioned Krystian from *the Eagle* in conversation, but now he's read it too; he too knows why Dilana aspires to be courageous, but not to a fault. And perhaps Luxian was physically stronger,

he admits, but being caring was surely more important; besides, fist fights don't matter in war, and there was nothing as a soldier that he could not do now.

Maybe, with a bit more bravery, I could have confessed my feelings, he argues to himself; under the moonlight, his vision fades until the surroundings transform into an undefined blur. But with such no chance at reciprocation, a confession would only result in an inevitable falling between the two, a lingering awkwardness that would no doubt hinder his chances to think straight in a battle. And since death was surely worse than anything that came before, there was no point in pursuing such a risky decision just for her to break his heart and open the door to more tribulations.

It's all a waste of time.

There's no point thinking so much for something so pointless, Magnus laments. It's just reality -- that some are born in infinitely better positions to succeed while others are descendants of insignificant farmers and obedient civil workers. His parents had alluded to it too: all those years he showed so much more grit than all his siblings Sasha and Breyan and Yeni and Marya, and yet all they could tell him was how far he is from greatness.

Regaining his composure, he tightens his grip on the handles of his bicycle. As Dilana whistles a familiar tune in the cold winter night, he imagines the shadows in the night sky speaking out to him in admiration: that he is doing no wrong, that he is on his way to become the hero he wanted, and that his family would one day apologize for doubting him all this time.

For as long as she could remember, Orumki -- her childhood city -- was split through the middle by a snaking river, with only the Bridge of Forgiveness that connects the two shores. For the longest time, relatives had called it the Bridge of Hope, and, while the last word was ambiguous in the language, she never quite understood why -- forgiveness inspires hope, but the latter doesn't always hold true.

"What's on the other side of the Bridge of Hope?" She had asked on multiple occasions, first to parents, then to relatives, then to classmates, and eventually her school grade teachers. None have given quite an adequate answer.

"We wish we knew," her parents and relatives had told her. "But it's forbidden, so we never go."

Teachers gave a similarly cryptic answer: that too much curiosity is never a good thing.

"But it's not fair!" She had once complained to Mama. "If this was the settlement of our people and our prophet, then why isn't the land returned to us?"

"I've told you that our religion is a thing of our past, dear," Mama had warned her. "Any more talk on this nonsense, and you're back to your room."

"It was just a thought," she said. "My classmates told me what they knew about the bridge."

"Mhm."

"They told me that the bridge used to lay home to a lot of worship centers. They say if you pray--"

"Go back to your room. We're not having this conversation today."

"But--"

"Talk back, and you're not served dinner."

Religion was always a touchy subject at home, and she never understood why. Seventh grade rolls by, and her curiosity is peaked when friends dress differently too -- Kolmi and Dima begin to wear delicate ornaments around their neck, and she wondered why so many neighbours did the same. The next month, another classmate points out how her skin complexion was different, and it becomes the first time she thinks much of it. Phenotype and genotype were taught in class, and she proposes a few explanations: that either they stayed out in the sun more, or that at least one of her parents came from outside the city.

She is not a disobedient kid at heart, but circumstances made it hard to stay out of trouble. For the most part, she did much to follow her parents' orders; ignoring the occasional average test score once in a month, she had kept her promise to perform well in school. But she also tried too hard to please her friends every day: while she would reason with them if she didn't agree with their actions, it always made her feel better to follow their plans regardless. Just a week ago, despite her packed chicken wraps for lunch, she got punished for leaving school confines to buy food at a visiting market.

"I still hate you all for that," she would sometimes tell the crew.

"But you made the choice to come along," they would shrug in response.

Not all mischief is created equal, and on a regular Tuesday afternoon, she gathers three of her closest friends to announce a proposition: that she wanted them to come along for a glimpse of the forbidden half of the city.

"It's not going to be too dangerous," she argues. "The only reason we never hear about it is because everyone is conditioned to avoid it. And, even *if* we get caught, we know all about getting out of situations like this. Remember the time the police captured us by the rocks?"

Their faces are blank. Kolmi plays with her hair; Dilma whispers a quiet message to Rishan, both forcing a smile that looks more fearful than intrigued or genuine.

"Dilana," Rishan finally breaks the silence. "Are you sure nothing is going to happen to us?"

"Nobody will touch us if we plan this out," she nods. A year younger than the rest of the pack, a glance around the room is required to gauge respect.

"You plan to be digging our way to the other side? Or learn to swim across a raging river? That'll take a lifetime," he jokes. She returns a forced smile, which earns her a pat on the back. "Dilana, if you're serious about this, I'm in if you are. But we should do it as a group of four."

It takes a bit of back-and-forth conversation, but eventually the four agree to scan the surroundings of the bridge before class the very next morning. This being the very first time they had gone anywhere near it, they jot down all the abnormalities: that the bridge has only train tracks, and that the coastline region is surrounded by guards and crates of food. It was one of those bizarre scenes that reminded them of grandmothers that would buy 50 fruits in their math textbook, Dima jokes, but only with more bodyguards and angry shopkeepers to pass through.

"This surveillance is a big problem," Rishan points out. "There may well be hidden cameras all over the place. And those guards will never let us get anywhere close to the bridge."

"I was looking around as we came here, I didn't spot any cameras," Dilana remarks.

"That's why they're called hidden cameras, stupid!"

"I know, but we can't give up now. What if we check how things look later at night?"

Rishan shrugs, so the others follow suit. After dinner, the four gather up once more and approach each family's door to ask for a night off to study (Rishan lived in a different neighbourhood than the three of them, so they went through a different pathway to the bridge). The one-hour bargaining session is followed with what Dilana calls a "research experiment" -- a step-by-step, scientific process for the group to extract as much information on the coastline as possible. But there is not much information to gather: there are no plans to make, for no guards lay by the bridge at night.

"It must be something about the name," Kolmi whispers. "You think the guards' behaviour tells us something about hope?"

"You think that guards are just paid to send a message to four teenagers walking by?" Dima snorts.

"No, he has a point," Dilana makes her entrance. "Everything is named for a reason, right? So what if the nighttime's just a chance for people from this side to visit friends on the other side?"

"That's not a bad concept," Rishan nods. "It could be the case. But something seems off. Why would they be more worried about us meeting them in the morning?"

"They may have different lifestyles to us. Maybe the other side wakes up in the evenings?"

"Perhaps. But I'm still not excited about meeting new people. Aren't you at least a little curious who would want to live on the other side of the river? What if they turn up being criminals?"

"There's no way. Didn't you say that relatives may be on this side? You remember why they had to leave our part of the city."

Rishan turns silent, stares into her wider-than-usual eyes and, for a moment, he isn't quite sure whether she was simply naive or too excited for adventure. Only he knows the reasons for disappearance, and none of them are positive: grandpa had stolen a gallon of water from the rations, while aunt #5 kicked an officer in the streets.

"That's so cool!" Dima jumps in the air. "We can meet relatives if we cross."

"Right, and there's no security now," Dilana adds. "No reason to back out of this now, once we learn how to walk on the train tracks."

Outnumbered three to one, the four walk up to the gates and embark on the last journey they would ever make as a group. What happens next is a blur: the same horde of morning guards are stationed on the other side of the bridge this time, and they prevent them from setting foot into the forbidden grounds. Everyone tells an honest story, but the group still separates into two; the next morning, she wakes up in a quiet room next to her father and mother, and they answer a few questions about their mischief.

"I think my friend's ornaments come from a ritual," Dilana tells the superintendent. Mama quickly covers her mouth, and she's not quite sure why; from all the conversations, her friends owned it as part of their identity.

"And any special reason for going on this journey?" He asks.

"I just wanted to be forgiven for my bad grades this year," she explains. "But since it is a bridge of hope, I prayed for my friends and I to stay as a group even after they move this month."

That was the last of her troubles that day. As Papa embraces her presence (though not without a few ugly slaps to the head, of course -- committing a crime was just not one of those things that any family takes lightly), her friends never crossed back to the right side of the river.

Unbeknownst to her, while she takes a lollipop from a jar on the side of her metallic bed, the three of Dima and Kolmi and Rishan are tied to a wall in a dormitory, situated so far away that they all had yet to see the building from outside.

Magnus and Dilana eventually return to the headquarters that night, both tattered and dirty from the wind and puddles of mud they had to pass through. Without a shower, she assigns Magnus with a set of new clothes and places him in a room right next to Luxian. It's both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, he gets to see *her* often. Every time she swings by to make small conversation, he grabs his chance to learn something more (just that other day, Magnus learned who her favourite artist was). On the other hand, the room reminds you of how miniscule he is. The walls are paper thin, and Luxian is a senior in the organization; people shout and discuss logistics while he just tries to get a good night's sleep. They're both part of the revolution, but Luxian's a leader and Magnus is just a soldier. The distinction matters: Luxian pushes the pawns to become the hero, while he just tries to survive.

Above all, Magnus doesn't like living beside him, because Lucian is not a particularly kind nor trusting man. It's a byproduct of his surroundings, Dilana had once explained. He won't trust strangers, because his family never provided him that trust; his father once poisoned him for greater influence in the parliament. It's a reality he knows nothing about, because life had always been simple in the village. People meant what they said, and problems were resolved through open conversation. If you didn't like another man, it was clear for both parties: there would either be no conversation between the two or an upright confrontation, not necessarily violent, but a mental one nonetheless.

"I don't like this argument about upbringing. Just because it was harder for him, doesn't just mean he can be a dick towards us," Magnus once complained.

"No, but trust me on this. He wants you here," Dilana had explained. "I've convinced him over and over that the forces are better with you all. His heart's in the right place: he's a tough love type of guy. He's saying this all to keep you inspired." He didn't fight back this time. For a while, he rationalized with what she said.

But words are often deceiving. While in bed that night, Magnus is wholly unprepared to hear all the bickering in the room right next to him, to hear his name painted in such a bad light when Dilana had been so open about the proceedings in the revolution. It's not directly about him, but rather, a whole critique of like-minded individuals; it reveals him to a destiny he never described for himself.

