

1.

A soft rustling rose from the reel-to-reel recorder on the table in the silence that engulfed the room. I could feel Doctor Rubelcava's cold eyes on me as I opened my notebook and readied to begin. His face, in the darkness of the room, lit by the odd banker's lamp and the hypnotic blink of green monochrome cursors, shifted between blank, piercing study, and a half-sneer. The smoke of his cigarette stung my nose, but I acquiesced when he politely asked for permission. My discomfort is a small price to pay in the aide of disclosure. The far perimeter of the light of his table lamp fell on the glass ashtray, lighting it brilliantly, causing it to cast tiny prismatic rays around itself.

My attention kept shifting to a painting encased in plexiglass on the wall on the far side of the room behind his head. The painting, along with the glass encasing it was an incongruity, breaking the flow of greens, creams and wood paneling, drawing too much attention with the sheen of light that glimmered off its armor. It was *The Slave Market* by Gerome. That art degree I failed out of briefly and unexpectedly breaching the surface of memory. Its presence made me feel uneasy.

Dr. Rubelcava followed my line of sight to the terminus of the painting, and he sighed. "That's a contribution of my predecessor. I'm sorry, I know it's distasteful. I meant to have it taken down, but, well, I never did."

"It's okay," I smiled, "I'm not here to judge anyone's art taste, doctor." I adjusted my notebook and pens. "I'm sorry, actually, about taking up your time, but I've been asked to compile-

He handwaved away my apology, smiling. It even looked genuine on him. "It's fine. We're in sleeping hours now. There isn't much going on."

"You have regulated sleeping hours?"

"Yes, we've found that everyone - everything - is much more stable following a regimen of four sleeping hours to every five hours of wakefulness."

"So everyone's asleep?"

"Well, not everyone. There is you and I, of course, but also any researcher this side of the firewall, as well as the guards that reside on the other side, with the subjects themselves. There is human monitoring twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. They are always awake."

"You must have a lot of guards."

"Indeed, all with specialized training. Former military. Women, like the subjects. They work on rotation and to ensure that we have coverage at all times."

"Why all women?"

At this he looks down at the cream-colored inkblot on his desk, not seeming to be looking at anything in particular. He opens his mouth, but there is a pause before the words come out. "I find that men have difficulties reconciling power over women with their responsibilities to women. This can be a destabilizing feature, and I'd rather remove it."

There was a momentary silence, which I choose to not fill by pointing out that he was a man with power over women. "Destabilizing feature of what?"

"Relations between men and women. Not always, but often. The behavior can be further modified through the addition of additional observers, but that in itself also promotes secret-keeping behavior."

"I guess that brings us back to the beginning. For this, I will be taking notes as well as recording: Could you recount the order of events that got us here." To this, the doctor laughed, and gagged on his exhaling smoke.

"Let's see, where to start – maybe with the birth of language, or maybe we'll jump a few hundred thousand years and start with refrigeration? How could I – any of us, really – pinpoint the start of this plague? Something so tightly-coupled with our own evolution. How to scientifically build a narrative to explain telekinesis and spirit possession? What about our current predicament is... explainable?"

"But you're studying it, right? That's what you do here."

"Sure, sure. But then I guess my definitive answer, for the record, is that there is as of yet insufficient data for me to draw any reliable conclusion that doesn't paint me as a hapless Magoo that shoves crayons up his nose while pretending to do science by wearing a white coat." At this he laughs some more. I think I like Doctor Rubelcava.

"Okay, let's lay that aside for a moment and see if we can approach it from a different direction. Doctor Rubelcava, can you tell me about yourself? How did you end up here, doing *this*."

His eyes went distant, lost on those prismatic rays of the ashtray.

