

Finding the island proved to be a challenge for Jean and his team. It would have been easier to just get one of the ship's officers to flip, if they could have found one. Instead, his team wheedled, bribed, blackmailed, interrogated, or quietly tortured every crewmate they had a dossier on. Most would have come clean, except they didn't know the coordinates. Or rather, they all knew different coordinates, and none of which were for any known land mass.

Jean had to rely on other avenues if he wanted to be on that island. The contest was the next obvious choice, but the task was made more difficult because everyone else in the world was clamoring to get a chance at Antwerp's prize. The thousands of competitors for The Trials were chosen by lottery. It would have been a non-starter if Jean's team had not already been in Antwerp's systems. A true random number generator chose most of the lottery, as much as there could be any such thing. There were no surviving records on any of the winning numbers, so it was lucky his team had found there was one round of the lottery where numbers were hard-coded in the system. It was possible Antwerp used that lottery round as a fixed buy-in for anyone with enough money. The man was an ethics nightmare.

"Contestant! Youwannadrink or somethin'?"

Jean ignored the slurring imbecile as he entered the cafeteria partitioned by walls of shoulder-high dividers, each flimsily made of some beige sound-dampening material. For many, it was one more of the endless parties while they waited for yet another of the relentless interviews. It did not seem to matter to them whether this was a post-voyage or pre-finale party. Jean's cabin near another of the cafeterias, which served beer, wine, and liquor at all hours, ensured him near-constant drunken cries of "Contestant!" up and down narrow hallways for the three-week trip while he tried to read.

Officially, the schedule for most days of the voyage comprised evening music, dancing, and trivial games that conferred one minor advantage or another in the upcoming final round. Jean did not partake in any of it.

A lounge with a library full of what Jean referred to as his loaner books occupied him — books of tales and stories not good enough that anyone would keep for themselves, and instead left behind for someone else to pick up and half-enjoy. It had become Jean's pastime to read these middling stories lost to the ages. His favorites were the oddly named Westerns: cowboys, drifters, and outlaws tangled with the fabled natives of early Old America, and he marveled he was in a time only a few generations removed from such iconic history. He especially loved the high-stakes card games portrayed in the stories. Poker was his favorite. Jean loved games where lying was the dominant strategy.

None of the passengers were allowed top-side, and the windows and doors of the former expedition cruise ship had all been converted to give no chance to see outside. The other passengers, throwing themselves prostrate at the altar of revelry, ignored ship's bells as they drank and feasted without a care for time or day.

It was just after third bell when Jean got to his assigned interview partition where an unexpected black mass of dyed ringlets sat behind the camera's tripod.

"Mr. Pak. Punctual. Have a seat." Yuria Coomes didn't get up or offer her hand.

"Where's Joanne?" Jean asked. "She's done all my interviews." Jean and Joanne used these interviews to plan for the island. He wanted one last chance to confer before they disembarked today.

"Sick." A lie. Joanne had passed Jean's room the night before. She bumped into him in the narrow hall as if by accident. Small theatrics to make it look like a chance encounter for the

benefit of the cameras that infested the ship. More than that, the idea of Joanne falling sick was laughable.

"Bit more substance to this one." Yuria shuffled through papers in her lap, not bothering to look at Jean. "Thoughts, feelings, whatever, about the final round coming up. Any pithy one-liners you can think of for a blurb in case the producers give you screen time." Her tone gave that scenario a low probability. She looked up to see Jean hadn't moved.

Yuria motioned to the chair again in a mock show of graciousness. Jean settled into frame under the main and fill lights without a word.

"Right. Let's jump in then. With your low Trials score, how do you see yourself faring in the final?" Even for Yuria, known for her no-holds-barred journalism, it was a low-blow question. The Trials had been easy. Trick of it was to get Jean right in the middle of the pack, minimize any chance to stand out.

Jean decided to pick at his teeth.

"None of the other contestants have mentioned alliances with you. Is that going to make it more difficult?"

He and the other contestants were sequestered after the penultimate round of The Trials until they boarded the ship. Contest crew searched baggage and gear for contraband. No watches, laptops, phones, books, compasses, or anything else that was not strictly clothing. Other contestants spent the time in cahoots, drinking and partying, while Jean pored over his loaner books.

Jean changed tack and worked the thick piece of gristle with his tongue.

"You grew up in Tashkent as an orphan. How has that affected your approach to this contest?"

An olive-branch question. Jean wasn't an orphan, but it was a useful backstory to keep people from looking for any relations.

This wasn't working. Jean switched back to prodding with his fingers.

"Are you going to take this seriously, or not?"

Jean took this seriously. He had given too many decades to Travel, too many years of dwell time in this age. His team was dedicated to discovering the secrets of the island, and their employer was downright scary in her relentlessness. Jean could not even guess how long she had been whittling away layer after layer, accumulating a vast amount of historical information. An obsession.

Jean's convictions were not as deep. Good pay, and he had his own idea of what he would do with his cut when they brought back the key. Even those motivations were not enough by themselves. In the quiet times between missions and surveillance and poker games, Jean admitted to himself that he wanted some of the glory of leading the team that revealed the truth of Antwerp's Island.

People long speculated the island was around Point Nemo, the furthest point from land. It was a common enough thought. A place famous for being in the middle of nowhere was as good as any for a mythical island that could not be found. Jean knew better, as did anyone who took the island's location seriously. Still, it was a neat thought. The kind a child might have.

Antwerp's Island was the Atlantis or Barb d'Io of its own time, steeped in mythology that became larger than the island could ever have been in reality. Fashionable contemporaries insisted that the island was not real, a fabrication, a fiction.

Jean knew it was these last who were closest to the truth, his face smiling while Yuria asked him question after question for an interview that would never air.

His employer had come across information that implied large portions of the myth were indeed fabricated. The man called Antwerp muddied the waters of fact and fiction from the very beginning.

The most simple form of the legend was a children's story used in some of Jean's first memorization lessons as a notably not-orphaned child.

*A man named Antwerp amassed a great wealth;
In his hubris, a tournament conceived.
On the day, Antwerp's speech toasted his health.
"The Champion, my fortune will receive,"
"To the winner, this too: a Key to cage."
For Antwerp's talents captured all Knowledge.
"Give back the key! Or risk a new Dark Age!"
The Queens and Kings worldwide cried out and pledged.
Then Antwerp replied with gravest of nods:
"Only the champion controls the key."
Aghast and affronted, they and the Gods —
Unleashed hellfire on mortal man's folly.
Not even Gods could undo Antwerp's crime.
The world's Knowledge was trapped for all of time.*

Like the best myths, this one was rooted in fact.

Antwerp was real. Jean stood within feet of the pompous idiot before they set sail. One last bid for publicity with all final contestants to tide the audience over during the three-week hiatus. Antwerp's fortune, too, was real.

The Key of Knowledge was real, though its truth was more convoluted than a simple myth can convey.

And by Jean's reckoning, surviving historical records and radiometric dating gave him three days until global military strikes culminated in the use of atomics over the Pacific Ocean in an effort to curb the effects of Antwerp's network attacks. A series of events that precipitated war, and the next Dark Age.