"How many campaigns are we launching over the next two weeks?" An unfamiliar voice asks, which Magnus reasons as another member of the revolution.

"Around ten battalions need to fight for two campaigns," Luxian responds. "We should bring six or seven of our more experienced forces to the main campaign and seize the prisons and release our previous allies -- disgraced politicians, captured commanders and all. To reduce risk of this, we should have three battalions or so used as distraction. We can ask them to place a goddess of democracy statue at the train stations to disperse their forces. They have to match us in both fronts, and hopefully we can succeed on both ends."

"But why are we placing less experienced soldiers all in one place?" Dilana butts in. "Surely it's not right to just use our newly trained workers for a fight they're doomed to be part of. Shouldn't we try to mix groups together? Try to have them know each other, make sure they get protected-"

"That's horrible," Olgen says. "You know that war's about sacrifice. Besides, what do we really know about the new recruits. They could be disloyal, for all we know. Eat our food, use our guns, then flee at any sight of blood."

"How do you know tha-"

"The whole batch, they're all pretty darn weak. None are physically up for the task, which makes them a lot less likely to survive. You've seen the bunch, haven't you?" Olgen speaks up once again.

"Well, maybe on the weaker side, perhaps, but fighting's not just a physical game."

"We would hope our good thinkers can run with both feet," Luxian finalizes. There's a loud thumping on the table, signifying the conversation is over. His comments are about Magnus, and he himself knows it too -- as much as he hates it to be true, the bomb blasts have left him with a limp he hasn't quite recovered to full form from.

Magnus tunes out to the rest of the conversation. With a burning face, he runs out of bed and prepares to jump in; only fear paralyzes him from moving any further. Awareness matters more than expression: he knows how physical fights would play out. Yet all he thinks about is belonging. Magnus just wants to prove them wrong.

Chapter X

[starts off with reading a book and referencing the shadow the very next day, then seeing Dilana appear at her bed the next day. needs to discuss the fact that he doesn't want to reveal any information about what he heard last night, but finds it very hard: he just has an inclination to tell her how he felt about the entire thing. but Dilana distracts him by discussing a book that she's read recently, and tells you what she thinks about it. you do the same with a chapter of a book you were parsing your way through, and try to interpret it in a way that she likes.]

[she really likes your interpretation and, because she knows that her ideas are often overshadowed by other more senior members in the group, says that you should really be there to talk to those in charge. Magnus feels a surge of confidence, as if he's made it out of his current state, and asks in a hypothetical setting whether there was a chance to make it at a greater position in the revolution. Dilana tells him there's not much he can do on her end to promote him but Luxian and Olgen are very fair people and would give him a chance if he shows a track record of good performances in battles. Magnus tries to argue that he would best be used in a more academic setting as part of Dilana's HR work or in war strategies, because he doesn't consider himself a particularly physical man but he did consider himself to have enough

observatory tendencies. dilana resigns to continue arguing with him, because she also thinks he may have a chance at helping her out: she asks him to go with her to meet the main people in charge late that day when they discuss a world after a revolution.]

[learns about alcohol, learns more about philosophy, he keeps his mouth shut for the first few minutes. around him are 7 guys and 2 girls, but the girls are driven out of conversation: there are plenty of confident men who say nothing of substance, and in contrast the quiet things dilana said with uncertainty were the viewpoints he agreed with most (and even if he didn't agree, had a good thought process behind them, he thinks). Dilana introduces him in the very start of the conversation, and though some of them are annoyed, they don't figure that he's the type that could run away from the room and give out the information that they were going to talk about. (though olgen says something along the lines of 'let's try not to talk about classified information here')]

[this is first interaction with alcohol, for which he starts to question the sanity of people. everyone has a drink, and she offers him one and he takes a sip. it's disgusting, and he almost spits it out, but out of courtesy he drinks it. it warms him from inside, which is his first hypothesis on the point of hard alcohol: it's a winter drink that helps people cope from the stress of winter. Magnus refuses to drink anymore, but another round of drinks are poured and dilana's face is a lot redder this time around. then another round gets offered around and this time only a few people on the very sides of the table take a drink. the conversation remains the same for the first 10 minutes, then it becomes harder to process information. he's not sure if it's just him, but people start to act somewhat delirious as well. a lot more vulnerable information is passed through, and luxian makes an attempt to kick a few people out of conversation. an argument ensues, and some make bold claims to fight each other. magnus feels a little more brave to talk for an odd reason (and he rationalizes that it's because others have started to act funny), so he reveals that he knows that he knows the battle mission after overhearing others and considers it a really stupid decision. he says that statues don't mean shit and that he did not deserve to be part of a distraction mission. luxian says that magnus has misunderstood the purpose of his mission and that they would most likely return safe if they walked in with a better mindset, but magnus continues arguing about the revolution tenets and says that he didn't believe in democracy anyway.]

[luxian tells him that he's going out of line, and there's a backdrop of people arguing behind them. he tells him that war isn't just a black and white reality where some missions are doomed to fail, but moreso that a lot falls in control in the soldiers, and arguing otherwise just proves he's too inexperienced to be part of leadership. dilana steps in a bit to tell him to be more tactful with his words, then cries because he pushes her aside. Magnus is still too enraged to defend her, even though he feels that she suffers a friction burn on her kneecap. he tells luxian that he should feel ashamed that he cannot get the whole organization on the same page, but Luxian says that it's just him imagining things and he should simply go back and get good rest and get to know the people he will be in battle with, as well as the specifics of the mission. Dilana agrees and drags him back to a safe space (and Magnus remarks she is surprisingly strong), while Olgen just laughs in the background. Luxian asks Olgen what's so funny, and Olgen remarks that Dilana is too soft-hearted for change. He leaves hearing more arguments between Luxian and Olgen, but Dilana slams the door behind them and tells him to calm down. they sneak into a small closet where ammunition supplies are held.]

[magnus tells her he feels mad, but stops midway when he remembers that heroes will bottle up their emotions. dilana tells him how she hates alcohol -- it tears friendships apart when in the wrong context. magnus then asks why alcohol is ever drunk, to which she says that she has no idea. she says olgen personally enjoys it because it makes him a lot happier, but she says it's a plague of the free world: people just want a way to escape reality. magnus feels his anger subside, which suggests his drunkenness has subsided. he also wants to escape the reality he lived in.]

Chapter X [Scene of his dream the day prior to being sent to mission + Scene when he is part of the mission and reluctantly goes out]

Taking the advice from the drunken debates, he takes it upon himself to meet those part of his battalion for the rest of the week. It's all a lot more inspiring than he had expected it to be: perhaps the commander didn't know they were doomed to fail, so he does a good job of convincing everyone on the significance of the mission and the outreach of such a national monument. Ironically, despite a large group of almost a hundred soldiers and only two commanders, the discussion is a lot more structured. People talk when they raise their hands, but it doesn't feel that their opinions are discounted. It could be the clear hierarchy that makes the difference, but it's all speculation: Magnus respects the commanders above Luxian and Olgen, because the atmosphere feels more welcoming.

There's a man from the factory he worked from before, he learns. His name is Edmon, but he had left the workplace on his own accord. It's a week before the mission, so the two of them look through maps and floor plans of the train station. Edmon's a bit more experienced on the subject: his parents were city dwellers that left him on the streets since age twelve, while Magnus had never gotten a glimpse of public transportation. It's hard for Magnus to read all this knowing his fate, but Edmon so strongly believed in their purpose that it temporarily convinces him that they were going to all make it out alive. He's a work companion, but moreso a friend now, so Magnus tries to shed light on what he considers as reality. Luxian never explicitly said that they were all going to perish, he reveals to Edmon. It's just that the mission is a side quest for a larger jailbreak they aim to do on the same day.

But sheer will is not enough. Edmon tells Magnus that he's just been imagining things, because no soldiers really get to talk to administration that freely. This statement makes Magnus feels slightly better, so he doesn't argue any longer. The truth is that he had only received this intel by eavesdropping behind thin walls, but that's beside the point: perhaps Magnus *was* truly special since Dilana had devoted so much time getting to know him. And perhaps he underestimates the psychological importance of a loving family, but in the moment Magnus convinces himself that he had done more with less. Edmon had access to the city and education, yet still had troubles reading and writing whereas he had become almost fluent over two months. If anyone is destined for greatness, it is him, and so he goes to sleep the night before with a smile on his face.

A few hours later, and his eyes are still shut; yet, he enters a whole different world and there's nothing he can smile about. First, Magnus sits in a room as a woman checks through official documents. It is not possible to determine where he is, nor who he needs to interact with to get out of the place; he tries to touch the jacket he's been wearing this whole day, but notices that his arms go right through the fabric. Reluctantly, Magnus takes a seat next to her (there's noise from the friction of dragging a chair out, and she doesn't turn her head: he wonders whether she's just so focused on work or whether he is truly invisible) and overlooks the pamphlets of paper. They look like identification cards, but it's a little thicker in substance. There's information on hometowns and a two sentence statement on their faces.

It's a lot of faces of the country, so you learn two main things about the people. First, the country's a lot more diverse than you had known it to be. Magnus is a little darker skinned, but it

always felt more like a tan than a different race; there are dark-skinned, blond-haired men and women that he had barely seen in passing even in the city. Dilana is mixed, but she passes as a commoner; Olgen's ethnicity too hard to determine, but nobody put much thought into it.

The second thing Magnus learns, albeit not by intention, is the age of the revolution figures. Luxian is 26, but he acted like his age for the most part; the only surprise was how Olgen had yet to turn 20. It's something he hadn't expected, not only because scars double as old-age wrinkles, but moreso because of the power he held in the organization. Seniority is a large part of village culture (speaking to those of a different generation meant one had to use different verbs and adjective to express gratitude or ask for favours), so it had never occurred to him that his superiors could be those that should be looking up to him.