"I've been many people, done many things. I've been a son, a student, a father, a husband – the science took the most work. I studied a lot, struggled a lot. I wasn't top of my class, and none of it came naturally to me. But the thing about emergencies and tragedies is that they have a way of conspiring to elevate the mediocre and the mundane to lofty positions of terrifying power that the mediocre and mundane had never considered or aspired to. I'm not a father any more, nor a husband. Just an old man that's lost too much, and at the same time, just as much as anyone else. An old man with a degree he struggled at, and the right connections, I guess, to get a job that many would kill for," He exhaled deeply, as if he had been holding his breath for the entire interview, and suddenly there was a weight rounding his shoulders that I hadn't noticed before. The sneer, maybe, just some weird biological response to the weariness of the situation. "But maybe I'm not being entirely fair to myself. I don't give a damn about money and power. Like everyone else, I just want to know what the hell happened."

The wooden-sided intercom on his desk chimed. His eyebrows asked a silent question, then raising his hand toward it he said, "Pardon, just a moment." He pressed a button. "Yes?"

"Dr. Rubelcava, Doctor Jacobson's pod went into lockdown. His vitals are erratic and fading fast," the person on the other end, a woman, spit out the words rapid fire. She was out of breath.

"What's going on the CCTV?"

"Nothing. The camera is showing black, sir. Security is working on the bypass for the door now."

"What was Jacobson researching?"

The sound of papers being rapidly and roughly shuffled, pages turned haphazardly. "The Elicitation of Ancient Auto-Didactic Language Recitation Via Ambiguous Image Stimulation."

"Whom with?"

"Donna, sir. It was with Donna. This was not a schedul-" At that, the old man just about knocked his chair over while rising.

"I'm on my way," he smashed a button on his intercom with a bit too much force, and grabbed a cane I hadn't noticed hanging from the back of his chair.

"I'm so sorry, I have to go." There was clear alarm on his face. He took a step, already lost with other concerns, then stopped, and turned back to me. He was biting his lips. "You've been given full clearance." It was a statement, not a question, but I nodded nevertheless. He started walking again, hobbling a bit. "Come along then, if you can keep up."

2.

We traveled the maze of the Redoubt, as the locals called it, for about twenty minutes before entering a smooth, chromatic hall from which many doors protruded. The wall was polished stone, cold to the touch. A door opened, and tumult spilled out.

Inside, various arrays of computer paneling built into bulkheads as bays, each clearly labeled by a number. The screens glowed softly, displaying various data points, fluctuating graphs that were the hieroglyphics of the scientific class of priests. White walls and floors with burnished steel inlays. Recessed lighting throughout.

"Tear through the fucking thing already," a female voice – the same that had spoken to the doctor over the intercom.

"He's already dead, what's the hurry?"

"The instruments could be malfunctioning, and either way, if he is dead he may not stay that way long if we don't– why am I explaining this to you," she turns in frustration and I catch her eyes. She's young. Younger than the edge in the voice painted her as in my mind's eye. A similarly young security guard looking ambivalent, shrugged shoulders asking the silent question of "What the fuck do you want me to do," while the rest of his team, already in placed, took to the steel doors with a rotating saw. The grinding shriek, deafening and all consuming.

The woman approaches us, modest heels clacking on cement. I see her eyes flit from the doctor to me and back to the door. Questions appear on her face, and she does her best to mute them. Young but concern-lines already establishing themselves. I catch sight of the badge at her chest: Denise Navaro, Laboratory Supervisor. She yells to be heard over the grinding, sparks from the contact between rotating blade and door, her backdrop. "The pod isn't responding to lockdown overrides, so we're," she tilts her head slightly towards the security team cutting the door behind her. "Security on the other side have entered the room with Donna and are awaiting orders." Rubelcava nods and Denise joins us in a line and we watch the sparks fly, waiting for access to Dr. Jacobson.

"Breach in 10," one of the security team yells from the rabble. We crowd in on them. My eyes trying to adjust against the flash photography of the flying sparks, the vaporized metal in the air clinging to my throat. Three members of the security team raise their rifles, aimed at whatever may be on the other side, another two emergency response personnel, cheery yellow jumpsuits, hold bright red extinguishers beside them. The hapless officer from before, maybe at some meager attempt to save face waves us back a bit.

We give ground, moving back about ten feet, and the doors hiss open, black smoke unfolds out, and the breach gives way to solid black, broken only here and there by yellow-red flames dancing in the thick of it.