Of course, age is just a side point. What matters most, Magnus tells himself, is how one carries themselves. And he had lost many years doing nothing in the village -- if they had counted meaningful years by years they had spent in the city, then there is adequate reason for his plight, so there's no reason to rush into things. Yet for some reason, his reasoning does nothing to change his thoughts. It brings a deep sadness to see that even Olgen -- the man he had considered to be so problematic in the grand scheme of things -- demand more respect than he does. It is not only a race, but a necessity to do well in this mission; there is a rush to become better than Magnus' peers.

Through this lens of sadness, the whole room shakes and he's now leaning on the concrete walls that punctuated his bedroom in the headquarters. He's one of the very few men that got saved, yet still breathe and stay with the revolution from their original factory job, though that may soon change. There's a clock above them, so Magnus learns it's almost an entire afternoon into the future. He's teleported into a room of just four officials in the revolution, Dilana and Luxian included, moving around pins and figure soldiers on a large map of the city. There's a star placed in where the headquarters are, and most of the figures are dragged away from the region; most figures walk towards a place Magnus has never studied or looked at before, whereas his figure walks to the train station just to grab the attention of guards that are overloaded with both duties.

A messenger walks by the building, and then the whole group hears an update: Magnus and his battalion are captured in a failed mission, but indebted former politicians and over two hundred

soldiers are saved as a result. To them, it's all a numbers game: losing a hundred inexperienced soldiers in exchange for many more seasoned veterans is a worthwhile trade. The tacticians hold their tongue for a bit, ask a few verification questions, then erupt into a cheer. Dilana jumps up and knocks over a box of makeshift toy tanks; the two of them almost kiss. There's no reason to fight if this is how they react: if his failure is celebrated just as much as his success if the imprisoned make it out alive. Worse, Magnus is just a ghost of the moment. He puts out his leg as to trip Luxian when he walks by, but his legs go right through; even a scream does nothing to catch their attention. All he wishes is for a shadow of attention, but nobody gives him this option.

The room is vacated by many. There's still hope that people care about him: Luxian walks up to the messengers and asks them if there are any pictures or updates on the other mission; he follows up by telling him that he can't quite go to sleep if he had doomed other soldiers for disaster. The messenger passes around a few cut-out images, and it's too small for one to observe from the other side of the room. All Magnus hears are a few sighs of sadness: here's even a picture of him handcuffed and slapped with a large bruise on his face; it's a face of tremendous pain and he promises himself never to get himself into such a situation. In the end, Luxian is brought to just sniffles, so Dilana wrongly puts things in perspective. She tells him that things were never going to work out for everyone, so it's the best they could've done in the scenario. It's a hug and viewpoint that burns his soul even though what she said was true. Magnus doesn't want to hear things in perspective. He wants to be the main character of this story.

Scene of him getting captured

There's not enough time to reflect on his dream nor recover from the heartache; Magnus wakes up in the middle of night in a puddle of sweat as a loud siren wakes up the entire room. A few others around him let out a loud yawn, then slap him until he's conscious enough to put on his helmet and hold onto a rifle. He stands right next to Edmon, and even though the two are afraid, there's a clear difference in conviction between the two: he's looking forward to success, while Magnus is trying to stay out of trouble. There's a pang of jealousy in all directions: he envies not only how favourable of a position Luxian is in, but in Edmon not knowing the pill of truth. If actions were made in a vacuum, then Magnus would do things that would truly help the revolution, rather than find ways to keep his grudges.

[Magnus and Edmon spend most of their time whispering to each other during the mission, which distracts both of them from the task at hand. Magnus once again asks Edmon if they wanted to make a runaway given the truth: that he had seen a prophecy that reveals that they won't be able to make it out if they stay in the fight. This is the first time there is a strain between Magnus and Edmon's relationship, because Edmon tells him that he's acting quite crazy and there's no substance behind his claims. Magnus tries to convince him again by telling him that his dreams have come true before, but Edmon says that he doesn't want to engage in such negative thoughts.]

[While they are arguing, the two miss an important command that tells them to enter the building from the back fire door. They do what they are told in the mission briefing rather than the edited changed command, however, which is the first sign that things are not going well. Furthermore, he's not sure at when he's supposed to trust his own instincts rather than following instructions, so he asks Edmon. Edmon says that there are only twenty of them waiting at the front fire door, so the only way they can fix this mistake is probably walk in after the first time they hear some sort of gun shot or explosion. This does indeed happen, and then they walk out and see a bunch of guards out in the wild. It's actually a false alarm, since it was just the sound of a train coming in.]

[They do not have the statue that the mission hopes to erect, so the half of them decide to stay in the flanks and look out for potential soldiers that may be up to catching them. Magnus and Edmon split up, because Magnus believes that the best thing to group up with the rest of the crew. While in the process, an elderly grandmother comes up to Magnus and tells him that they are damaging public property by cutting down the dictator's statue. It's really early on in the morning, but she starts to struggle with them and calls them a lot of derogatory terms. She tells them that they will all get what they deserve and while the commander simply brushes off the comment, some other soldiers kick the grandmother and force her to go in hiding under a bench. Magnus looks to check if she's alright, but she tries to stab him with her umbrella and says that he is a scum of the earth. This is not taken too kindly, and Magnus further believes that this whole campaign is a mistake.]

[It takes them a really long time to get rid of the dictator's statue, since the metal they use is extremely dense and strong that toppling it is not easy given the lack of hard machinery, i.e. a crane or any sort of lever-based car. The revolution had misunderstood how long it'd take for

such a campaign, so instead they just surrender to putting up just up the statue of the goddess of democracy. It's not even something Magnus believes in, but he doesn't chat much about it since staying quiet is helpful here. In terms of writing, want this to have a description on the train station:] Magnus looks up at the renaissance paintings that filled the hall. Each work of art contains its own, unique flaws – some featured careless brush strokes and unnatural colours, others featured cracked paint and unrealistic guardian angels – but they all withstood the test of time. They all tell a story. And they all own an inexplicable charm that keeps him staring at the characters, hardships, and conflicts they portrayed, even in the middle of an albeit peaceful revolutionary mission.

[As they try to hide away and leave the premises, they hear a siren go off. Once they leave the train station, his worst fears to come to reality, there is indeed a group of soldiers in black that surround their squad. there's a few gunshots that are exchanged, but the commander quickly realizes that it's all futile since they are outnumbered by almost 3 to 1 in close quarters. He raises his hands up, so everyone follows suit and they allow for themselves to get captured.]

[talk about the particular soldier that holds onto Magnus alone; he is already far separated from Edmon and the commander despite them all standing in a line and being rather close to each other. His hands are tied to his back and all of them have a band around their mouth, everyone is unable to talk but some are better at shouting out than others. but everyone subconsciously agrees that there is no point in arguing at the moment. Before the band was tied, he had asked briefly if there was a chance for him to be let out if they can strike some sort of deal and he can work for them; he doesn't even feel that close with Edmon in that moment that he would be willing to turn him in for his freedom if given the option.]

[Magnus, being an observant person, starts to talk about the things he sees around the world, and how there remains traces of Dilana and Luxian. More specifically, as he recaps things that has happened, he thinks back to paintings he sees within the train station and people that walk by and can't help but think that many of those people should've been. he starts to think back at mistakes he made throughout his time in the city, and tries to debate with himself whether the mistake started when he decided to stay in the revolution or by not running away just earlier, or just not confessing anything with Dilana and asking if there was any way to escape their organization, if possible. As he talks to himself, it becomes increasingly obvious that his brain is wired for him to flee and avoid conflict.]

Scene of him bargaining, then instantly regretting

[they are put into their own jail cells one-by-one.] Banging his head across each bar of the cell, he captures the attention of a prison guard that sends him food and water the previous day.

[he finally answers his prayers one day by dropping a sheet of paper with a pencil. it's rather ironic he had just learned how to write a few months ago -- only fate would have known what would have happened if he had been a little dumber or a bit slower to process information.]

"You have two options," he explains. "One: you join us as a prison guard. You tell us where your friends have been hiding, and you become one of us. Otherwise, you can stay in your cell forever. Just don't expect things to get any better. You have till tonight."

He drops a pencil and walks away from your sight. There was no rush to respond, of course, for he knows the locations of all headquarters by heart. It's quite a talent, he thinks to himself, to have a photographic memory of places you've been to before. If the guard was honest to his word, then Magnus would be guaranteed a better life: he could provide him with all the information that the government wanted to know. And perhaps the life of a prison guard isn't exactly the freedom Magnus is looking for, but it could not be any worse than what you have right now. His cell is dark, empty, and with cracks all across the walls; his stomach grumbles all day because all he has is a molding piece of bread. He knows this is not the way he wants to live. And it tempts him to know that this all can get better.

He reaches for the pencil for the very first time, but stops when he feels a sharp pain jolt through your fingers. It's a sign you're greater than this, he tells himself. [Begins with a small discussion on why he wouldn't do it. goes back to another moment that he had with Dilana when she taught him how to operate a camera once when Magnus was still in training, and they had set aside book reading to look at moments that she had with friends. when she said that she regretted that friends were no longer by her side and she didn't fight harder for their livelihoods, he told her that he would learn from her mistakes, and she beamed so happily at the statement. he asked her what it would have taken to save their lives, and she said that it probably required her to spend time in jail too. But then this idea loses traction because of two reasons: one,

Magnus reasons that she has a current life to become more of a hero because she didn't sacrifice herself at the time. (put this analysis within the flashback)]

Thus, back in the cell, he picks up the pencil with intent, this time carving both their names on the top corners of the paper. With each stroke of the headquarter addresses, his hand shakes. It's a feeling of jealousy: perhaps it's wrong to count successes, but it's the more important reason he feels no loyalty towards the revolution. Magnus doesn't like how Luxian and Dilana giggled at night while he was still sore from training, or how they had their life put together when he worried about finances. But above all, he didn't like how, if the revolution succeeded, *they* get the recognition for your efforts and *they* get to live a happy life and *they* live in a free nation and *they* raise up children to bike around the mountains and *they* play chess on the streets and *they* take photos of the world but he's not even a snapshot in time. Besides, Dilana is the only person in the world that made him feel like he truly belonged -- even his parents did not speak much other than to order him for errands -- and yet Luxian did all he could to embarrass and isolate him from her. How silly he must have been to risk his life for a vision he never believed in.