"Flush the room," someone yells, and someone else, somewhere must have hit a button that brought the loud whooshing of an industrial exhaust system. It hungrily draws in the black

smoke. The emergency team pass the security personnel, and raise their extinguishers, spraying the small lab cell from left to right and right to left until the flames are finally gone.

And what is left is the wet, pulpy carcass of a very burnt human, on its knees, appearing to have died while praying. In fire science, this is often referred to as the “pugilist pose”, but here the Jacobson-thing, mostly charred bone and cooked flesh, never fell over. He’s on his knees, head slightly bent as if in deep consideration, hands clasped in front of him. A silver cross he was holding, melted and merged into the irritated, purple flesh of his deskinning fist.

There are various exclamations, the usual “my gods”, and “Jesuses” that accompany such encounters. I steal a glimpse to Rubelcava. His chin is set and face stolid, but his eyes are wet. He’s doing his best to remain some form of a stony leader in the face of it. Denise covers her face with outstretched palms, taking a moment with her shields up, saying nothing at all. The barbecue smell of Jacobson’s cooked flesh reaches my nose, and the hurried lunch packed away before my meeting churns, attempting to find a way out of me via the entrance. I choke down the feeling - I am here as an observer, as impartial and as close to sociopathy as possible. My fists gripped so white and so tight as to produce diamonds. The feeling passes, but the hapless officer is not nearly as lucky, and he sprays down the pristine white wall with such projectile force, that for a moment he looks like a cartoon character, and I worry I may start laughing hysterically.

This snaps Denise out of it, “Hold your lunch, this isn’t a daycare-” Screaming. From the effigy.

The shock is absolute. Everyone is frozen, as guttural, animal wailing fills the silence. The cooked man unmoving, but that wail – something prehistoric, pre-lingual, pre-human. Maybe I’m reading too much retroactively – but sadness, regret, longing? All of the broken parts of us, in the deep inky black of abyssal unconscious, somehow expressed in that wail.

“Where’s the god damned med team?”

“He was supposed to be dead...”

“Get the med team!”

I don’t know how much time passed. It felt like an instant. The body was lifted, bones and tendons fused in its praying pose, and placed on a stretcher, and just as quickly, disappeared into one of many unknown chambers or ventricles of this place.

And that’s when I saw her – behind the smoke and the tumult – on the other side of feet of glass and concrete, but still clearly visible, “on The Other Side”, as I would grow accustomed to hearing.

To say her face was a forest path was no metaphor. In what was a likely candidate for most painful tattoo session I had seen with my own two eyes, a desire path bisected her face, clutches of pines to each side. When she shut her eyes, they became a part of the tree, a little bit of sky. And on her upper-left cheek, a small fire climbed alongside one of the pines. Donna was strapped down in an upright position on some kind of gurney. Three rifles were aimed at her from various sides. She slipped the eyes, especially at this distance. The colors of her, like a natural camouflage to any eye not focusing with absolute intent.

“You–” I look over to see Rubelcava has caught her in his sights. He’s furious. “You did this!” He points, spittle ejecting from his lips at the last line. She can’t hear him – that would be an impossibility, but a queer smirk touches her lips all the same.

“Sequester Donna to her quarters,” Donna barks into a radio.

Across the expanse of glass and concrete, Donna is wheeled out of view. My eyes go from the empty chamber to the doctor. He leans over, breathing deeply. Recomposing himself. "I'm sorry. I need to do better. You came on quite the day. Please, give me some time. We can resume our discussions later."

3.

Ms. Amy Amalric sits across from me at a black glass-topped desk. Black pencil skirt, and a black dress shirt, the placket slim, and deep red. Bisected by another line of red at the second top-most button, forming a crimson cross extending out to and flaring at the shoulders, calling to mind, for those who still remember, the crusaders of old. The glossy black buttons gleam like so many tiny eyes catching the light. Her face is all angles, but I wouldn't use the word 'severe'. There is something inviting there. Enticing even. How to capture a jawline that has the quality of a jagged cliff and warm flesh all at once. Her blue eyes shine full of barely calculated friendliness, and lipsticked mouth I'm sure, both men and women find appealing. Just looking at her, you can tell that she is good at what she does. You want her to be good at what she does.

Her office was spare. Lots of grays, blacks, and polished steel. A solitary lit candle on a floating shelf by the wall clock added some fleeting warmth to the room. The slanted windows behind her overlooked a wasteland of unattended and uncared for buildings and infrastructure worn by wind and sand, down to nubs under a metallic black sky. My eyes, focusing on her, played a cruel trick - for a moment I thought I caught shifting firelight in a distant window, and my eyes wandered from her face. She smiles, turning to follow my gaze. Not seeing the thing that pulled me, she makes her own assumptions. "I like looking at it. It serves as a reminder of what once was, and what could be again."

I lay my recorder within clear view, and notice her smile widen. She motions her young assistant away with a mild gesture.

"I'm trying to gather as much information as possible regarding both life on the Redoubt as it currently is, but also, hopefully, some explanation for how we came to be here. I really appreciate your generosity with your time. I know you are quite busy."

She dismisses this with another gesture, maintaining that smile, and adds, "Of course."

"Can you summarize the goals of Regnum Dei, your organization, Ms. Amalric?"

"Amy, please," she interrupted, "And for the record, it is not *my* organization. I answered a call, as we all must in our time."

"But you are the presidential candidate?"

She beams in response, "Yes, it is my good fortune to be called to speak for those who keep the faith, though I believe that we more broadly represent a silent majority of people here at the Redoubt that believe in the autonomy of every individual to decide to have children, to curb spending on ridiculous, fruitless research in the face of what is clear to all."

"Can you elaborate on that please?"

"Of course. I think even among the most faithless of us there is a sneaking suspicion that our elected leaders ignore what is in their face to pursue alternative answers. They funnel money that could be used to expand housing, education, food production, and therefore families, to what are otherwise dead ends. Even ignoring the quota and approvals system, a

cynical person could easily make the argument that this is a government-enforced shadow project of population and demographic control. There was a time where a man and a woman could choose to have as many children as they wished. Where the only limit was the resources they could accumulate with the sweat of their brow. They worshiped as they wished, lived as they wished, raised their children as they wished, as long as they held the one unbreakable contract with the state – they paid their taxes. We pay our taxes. Regnum Dei asks on behalf of all of us – where are our rights?”

“You’re describing Before. That’s a rather unfair comparison – to say that the limitations of how we live now must offer us the same freedoms and possibilities as we had Before, when our growth is now limited both by how quickly the Redoubt itself can grow, but also food production.”

“There is no situation to which an appropriate Founding Father quote doesn’t apply. I give you Franklin. ‘Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.’”

“I think some would say the world that Franklin lived in is starkly different from our own. It is an assumption one way or another to say that he would feel the same were he here today.”

“Perhaps, though I think the sentiment broadly holds.”

A moment of silence passes between us as I jot some notes.

“Given recent news-”

“You can’t believe everything you see in the news,” she offers with a dismissive smirk.

“Surely, you can’t believe everything you see anywhere, but believing nothing you see is its own form of self-serving nihilism.”

She laughs, a fluttery, joyous laugh. “Oh, I like you,” her eyes enveloped me, the candlelight caught in them flickering unpredictably. “Please, go on.”

“Regnum Dei is currently in a stand-off of sorts with the ruling government.”

“I wouldn’t classify it as a stand-off, but rather, we are exercising our right of peaceful assembly and protest.”

“Regnum Dei has assumed political, military and economic control of several sectors of the Redoubt. Barricades have been built, civilians have been forcibly displaced, and there is evidence of unlicensed breeding programs. Authorities are barred access for inspections under threat of violence-”

“That is a lot of misinformation you are parroting here. We are only looking after our interests. We have made a safe space where we can worship and live lives that sanctify God, where the purveyors of pornography and blasphemy don’t have the reach to touch and corrupt our children, and where Government Men aren’t the highest authority we answer to. The so-called “unlicensed breeding” is merely us aiding couples that have been on waiting lists for approval for so long that it is now difficult for them to have children naturally. Don’t you understand, this life, as we are being told we must live it, steals our humanity, robs us of the joy of family, and keeps us from sanctifying God as we have been commanded to?”