The clock ticks. Magnus carefully complete the addresses, then waits for the saviours to pay him a visit. Maybe he still loves Dilana, but as they've said, there's levels to this: the world's not perfect. He was never going to be a hero today.

[This scene will be a snapshot of the past, which is Luxian's very last time he ever sees his father in person. They're all at a funeral for the poisoned government official Luxian had adored; uncle drops in with 13-year-old Luxian and his two year younger sister. The body's already cremated, so it's just a box of ashes in the front of the room. Artem enters the room alongside a few officials, and immediately the uncle drags him away from their presence. He mentions something about how Luxian standing next to his father will result in bad vibes.]

[The ritual of the funeral is standard, but it's the first time Luxian had ever attended one. It's a pretty bad experience to have for a first funeral, because father takes all the chances to make it about himself. Since the funeral's a government funded event, he's given a chance to make a statement about the man, and it disgusts him to see how his father could let out crocodile tears when he was the only reason for the demise. his government cronies do the same and weep in

the background, but all Luxian does is stare into the abyss; the only thing he thinks about are the times that he shared in the city and on holidays. The funeral wraps up within an hour, then his father makes an effort to talk with him and his sister. Uncle tells you and your sister to leave to the car with Mama, so they do so quietly.]

[Luxian waits in the car for over thirty minutes, while his uncle-turned father and his biological equivalent get into an argument. Biological father twists his mouth and tells uncle to step away and let him be with his wife and children again, but uncle tells him that this was the collective choices of the children and one should respect this as a father. Biological father snaps again and tells him that he wasn't blood enough to care about the kids, so uncle asks him whether he was blood enough to respect *this* uncle who he murdered for more influence in the government. They almost get into a physical altercation, but the other government officials try to drag him away. They're also aware of the truth (because they had bribed him for this outcome) and simply tell the adoptive uncle that he's going to get what's coming to him. Luxian hears this from his car and starts to ponder about what he truly wants in life. When uncle returns back to the car and tells him that they are moving to a different place forever, he concludes that loyalty is what determines family more than blood, and it's how he desires to rebuild his life now that his father is gone.]

Chapter X: Letter for Dilana once he transitions into being a guard.

[Immediately realizes he's fucked up, etc. Now, as a guard, he's still undergoing training procedures on what to do and how to act, and it's the third time he has to go through training. It's equally as bad as the time he had first entered the city and slaved his times off in the factories (which makes sense, since both are owned by the government), and it instantly makes him think: he did not read through all those books and spend so much time around figures that have taught him how awful the government is. Dilana always tells him about believing in his self-worth, so he wonders what is worse for him: taking a job with the government with no self-respect, or letting himself to stay years in jail or, worse, die for the people he did not truly support. And while he still tells himself that this situation was inevitable -- that some other soldier would have betrayed the organization anyway, so it's better to have just done something that helps oneself -- he realizes that this is no way to live, and he doesn't feel any better for saving his own life. There's some paper next to him, because training required a few written tests (and it didn't make sense why this was the case), so he takes an extra sheet of paper and starts to draft a letter.]

Dear Dilana, it begins, but the tone doesn't sound quite right. It's after so long, and calling her by such a formal tone made him feel conscious; it's as if their relationship is demoted to just work acquaintances. Yet it's the only introduction he's learned, so he goes with it.

[The rest of the letter feels too hard to write. Writing as if nothing happened was disingenuous, yet writing about his betrayal then sending it to the same address he revealed was just salt to the wound. Every word he eventually writes feel as painful as another guard stabbing him right in the back. Alas, rather than trying to write about reality, he finds another way to escape; like alcohol, he gets drunk on made-up stories set in the village back home. He invents and makes up and invents and makes up; it's another character named Krystian that learns from his mistakes and gives back to the society, then little Anna takes a first swim in the lake to wash out the bad luck she received from visiting a haunted house last night. It's not very productive, and there's no reason to send such a meaningless text to Dilana, so he sneaks in a tear-stained apology at the very end. It's written out as a footnote, but it's not a reflection of his true emotions. He wants the stories to reel her in; he doesn't want his message to sound like a taunt, because he still truly cared for her happiness.]

[Even when finishing the writing and double, triple-checking through the work, he feels there is no way to write this in a way that best reflects his emotions. He grabs an envelope and writes the address, then slips the sheet of paper into the packet, but doesn't find the courage to seal the package. Annoyed, all he does is leave the masterpiece on the side of his new desk, and he hates that all he's done with his ability to write is to harm those that mattered the most to him. The rest of the night is excruciating -- he rips up the envelope, then cries to himself. Peering out, the night sky is surprisingly hopeful -- it's the first time he sees snow in the country, and his eyes sparkle when he sees children optimistically come out to play despite all he knows about the country's violence.]

Scene when they meet when he is a guard

Wearing an oversized dark green uniform and a dirty hat that covered much of his forehead, it brings Magnus tremendous disappointment to see Luxian and Dilana stare him down when they walk in the very next day, handcuffed, placed in rooms by the corridor he was demanded to guard. She gives him a little smile as her door locks, but he couldn't quite discern how genuine it

was; for all he knew, she's too naive to assume his responsibility and didn't realize the whole context of his betrayal.

Biting his nails, Magnus walks back to his guard cell and takes one glance at the cells from afar. His knees tremble as he sees Luxian emotionless, staring into the ground, and Magnus' thoughts echo with Luxian's past words -- that people like himself would betray the revolution. He turns his head clockwise and spots Dilana with her body hunched over into a ball, hands covering her face; he opens his mouth but his anxiety saves him from letting out a wail.

I must give them some space and time, Magnus thinks to himself. There was so much to digest and unpack for them, he figured, but more selfishly, he knew he had yet to summon the courage to reveal the truth to them. He had rehearsed it a few times in his mind, but that was before he had any confirmation he would be meeting them again; seeing them in the flesh was more jarring than he had ever envisioned. How would they react when they see me? After so long, what should we talk about?

His apprehension prevents him from talking that first night, but guard duties the next morning force him to confront his inner demons. He takes a plate of stale bread and cold potato soup -- a meal he was all too familiar with from his stint as a prisoner -- and, avoiding all eye contact, drops it next to each of their cells. Luxian does not acknowledge the metal tray nor his presence, which brings him temporary relief; he remembered how their last talk on ambitions and plans had left a sour taste for both of them. Hoping for a similar outcome, Magnus leaves a same tray right by Dilana's door, hoping that she would not recognize him with a mask and a pair of sunglasses.

"Magnus?"

Her voice shakes in the darkness. He raises his foot as to take another step away from her, but her frantic calling eventually draws him in for conversation.

"What happened?" She reaches out her hand between a sliver of space between the prison cell bars, and Magnus doesn't hesitate to embrace it. It's as soft as ever, but they are a little more delicate than he's remembered them to be; when he turns over her palm, there's a large scar that

makes her grit her teeth each time Magnus's fingers move closer. It's the same with her knees and shins -- they look more bluish-red than skin colour.

"What happened to you?" He asks back. "Your legs must hurt."

"It's not as bad as it looks, really," she responds. "I've had a big bruise on my left knee since last month when I tripped while going down a staircase. But the government guards don't care much for keeping you safe."

"Safe?"

"They're clearly not trained too well, because they dragged us up the stairs when we didn't resist any of their movements. We knew it was over...but anyway, it doesn't really bother me. You, on the other hand -- how did the mission go?"

"Well," he sighs. "I think you know what happened. It was a lot harder to take down the statue than we desired, so had to settle for a compromise. We defaced the face of the leader, then reassembled our statue that the revolution told us to do -- but this took a long time and we got surrounded as a result."

"I'm sorry," she sighs, and it's not quite sure why she feels so bad guilty even given the current situation. "We thought this mission would be a lot easier for you all: you soldiers will get to fire a few warning shots, get to fight a depleted government squad, and come back alive with more experience for more important tasks. It was nothing about you: like any organization, we just wanted to slowly promote everyone to perform better. Right, Luxian?" She raises her tone at her last question, almost as if she thought that Luxian was in the cell right next to her. A fair guess, Magnus thinks to himself, except that the senior prison guards were smarter than to let all rebels congregate in a locked space.

"There was another mission that went out that day, right?" Magnus further inquires.

"Yes." There's a bit of a shock on her face as she answers. "We didn't think they would overcommit to your battalion, because we were planning a jailbreak of soldiers and politicians. How did you know about this?"

"I told you all that I overheard this conversation." Social skills are a lot harder to develop in life or death situations. "But perhaps you were all too drunk to take me seriously."

"Oh, perhaps. I wasn't really that drunk -- I just focused more on keeping the meeting productive."

"So did that mission turn out well?"

"Well, it had a good outcome, but now that our revolution's revealed it's hard to do much with the situation. We sent the soldiers and the former politicians to the barracks: there wasn't enough space in the headquarters, and we wanted to spread out resources, so they're still in hiding. Who knows, really!"

"Is it just you and Luxian that got captured? I didn't see many other soldiers or members of the leadership."

"In all honesty, I think a lot of us got captured. Olgen evaded capture for the same reason as what I've mentioned earlier. Magnus, we can't risk revealing any information. I'm speaking quietly, but are you sure there's not anyone else listening to us? No recording devices or anything like that?"

"There's only me," he responds, but even then her query makes him uneasy. The training manual states that each guard manned a row of cells, but realistically anyone could pop into another region if they desired. "But we can talk less about the future, or resume this conversation some other time-"

"No need," she says. "It's going to be hella boring if you leave. It's best if you want to discuss about something other than government."

"I promise we will end off all discussion on logistics if you answer one final question I have."

The room stays silent. There's a clanking sound of a key in the distance that echoes over. It's enough to make Magnust stand up from the fetal position he found himself in while in

discussion with Dilana. He paces the cells once more, where many of the other unknown prisoners don't even bring themselves to look into his eyes. Luxian doesn't do the same, but there was a history between them; though it would have helped to know, who knew if the other men and women in the hall were convicted for treason or more heinous crimes.

His new boots click for ten minutes on the concrete floor, and he is careful as to not step on any of the bloody or insect remains scattered in certain regions of the hallway. The tension seems to subside, so he turns his attention back to Dilana's cell.

"What was the point of our mission?" He whispers.

"Sorry?"

"Well, you said that it was just a training mission for us to get accustomed to firing shots and learning more about the landscape of the city. But the whole idea seems so meaningless: so what if we fire off a gun and deface a statue? Do you think it really matters that we remove an image of a dictator and put another woman in its place?"

"Well..."

"Even worse, I don't think many people would've known it was a goddess of a democracy. I tried to tell you all this, but you were all too busy worrying about the other mission."

"Magnus-"

"I'm sorry," he finally lets out a sob, and it becomes too difficult to let out any more words. Every time he tries to speak, snuffles overthrow his vocal cords; there's no way to reveal the truth. She reaches her arm out and tries to pat him in the back, but it just makes him feel all the more guilty.

"If it's any comfort, I can start off by answering your question," she forces a smile. "You know, statues mean a lot more than you think they do. Think about it this way: if you hadn't joined the revolution, and the dictator's image was omnipresent no matter where you went -- the train

station, at work, at bars or restaurants -- would you not feel at least a bit curious why he meant so much to people?"

Magnus nods. Deep down, he's still sniffing; it's still hard to formulate his past actions into words.

"The train station mission means a lot to our revolution, because -- well, we had intel that there were international governments aiming to come to the city via railroad and have a progress meeting with him. And news about our country is often kept in secret, so true sentiments are never truly revealed to the outside world. To get more funding and more international support, we hoped this mission would be a start -- to show that there is dissatisfaction amongs the country. Whatever Luxian said about it being just a distraction mission, it's simply because he acts and thinks in different ways to the other leaders. You seem to be very fixated on what he says and does, but he's an equal stakeholder in this all."

Magnus doesn't quite know the meaning of the last sentence, but he doesn't cut her off.

"For the rest of us, this mission meant a lot, because it had a lot of symbolism involved. If you don't believe me, our current dictator did the exact same action upon gaining power. Remember how he toppled all emblems relating to the old empire? It's in some of the books we had in the library -- not that I expect you to finish reading all of our resources -- but it's an important part of history."

"I see."

"I wish we got to have these conversations more, of course. Maybe this could have changed the fate of everyone here."

"Dilana," he sighs. It's the first time there's any sort of clarity in his tone, but he breaks down once more. "I'm sorry for turning you all over. I fucked this up." There's a grunt heard across the rest of the hall, most likely from Luxian, but this time they're both too emotionally drained to play dumb. Magnus feels a surge of blood rush into his brain, and it makes him feel too dizzy to think rationally or get up to his feet. All he needed to avoid this plight was explanations like those she had just given: comments of appreciation do wonders to the human psyche.

"You know," she pats him in the back once more, this time with a little more force, and at first he's not sure whether there's any anger hidden in her actions. "There's no reason to feel apologetic over your actions."

"Really?" His voice perks up ever so slightly, but grey clouds still surround their conversation.

"I mean, I brought this all upon myself," she continues. "And so did Luxian. I could go on about him, but after all, I was the one spreading anti-propaganda and recruiting workers from around the city to join the cause. I'm as guilty as one could charge. And, besides, you would've died if not for your choice ... so I agree with your decision. There's so much to live for, Magnus, so a second chance at life: that's the only thing one could ever ask for."

Her explanation makes him sob even more aggressively than before; part of him wishes that she wasn't so understanding of his situation.

"They made you become a prison guard as part of the agreement, right?" Dilana finally asks.

"How did you know?"

"It's quite obvious, really. I didn't think this type of life really suited you, unless you really had a power trip that I didn't know. But even then, a life of a prison guard was probably not what you were gunning for."

"I'm not sure how much longer I have to stay in this position," he sighs.

"And neither do I," she laughs. "That makes us two."

Magnus turns his focus away and stares at a singular crack on the wall. It takes a great deal of focus to realize that the crack does not lead up to the outside world: there is light that illuminates through the hole, but it's a misconception. With his head turned away, Dilana herself is now in tears, but she stays quiet enough as to not draw attention; with just a quiet cough, she composes her emotions and prepares herself for a little monologue.

"You know, Magnus, I might not have told you this," she begins; she lets out a little hiccup when she says his name. "When I discouraged you to become a soldier that day we returned from the barracks, I feared you had to make decisions like this. When life or death situations become a lot more blurry and ... well, I can't fault you, but I had made a similar decision before."

"Oh," Magnus responds, not turning his head at her. "I really hated to have done what I did. I wish I could take it all back."

"That's not what I'm trying to say!" She quickly corrects herself. "I just wanted you to feel a little better by telling you that you're not alone."

"It doesn't," he mumbles.

"That's okay. It'll make me feel a lot better if I told you the truth."

It's the first time Magnus feels like a weight has been unloaded off his shoulders this conversation; for the longest time, he had worried that she would retaliate poorly and force his hand to push her arms away from the cell bars. Or, even worse, he could have the pain of being ignored once more; in the grand scheme of events, their time together was so fleeting and short, and yet he didn't want anything in his lifetime to get in the way of that. He takes his eyes off the light from the crack; it leaves him with a temporary blind spot in the eye that makes it hard to appreciate her beauty even in her unkempt form.

"The stories about my childhood, I was always worried about revealing them in full. I had no good way of telling them without anyone judging me or knowing what I had to face," she begins.

"The truth is, I lost my childhood friends because I proposed visiting a forbidden bridge to Rishan and Dima and Kolmi. They were uber aware of the consequences, and so was I ... yet I pressured them to cross it with me. All I ever wanted to learn more about the truth. You know how I am."

"That just sounds like you're curious," he replies.

"But no, that's not the main point of the story. I thought a lot about this particular moment when we were on the bike trip, really. The fact of the matter is: the four of us planned our escape

poorly, so, like you, we got captured before we had time to react. Here's where the parallel comes in: I felt that I had the chance to change their fate."

Maybe she's too tough on herself, but her story draws Magnus in; for the next thirty minutes, she tries her best to describe all the dynamics and small details that made her life so unique. It begins with a discussion on minorities in the country. The country is diverse so racial tensions are not high; tensions between social groups are only founded on religion, and as such, the province she grew up in receives the brunt of the discrimination. She proposes that this is due to competition: Daryus and his father, Oskar, both wanted a cult of personality around them once they took charge of the administration, and the belief in a divine figure in a religion was a clear challenger to this mission. Nevertheless, she then draws out a map of her town from memory, signalling mountains and rivers and whatnot with sharp gestures on the empty grey floor; with the possibility of another prison guard walking by and observing his actions, it feels too risky to provide her with a pen to aid her descriptions. There are two sides of the town, separated by a bridge; only one side is inhabited by citizens of their ethnicity, but there are buildings on the other side as well; the town is split into five main districts, and one of the districts is where most of the expatriates (i.e. teachers, business owners) would live in. Parents and her lived in the Red Fortresses, which is one of the poorer regions in the town, but it's not all bad; she explains that there were worse places to live in, and their parents owned a good chunk of land that they rented out to the public market as revenue.

She mentions that Rishan's parents used to own the other side of the land, which is how they got to know each other. He was a year younger than Dilana, so he became the de facto brother she never had. When they got captured for trespassing on the bridge that one time, she admits that she's been conditioned to lie about her understanding of religion dynamics.

"I lied about being unaware of religious persecution," she explains. "And everyone knows that's a fucked up lie. I said this to myself over and over so I didn't have to face the guilt of my actions."

"How could you have known?"

"Well, Papa and Mama were always so worried to see me hanging around with those who wore pendants or headscarfs. Told me I was messing up my future and whatnot. In the end, it wasn't

hard to know that there was an aversion to their fashion. They'd wear them when I went to a lot of their rituals, and thus I was able to connect the dots."

"So what did you do then?"

She takes a deep breath, but words do not come out her mouth. She's more resilient to her emotions, but Magnus tries his best to comfort. He holds onto her arms, ignoring their uncomfortable, dusty texture, and this gives her the energy to continue.

"When I gave a testimony and they asked me why I was there, I told them I just wanted to learn more about the town. I was so worried about my own escape that I didn't ask them where my friends were, and even threw them under the bus. I told the investigators about a theory my friends had about the other side of the city being for religious prisoners. It was all an accident, I swear -- and I promised myself from that year onwards that I would give my life up the next time such a scenario were to occur."

"There, there," Magnus comforts. He doesn't quite know how to respond, but it makes him feel even more guilty inside. The story must have sounded a lot worse in her head, because her actions had no malintent nor clear downside; his actions, on the other hand, had a very clear backlash that he had to weigh prior to his decision.

"Thank you for listening," she says. "That's why the idea of parallel universes are intriguing -- there may be braver versions of both of us that can do the more honourable thing when it counts. Or more importantly, another version of ourselves that don't live under a watchful evil government."

"Though, in that universe, we may not have met," Magnus remarks.

"Perhaps not," she sighs. "I didn't consider that option."

The next time the two get to talk is dinner that night, and it's a bit of a role reversal from the times Magnus is in the city. He brings dinner in the same routine: out of respect, he serves the dishes first to Luxian, then to the other inmates around his vicinity, then over to Dilana. Tonight

in particular, there's chicken in the soup, but it's not quite chicken soup; judging by the smell, it's not cooked in the same traditional way he adored.

"The food's good enough," she comments. "I've had worse meals back home, and that's saying something. Have you gotten to ask Luxian what he thinks about the food, by the way? Maybe you can be a messenger for some things I'd like to say after our conversation today."