“Nevertheless, such a program, regardless of justification or cause, risks starvation for all citizens.”

“Hogwash. Even now Regnum Dei is investing significant resources to maintain independence for all members. We account for every life, even if the government does not. The current regime asks us for our trust, and obsequiousness, and in turn says that it will provide, it

will make us safe. And yet, didn't a researcher just get torched by one of the abominations they keep locked in here with us, claiming that It will somehow hold the key to getting us out of this? Haven't we been told time and again that the fire break will keep us safe? And yet, here we are."

Regnum Dei has more deeply penetrated the secret places of the Redoubt than the authorities likely know, or are willing to admit. I must have failed at controlling my surprise, the news of Jacobson's death had not yet been announced to public news. "We have supporters all across the Redoubt. There isn't much we are not privy to."

"I feel I should also ask about the recent terrorist attacks carr-" For an instant, the smile sours, collapsing, and then reverts back to its mean.

"Regnum Dei neither condones, accepts, or answers for the terrorist actions of the Templars or any other group. We vigorously condemn the taking of life or the sabotaging of resources that may result in the loss of life. Regnum Dei is a peaceful organization, and we aim to win in one and only one way – at the ballot box. And we have absolute faith that if the election is free and fair, we will soon be speaking for all citizens."

Her assistant enters, steaming cup of tea making a trail as they pass. One cup – signaling an end to our conversation before any additional word can be spoken. Amy reaches for it, and the assistant bends, whispering into her ear. She pulls back to face me again. "I'm sorry, but I fear I must cut this short. It's been a pleasure speaking with you." She takes a sip, as the assistant raises an arm, showing me the exit.

4.

My final report should contain little, if any at all, of my own beliefs, biases, or general opinion. Objectivity is impossible in the best of times, but it is an ideal to strive for. That being said, I'll be damned if I strip out the opinions of others. It will ultimately be up to the readers of this report to make heads or tails of the state of the Redoubt, and reality oftentimes cannot be so cleanly severed from belief. Economies live or die based on consumer sentiment. So I will convey the words of others accurately, whether I happen to agree with them or not.

After the unexpected conclusion of my interview with Amy Amalric, I crossed the entrance to *The Outside*, a bar that clearly catered to the working professionals of this area, and that had by now, mostly cleared out. It was dark, the music low. My kind of place. The entrance led through a narrow hall. Periodic portholes give the passerby a quick glimpse of some distant, farflung and now no longer extant location, species, or activity. Sometimes all three. I caught glimpses of elephants in a savannah, a busy transit station with people coming and going as the sun cast on them from windows, harsh and obliterating when they passed under it. From one of them, I saw through the windshield of a car as it was driven at ridiculous speed on a beach. Next to me a man laughed, exhilarated. The camera turned, and on the water, a jet skier was racing us.

I could see how these images would be a brief and fun diversion for some. And an inspiration to drink for others.

I ordered a rum, and settled in to go over my notes, brief as they were, but when I looked back up, she was already taking a seat next to me. Denise Navaro.

She had a sad little bemused smile, and her eyes were squinty against the soft blue light surrounding the bar, more from the alcohol than from the light itself.

"You know, not everyone knows what human roast smells like, even if they can imagine it. That's something we have in common now," she offered by way of starting the conversation. "If you could separate the smell from the image, it's almost enough to make you hungry, and then make you hate yourself."

*Everyone deals with tragedy in their own way*, I told myself.

"Oh don't look at me like that. What happened is terrible, but Jacobson was a creep that got off on his research, and Rubelcava should have fired him eons ago. I love and respect the good doctor, but this is a blindspot of his. This didn't need to happen. But there is no perfect leader, and we live in a world that reflects that."

Some spark went off in my slowly churning brain, and I rifled through pages until I found what I was looking for. "What is 'Elicitation of Ancient Auto-Didactic Language Recitation Via Ambiguous Image Stimulation'," I asked.