"I'm not sure," he admits. "Luxian doesn't really talk. He doesn't even glance in my direction."

"Did you try to make an effort to strike a conversation with him?"

"Not particularly, but he didn't seem up for it. He knows who I am and what I did."

"You should try again. I don't think you know him as well as you should ... and I believe you have a lot of misconceptions over how he acts."

"But those aren't misconceptions!" It's the first time Magnus speaks in something louder than a whispering tone; a few sleeping inmates lift their head from the ground to look in your direction. "Just because he treated you better doesn't mean he'll treat me the same way."

"I'm like an old woman now, telling all these stories," she chuckles. "But let me tell you more about Luxian's childhood and how he treated me at the university. Hopefully this changes your mind."

Again, she dives into stories upon stories that sound all the more uncanny, and Magnus can't quite tell her bluff; she had a cryptic aura at times, where she'd try to deflect questions she hoped not to answer. X, he first learns, is not Luxian's surname at birth. He grew up as a member of the royal Ehtana family, but had changed his last name in hopes of disassociating himself from his father's power grabs in the government. At the age of thirteen, his favourite uncle had been poisoned in a bathtub by hitmen hired by his father; at the age of fifteen, his adoptive father passed away and he was sent to live at a prestigious boarding school with the final dollars of his inheritance. Even there, he never escaped the cycle of betrayal; it became hard to trust a housing group (or anyone, for that matter) when four of his closest housemates tackled him down after his strong results at the national university entrance test.

"All interactions between people, from then on," she explains. "They become a sort of test. He only opens up and shows a softer side of himself when he thinks you've passed it."

"So I've never passed, then," he sighs. "And I don't deserve to. I turned him in, I killed the dreams of a revolution for my own life-"

"Stop saying that!" She grabs onto Magnus' arms, then glances around at the inmates around them. "As I said, Luxian and I only have ourselves to blame. Besides, your first statement isn't even correct. Luxian considered you loyal, and not only that, but he was willing to open up to you a lot earlier than he ever did for me." She's withholding a few truths of the situation, but portraying the exact reality isn't her main goal; seeing Magnus happier is the only way she could find joy in current circumstances.

Magnus opens his mouth in bewilderment.

"Back in my college days, when he tried to have us publish his opinion articles, there was a huge difference in not only how he acted, but the power dynamic of the situation," Dilana describes. [Luxian sulked a lot over differences, and was unwilling to talk when things didn't go his way. He asked us if we agreed with those opinions, and then, since we did, why we weren't willing to publish them. It took us over a year of the same conversation over and over before we made any headway. He had a hard childhood, and that made him unable to put his faith in me early on.]

"So how did things get solved between the two of you?"

"Eventually, I tried to trust him as much as possible. We worked it out one dinner. I gave him a brief backstory of why we couldn't write out his ideas -- our club was funded by the university which, in turn, was funded by the government, so any of his articles would have marked the end of our publications. After that, he put trust in me as well -- he opened up on why he had such a hard time accepting failure on our end. Remember what I said about his father? It wasn't always like that. In the past, his father often spent time and agreed to take him out for activities. But once he started to agree only in principle, it was the start of their estrangement."

"I see-"

"And I can't fault him for that, really. We're all a byproduct of our upbringing, after all. It's the great thing about meeting people: everyone has a different perspective on things."

Silence ensues for a while.

"But if you said he trusted me, why did he work so hard to keep me in the side mission?"

"If that's what you think you heard from our internal meetings that day, then I'm afraid you're very mistaken. I mentioned this over and over again, but your mission had just as much importance to the revolution. You just connected those dots in your head because you don't like him as a person."

"Maybe I don't, but I did ask to be part of the other mission."

"That was to protect you from disaster! And, I know it's a little ironic saying this all now, but two weeks ago we had all agreed that your battalion had the safer option. You came with much less training, so Luxian just wanted to keep you alive."

"Then what did he say about my limp?"

"Luxian's not the only leader in the revolution, Magnus. He's trying to get you to work in a more managerial position -- and I'm sure that's something you would desire as well. Think about this: how many other common soldiers did you see in our internal meetings? Who do you think rallied for your right to be in those discussions?"

Magnus holds onto his tongue. None of these signs were as optimistic in his warped sense of reality: clouded by jealousy, the only way was to look at things with a hopeless outlook.

"Why didn't you tell me all this earlier?" He asks.

"If I told you all this, I was worried Luxian wouldn't trust either of us again."

The next three days follow a similar trajectory. As excruciating as it is, Magnus spends his nights lamenting his position and staring out at the window, imagining how different life would be as just a normal citizen, wondering how things would have gone if he had just escaped from the revolution or, even better, never had moved into the city. Then, he'd look forward to the mornings and afternoons: as a guard-turned-messenger, he'd first pop over to Dilana and pass over everything she wanted to say to him. Magnus tries to stay as faithful to her tone as possible: there's a certain optimism in how she speaks, and he gathers that her goal is to cheer Luxian up in these final days. Then, after he serves out the same stale pieces of bread (it's the same food Magnus had received as an inmate, though meals as a guard aren't any better) to the rest of the squadron, he sits next to Dilana and reports that Luxian had nothing to say. She comforts him by describing how their relationship had strained over the past week, but the two of them knew better; Luxian no longer wants to talk to him in wake of his betrayal. She tells him to keep sending over her thoughts, and perhaps one day he may reciprocate.

Despite the time they've already spent together, Magnus still gets to learn a little more about her. The conversation doesn't always have to be intellectual: they spend the entirety of the afternoon playing with rubber bands he had left in his makeshift office, and she's able to make a star and a lion face with her bare fingers.

"It's nothing special," she brushes it off when Magnus attempts it from outside her cell. "Friends were always the artistic type, so they taught me a few of their favourites. Trust me though, they've got a lot more tricks up the sleeve."

"That's a lot more than we ever did," Magnus gasps. "We just tried to shoot them around and see how far they would go."

"We did that too!" She points her fingers towards him. "That was really fun too. We played this variant where we stood in a circle around a metal pole and would see how many tries it'd take to hit the bar. Tell me more about your childhood games, then."

It's at these last moments she starts to break the news to Magnus. Between each description of a sibling and their tendencies (Dilana repeats his summaries each time he mentions them -- oldest brother Sasha has a bushy beard and wants to be a butcher, while Breyan's tall as a stick and just likes to sleep. Marya and Yeni are twin sisters, albeit fraternal and on different paths in life: if

anyone else was going to make it out the city, Marya was the only other one capable of reading and with the extraordinary skill of acting in the village plays), she reveals more about her life in the prison when Magnus isn't around. It turns out that there are a few other guards that patrol his hall when he's not around and receiving further training, and they treat her a lot worse; just last night, they beat her with a cane and stripped her down to the bare minimum to check her for weapons or possessions, even though they had already done it the day before and the day before that and the day before that as well.

"I don't think it'll happen for much longer, thankfully," she quickly dismisses the points. "Back to your childhood, then! Introduce me to your childhood friends."

Magnus doesn't quite understand the implications of her statements, so he leans his head on the bars and begins to draw on the floors. This time, with a pen, he clings on to his memories running through farmlands and starts drawing out the market center; peeping Pavan was good-natured but creepily followed people around for attention, so the two of them made a perfect match for exploration. The two of them crossed bridges, but none were as consequential as hers; in smaller villages with little authority, roads were just a way to get from place to place.

"We walked around as many places as we wanted, really," he explains. "There was no concept of school or studying, so the only condition was for us to be back home by dinner."

She lets him finish the story, then gives him a little clap; he checks the clock, and it's almost time for his second shift of training that day. Worried that he may be late, he vacates the scene without explanation, but Dilana tugs onto his feet and trips him before he gets to leave.

"Just let me tell you something important before you leave," she pouts.

"Go on, then." There's a hint of irritation in his voice.

"Promise me you'll not act out or get too mad at yourself."

"What's wrong, Dilana?"

"They'll tell you this soon, but ... the other guards told me that we've only got one more week together. Luxian and I, we're scheduled to be shot in public."

"..."

"You should leave now. Go do whatever you were supposed to do. I'll need some alone time to think about this too."

[This part is incomplete, but will be written in later draft revisions! For now, this is a pretty good place to end and it flows well to the next section.]

Chapter N

It is a moment you can mentally prepare and replay in your head beforehand; it is a moment you can try to avoid by thinking back on better times and speaking with those you loved most. But one can never avoid destiny. No matter how little sleep Magnus had the night beforehand, or how much he had cursed out at the stars throughout, a week passes and the clock must strike twelve at noon next day: then he must stand on the makeshift wooden plank-stage alongside two other soldiers.

Dilana and Luxian stand right ahead with their hands and feet tied up to a eight foot tall metal pole. Their eyes are black and swollen, and it's not what he ever wishes on his worst enemies. It's the beauty of disaster, as Dilana once told him in the barracks: moments of sadness always remind us of times one can look back to as the golden days. But it's also the ugliness of life, Magnus thinks to himself: time only moves forwards, yet we spend too much time thinking of alternative lives and in-the-moment infatuations that fill our minds with jealousy. Too often, we forget what it means to live a happy life; because we always strive for more and find the faults in the moment, we do not truly appreciate the golden days until it becomes too late to realize we had lived through them. He remembers how Dilana told him of an ancient Chinese philosopher named Tao and the tenets of his religion: that balance could only be achieved with darkness in light and light within darkness.

Their wooden stage is situated at the top of the same train station Magnus's battalion had originally been captured at, and though he had too much motion sickness to look down at his surroundings, the loud murmuring sounds suggests that a much larger crowd than expected had

congregated at the spot. [where exactly they are on the roof -- and what paintings Magnus remembers seeing when he had been part of his one and only fateful mission.] He holds an unloaded handgun on his right arm, and even then, he feels too scared to put his fingers on the trigger.

The weather is oddly warm and sunny for just a regular February day. Magnus isn't religious, but the villages had many superstitions: in particular, a warm day in the late days of winters are a sign of good luck and future harvest. There is nothing great about the day for him, but it's all about angles and perception. There is nothing in it for me, he tells himself, but for the corrupted administration and onlookers, the day is a sign of hope. For those who lost loved ones, ruthless killers facing execution are a symbol of justice and closure. All in all, the weather's a fitting metaphor of their personalities -- Magnus learned more about Luxian these past few days, and now considers them both a sign of kindness within the dark times they live in. And how awful, he further remarks, would it be if their last memory of the world were just a snowy winter scene with winds that send shivers across the planet. Sure enough, he takes a slight peek at the crowd once more -- many solemn onlookers wear black as they stand in front of a row of plum blossoms. He's never learned about rebellion in its silent ways, but it looks as close as how he had imagined it to be.

A soldier of the People's Army -- as they are called --walks towards Magnus with a smirk on his face. Then, before Magnus has time to react, another soldier makes his way to the front of the stage and places a microphone in the center of the stage. The man speaks with conviction, but there's not much substance: he recites the constitution, offers a lengthy timeline of their revolution (which, judging by Luxian's quiet shaking of his head, meant that the recap had not been truthful), then describes them both with harsh-sounding words Magnus had never heard before in his life. The speaker makes a quick pause after each sentence, as if he expected a round of applause after every line, but the crowd doesn't give him the satisfaction: Dilana lets out a slight snicker when all the audience does is chatter throughout his talk.

It is not obvious when the soldier ends his speech, for Magnus tunes out to stare at the emotions of his two companions in their final, more vulnerable forms. He isn't always a visually observant person, but he notices how much their faces had aged over the past few weeks. Luxian had always worn a large scar across his forehead, but for some reason it looks a lot larger and more bloody than he had remembered it to be. Same as Dilana, he notices that his face is also a lot

more wrinkled and grayer than the time he had argued with him prior to being deployed -- showers came once in a blue moon in the underground forces, but he imagines that they had not been able to wash themselves since being placed in their prison wards. Then, on the other hand, apart from the frayed hair and dust across her face, it's the first time he notices how skinny Dilana had gotten. Food had been scarce in prison, he knows, but it hurts nevertheless to see her cheekbones so much more defined and lifeless as they are.

The whole world goes silent for a minute, and it takes a large shove from the back for Magnus to realize that the pseudo-monologue had finished and his handgun is the final word in the proceedings of the day. He walks up to a red dot just three meters in front of Luxian first, and at the sound of an air horn, he raises his arm and points it straight at his face. (His hands shake too much, so the soldier next to him grips on the gun for stability) Luxian rolls his eyes, and it causes Magnus so much pain to realize that he had been right all along -- that Magnus did not deserve a better spot in the revolution because his heart wasn't *in* the right place, because saving himself mattered more to saving an idea. He feels his bottom lip tremble as he tries to speak out.

"I'm...sorry."

It's a show of waterworks, and his vision becomes blurry. [The grip on his gun is ever more tight and] the soldiers shouts at him to make a move.

"I learned a lot about you these days. I couldn't tell how much you cared about us all," Magnus continues, and Luxian grunts. It's the closest thing to a response he had heard from him in the past month, and Magnus gains a bit more control of himself as he feels a warm stream of blood rush into his arms. He waits until he lets out a little smile, then closes his eyes and fires straight, just as he had been trained to do on lifeless dummies. The soldier cheers in hopes of the crowd riling up to celebrate his death, yet the crowd stays silent as ever. Magnus doesn't open his eyes until he lets go of the gun and drops his hand back to his side.

"The job's not done," the soldier shouts. "We have another criminal."

Magnus is almost too weak to continue, but the same handgun is forced onto his hand sooner than he wishes, and he stands on another red note a lot closer, a lot more intimate with his beloved. Opening his eyes do not do him any better: he almost collapses when he sees Luxian's

scar now gone from his face and reduced into a bloody remnant, now just an artifact of the past. Pulled back onto his feet, he notices Dilana breathing heavily to herself; she whispers apologies to Luxian and begs for them to be reunited again. It's clear she's not as prepared as Luxian had been for his fate.

"I'm not very good at this," she mutters to herself. Her tears cleanses the grayish complexion of her face. "It's like I'm back in high school all over again."

"I'm sorry," Magnus whispers out loud. The guards shout at him once more, practically begging at him to get a crack on with the ceremony, but this time he resists their control of his arm.

"I've told you you got nothing to apologize for," she suddenly looks up, flustered, almost as if she didn't want him to have heard her talk. "You couldn't have chosen any wiser."

"I..."

"Magnus, you remember what when I talked about parallel universes? And reincarnation?"

"Yea-"

"Do you believe in a world where we will live to be old and have kids and grandkids and be neighbours and go shopping ... and wake up to watch the sunrise ... and learn to drive a car?"

She chokes on her words, and Magnus notices he does the same: no matter how hard he tries, his throat is empty, and he cannot match the forced smile she puts on.

"How I envy them," Magnus eventually gulps. He keeps his eyes wide open and thinks back to that very first encounter they had when *he* was the lifeless figure lying in bed. There's beauty in this pain: Magnus finally learns how much it must have hurt for her to see him in that state. And life's a bitch, because her tears tug on his heartstrings. For so little he had done, the revolution taught him so much on how to love. All a young thriving man needs in life is a bit of empathy: once you understand what to receive, you learn what to give as well.

"But don't think like that -- that's the trap! No matter what happens today, I'll still be alive."

"I..."

"There are still people who will live up to our ideas and still so many pictures that keep our moments in eternity, even if I don't come back or you never find me again. You promise to keep looking for them, right?"

Magnus nods his head.

"We will see each other again, Magnus. Don't be scared!"

"But I'm scared for you."

"There's no need for that -- I've had a great life. It was a pleasure getting to know you."

"I'll miss you, Dilana."

"So will I."

Against his will, a soldier tenses his grip around the trigger, and she drops right to the ground. It's the last words Magnus hears from Dilana forever.

Epilogue

*I'm here // Come to me
I still keep the wish I left behind
Though I put a brave face as I live my life
When I want to see you, when I want to hold you
I will remember the memories, our moments together
As the guiding light of an unseen future*

-- Centimillimental, *There's no Turning Back*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GWkLAGlEcsg>

[this should just be about Magnus recapping life and how he stayed as a prison guard for 5 years but as he got more used to the work he realized that it was a great lens to learn about the world and to exercise the things you had learned from the revolution: to empathize with others. mention that he does not work in executing others, and most of those he had to manage were not those of revolutionary crimes but more petty actions such as theft. he should also mention that while he works as part of the government, he never felt too attached by them -- he basically received no pay and just food and drinks, so he did not feel particularly guilty that taxpayers were funding his actions. and hearing people talk about life, he realizes that while luxian and dilana had been taken in, sentiment against the government had been at an all-time high]

Outside of the occasional television episode and daily newspaper printouts, prison guards do not receive much information about the outside world. Peering out the window of his fifth floor ward, Magnus saw a lot more protestors and gunfire exchanged outside his apartment; and, though he had chances to leave the confines of the prison every once in a while, there was never enough time to explore past roads and the limited parts of the city he still remembered from his days at the factory. People had been a lot more agitated, Magnus often remarked to himself, but that could very well have been confirmation bias from all the newspaper headlines he had seen earlier at his tenure. Indeed, in his first year as a guard, Artem Ehtana (it took him a bit of time to remember his affiliation with Luxian the first time he sees his picture) died of mysterious causes, and it's exactly as Olgen had predicted -- that he would disappear on a current affairs trip because politicians were too slimy to admit their differences and wanted permanent, irreversible actions as a solution. The government descended into further authoritarianism the second year, and it's where Magnus learns that Olgen had evaded capture when he had revealed the locations of the revolution headquarters. There was an initial feeling of resentment that he was the only one still alive out of the trio he considered as leaders, but it was quickly drowned out by hope: he remembered how Dilana tells him how she still lives through ideas and protests, so it brought him happiness to hear how Olgen keeps fighting on their behalf. It's almost as if his more bloodthirsty nature was what the revolution truly needed, because all he remembers from the third year of his job is violence. All neighbouring government buildings seen in the peripheral had been destroyed; the prison had to be relocated, and Magnus spent three months in another hospital. The fourth and fifth (the final) year featured similar scenery, but circumstances made the fight a lot more hopeful. Higher superintendents promote Magnus to have more freedom to leave the confines, and it's something he takes to his advantage -- newspaper articles write of seceding government branches and suicides of prominent officials, all until one day a soldier

walks up to him and says that the country is free once more. His contract as a prison guard is over.

As mentioned earlier, prison did not pay him much, but in the new Ralyan republic it becomes easy to find a job now he had learned to read and write. An office hires for a writer and had all the intangibles he desired from a job -- they provided him enough of a stipend for housing and was close to the headquarters he once had been part of, for old time's sake -- so a now 26-year-old Magnus takes the post and learns how to use a typewriter in this free world. It's also the first time the country has elections in almost thirty years, and like what the books in the barracks proposed, all above the age of 25 get to rank the six candidates in a ballot (only the first two really mattered, in theory -- nobody had really heard of the other four men at the end of the list). There are absentee ballots, and while Magnus truly thought Luxian and Dilana were still alive and their spirits were with him, he could not make any additional votes for them; thus he voted for the man he thought the two would choose. It is a close decision -- Luxian would have voted for Daryus Umaneva, a middle age brown-haired man with a desire for moral righteousness and to pay back reparations for what had been wronged before, but he knows Dilana would have voted for Kilyan Abdeshevez -- an older man who looks like he's truly seen it all, one that would keep his word to break the cycle of violence and build a more international world to connect with Europe and America -- so he chooses that candidate. It warms Magnus' heart to see that the majority of the country agrees with his opinion and gives Kilyan the chance to address the country in a way that truly made the crowd *belong*. When he calls for no discrimination and better welfare for all, it makes Magnus think back to the villages and Dilana's upbringing and how many new-age kids can live happier after their sacrifices. It's a realization five years too late, but life's not zero-sum game: there's no need to worry about others living better lives because our actions live on in the people we touch.

It's five years from the executions Magnus tries hard to forget, but he knows it's not all in vain. As a free man, he now wants to find old pictures that Dilana had kept and stored in private 'unbreachable' places as she had called it, yet it's been so long since those days that he had forgotten so much about the past locations and where she had stored her treasures. (Of course, though there are a lot of pictures Magnus had seen before, there were a lot more she had kept in hiding -- a naturally artistic woman, she wanted more time and chances to refine her products before she revealed them to the world) His first attempt was to return to bank building the headquarters was located at, but the landscape was almost completely different -- the bank had

lost almost half of its height from structural damages, replaced only with surrounding debris and melted steel beams that lie on the ground untouched. It's been more than two months since Magnus had heard of violence in the city, and yet the building is still too smoky to enter; he eventually forces his way into the basement, and notices that there's nothing left but an empty haunted room with a few unscrewed nails and scraps of paper that remind Magnus of arguments they would often have before operations. It's a waste of time, so he covers his mouth and leaves the area in disappointment.

Dilana talked much about her parents. While in prison, she told Magnus how they would come to the city to find her. It was something she said with such confidence, and he never quite understood why: she told him so many stories on why they no longer talk, so it didn't make sense why she held so much faith for their reunion. And though Magnus knows that it's not her parents that talk to her when he walks through the city, it's as if Dilana's spirit and her loved ones still lead him to the right track. When a young woman with a headscarf asks where the nearest bakery is, he recalls the very first time he had left the factory to buy additional bread and learn about food prices in the city. They walk together until they reach the city center and, while the exact bakery did not exist anymore, two more extravagant bakeries had sprung in its place, each decorated with colourful candy canes and pictures of beautiful architecture that he swore he had seen in the barracks as a trainee for the forces. Then, the other day, an old man offers to teach him to play chess, and it finally makes sense why the world around becomes so much more peaceful. Magnus quickly learns how the pieces move: pawns move one step forward and capture diagonally; knights move in L shapes and jump over pieces. Bishops move in diagonals while rooks move in straight lines. The queen's a rook and a bishop combined. No pieces are created equal, but it doesn't quite matter. There are piece sacrifices, the old man had explained. "Queens may be worth the most in value, but if I give up my queen here, I have a way to win the game." It's a new perspective and a metaphor for life: all pieces are expendable until you capture the king. And, though it has been five years since Magnus last saw Dilana and Luxian, it's almost as if they live within the chessboard, smiling at him whenever the sun shines and reflects on the wooden sculptures.

Elections are no longer as cutthroat as they used to be: there's still a winning party, but 'losing' parties still had a say in the government. Two weeks since the election results are announced, Magnus learns how Olgen is an assistant of new Daryus and had permanently moved into the parliament. Security is tight, but he gets to pay a visit to his old friend: when Magnus shows him

a pen Dilana had passed onto him, Olgen reveals more about how the revolution was structured after their departure.

"I always respected the two of them," he says. "But they had troubles rallying up the forces. Dilana came with too kind of an approach -- she gave new recruits the resources they wanted and said the things they wanted to say, and we always had to spread our resources thin because of it. Luxian, on the other hand, was too rational. Both of us are university students, but people want to fight for their freedom: there's no point reading into chaos like a book."

"Dilana often had questions about how you ruled," Magnus points out.

"It's the past, so we don't have to argue back and forth on things that shoulda, coulda, oughta' be done. I'm not perfect, and there's a lot of things we could have done better -- but we ironed that out once the executions happened. I heard all about the ceremony -- I know you were a part of it. It was the first time I learned to forgive."

Magnus nods, unsure how to continue.

"A part of me was enraged you agreed to do what you did. In those situations, I would have always chosen death. But it's about empathy: I learned that many people were not put in good positions. Besides, it made me think about my past."

"What about your past?" Magnus inquires.

"Well, I lost my eye from a mission where we overstayed when I tried to hunt down a specific old friend of mine. I'm lucky to have gotten out -- but a few of our forces had been captured because of my selfishness. I never quite thought about it, but the death of Luxian made me think about the mistakes I committed, and how I left many others to die."

"I never meant to hurt the two of them. I loved both of them for what they did for me and what they stood for--"

"I know. I thought about it, believe me. The revolution got a lot better because I got to reflect on our budget and our mistakes -- there's a lot I owe you for that."

"I see."

"May I pour you a cup of tea?" An assistant walks around the room, and it's the first time Magnus learns of proper teatime etiquette. He nods in silence, then takes the time to admire the rest of his office --- colorful paintings of old, important-looking men and what the assistant described as impressionism art. From up close, the brush strokes make little sense: it's just a few strokes of dull-coloured paint, carelessly placed on the canvas. Yet from afar, the painting is a masterpiece: the bridges and night sky that lights up the city are all so colourfully portrayed in a way that even the best camera technology was unable to capture.

"This particular night sky painting came from a time when cameras had just been invented, so it's more about capturing the ambience," Olgen continues the description. He sips on his cup of tea, and Magnus does as well; there's very little volume, so he paces himself accordingly.

"What changed with the revolution?"

"Well, first, *you* revealed where our headquarters were, and so the first thing we had to do was move locations. We were ready for this, though not so soon: I had only found out because I was sent to help out in the barracks, then a messenger revealed the news. So, from then on, we decided to recruit more from universities and from disgruntled construction workers who we would have killed off regardless. We moved entirely to the barracks, and it was a bit of a squeeze -- it's not easy having over five thousand people hiding under abandoned tunnels. But in hindsight, you know our fate. It worked out quite well for us."

"So all the photos we had are gone?"

"It's funny you ask," Olgen responds. "A lot of the images we hung up in the old headquarters had been seized, but Dilana and her friends had sent their cameras for processing around that time. So we got to bring back a lot of pictures from your time at the barracks."

"Maybe we can still see them now?"

"Oh yes, that's no issue. I can grab them from the bottom drawer, if you'd like."

Magnus feels his heart pumping unusually loud as Olgen walks to his desk and pulls out an unusually long sheet of laminated paper. It looks like a film tape, where, printed on it were the golden days: there's an image of him learning to write for the very first time, then another one of Dilana peering through a stack of books that the two of them had played makeshift Jenga when he was too tired to continue. Right beneath those are pictures part of Dilana's life: one of her grabbing onto Luxian's left arm, who holds up their university flag (he had just learned this fact upon asking Olgen why the revolution or country flag looked nothing alike) on the top of a snowy mountain. She was wholly unprepared for the cold weather, he remarks to himself, and yet she still brought herself onto such a mission.

"They were pretty close," Olgen butts in. "She always had a thousand things she wanted to do, and would like to drag him out to events. I was wondering how they could keep anonymity with such behaviour, but it turned out they managed quite well for so long."

"How did they get so friendly?"

"Not sure. They already knew each other really well for the revolution, so it's nothing I can talk much about."

"I see."

Magnus gives a little smile to Olgen, then parses through the remainder of the film. Below these pictures of happy moments were also times of sadness: it's a rainy day, and she's out there sitting by herself on an empty park bench, her hands planted firmly to cover her face. This image borders another scene of broken metal planks and wood, covered with shrapnels of a successful explosion. There are puddles of a thick-looking liquid, which Magnus quickly determines as blood when he identifies a limp figure buried under all the ruins; judging by what he remembered as her tendencies, it could have very well been one of his or her friends.

"I look at these photos almost every day," Olgen speaks with a shaky voice, and Magnus almost spots a tear from the right side of his eye. It was very rare to spot him displaying any sign of weakness. "Politics is no easy job, but these scenes remind me what we fight for throughout these days."

"She mentions she had hid a few more around the city. You have any idea where these could be?"

"Not sure, Magnus. You might even know her better than I do -- she barely spent time to talk to me. Best of luck if you do go on a search, though: do tell me what you can find."

They exchange a few more pleasantries for the day, then Magnus returns home for a shower. [more description regarding life and how he slowly accepts the fact that it may be impossible to find the images, for he never learned what Dilana really liked around the city] And besides, while there may be more time to dig up morsels of the past, it feels guilty to have his heart stuck in the past: just as he had moved to the city and abandoned his family for a better life, it feels equally wrong to look back on times long gone when Dilana had made the ultimate sacrifice Magnus was not not willing to make for her: the chance to explore a world free of oppression and glass ceilings he had no idea existed. And, perhaps, the world is still fucked in some way -- nationwide perceptions are not just changed with a change in leadership, after all -- but he knows that the only way to thank her is to continue fighting for these injustices.

Thus, he takes arms to continue the fight. It's not in his usual personality to reach out to others, but there's no point in worrying about normality: nothing in his life thus far had gone to plan. The physical revolution is over, but Magnus keeps writing about his experiences as part of the office. He works as part of the organizing group for a food production line across the country, so opinions and livelihoods matter: in monthly reports, he makes sure to point out statistics about less privileged regions in the country not just because Dilana had pointed it out before, but because he saw himself in them and wanted to make sure that others had a chance to live a better life than what they had to go through. In meetings, though he still does not hold a managerial position, he doesn't get jealous at the lives they live; instead, he makes sure to speak to those who did determine exports and argue for places that needed more help.

Above all, it's about a life worth living. For thousands of lives to have perished for our world, it makes enjoying the present a lot more valuable for Magnus. It'll still take some time to adjust, he tells himself: one does not simply snap out of brutal murderings and unfulfilled, regretful messages that ring in his ear each day. But slowly, step by step, as the leaves turn orange then green again, Magnus learns to embrace the imperfections in this lifetime. That there are flowers that bloom in winter that teach us all to live a better life as a community: that there is still light at

the end of the tunnel, that there can still be so much good and altruism in a world diseased by greed and power.

It's a pleasure to have known you, Dilana.