She burst out laughing. Sprayed me a little with whatever vodka concoction she had been working on. She keeled over, and finally, noticing my blank face, and, I think, processing that she may have hit me with some spittle, she covered her mouth and started apologizing. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry." She patted at my face with a napkin. "I'm sorry, it's just all so ridiculous." She finally settled, with a deep, authentic sigh. "It's funny what language can do. That you can use very big, very serious words to make the absolutely insane sound like a legitimate area of research. Doctor Jacobson was a religious fanatic. A zealot. What he wanted, more than anything, was to find some connection between all of this and the religious phenomena of glossolalia - speaking in tongues - as a way of making what most people see as a momentary bout of insanity, legitimate." She takes a drink.

"The thing is, the test subjects... Fuck that," she says, apparently to herself, "Those women. There is a lot we don't understand, and there are a lot of anomalous phenomena that occur, either through them, or due to them, whatever, anyway, it's really unpredictable. Anything that assumes the supernatural and attempts to play with it in them, doubly so. This kind of research is already supposed to go through several layers of approval. That had not happened in this circumstance. Jacobson was playing with fire. Pun intended." She polished off her drink, and brought the glass to her forehead. I gestured to the bartender for another.

"I had a sit down with Amy Amalric just now. I was surprised that she already knew about Jacobson."

"Oh, that's not surprising. Regnum Dei has been pushing a 'diversity' and 'engage the controversy' initiative for a while. Pulling every lever and twisting every arm available to have access to the research apparatus. Jacobson being a researcher was a product of that. I'm sure their acolytes and supporters have regular communications channels," the bald bartender delivered fresh drinks as she finished, and she winked at him.

"She's polling very well. There's a pretty good chance she's going to be the next president, with her message of greater reproductive rights, and questioning the research that's done here with our tax dollars."

"Yeah, I know. It's almost enough to get me to wander out into the wastes, if not for my cat. But her message of 'greater rights' as you put it, is more a message of 'forced rights'. Women forced to incubate babies for god and the movement. The suppression of different faiths. Giving the knee to their beliefs above all else. It's funny, how often the misogyny 'is coming from inside the house', if you will. You know Amy doesn't have any children, right?"



“No, I didn’t know. But it is hard for some-”

“No. Well, I mean I don’t know for sure, but there are plenty of rumors that she’s had two abortions. That’s the kind of honesty and respect of rights I expect from her, that’s maybe why I believe it. An ambitious woman can’t have a baby getting in the way of her career, no, for her an abortion was absolutely necessary you see. Hers was necessary. It’s all the other ones that are superfluous murder.”

She turned in her stool away from the bar, aiming herself more directly at me. The way her legs hung without quite touching the rung, and how she swung them back and forth made her look so young.

“She’s playing to people’s frustrations and anger. Maybe she even shares them. What people like Amy don’t understand is that setbacks are a part of progress. We are still here. No one could have foreseen the Redoubt, this life. We’re still moving forward, and that involves pursuing all sorts of avenues, and sometimes looking like you’re staying still. Throughout history, in the most trying times, facism rears its head and says, ‘Hey guys, look at me, I have a solution. And that solution is super easy – you see, the problem is everyone who is not like this. They are corrupting your children, they’ve degraded your government, and they’ve robbed you of the joy and meaning we all feel should be present in our daily struggles. If we just start isolating these people, maybe imprisoning them, maybe torturing them, things will get better. It’s distasteful, but if you give us absolute power, we can do it for you and you can keep your hands clean.”

“There are literal demons out there, though. It does give them some ammunition.”

“Yeah, and we have to be careful to not become literal demons in here.” She leans in and whispers. “Thank you for listening to me,” and kisses me on the cheek before resting her head on my shoulder. After a minute of silence, I no longer knew if she was awake or asleep.

5.

A sound woke me. I was on my couch, and lifting my head, I saw that Denise was still sleeping in my bed. A knock at the door. She stirred. I rose and answered. A teenager in loose fitting patchwork clothes, welder goggles over his forehead as an accessory. He looked at me with a look that said it made perfect sense that he was standing in front of my door, and I was the weird one for looking confused.

“You wanted to see Yuri? I’m supposed to deliver you,” he said, slapping a large sealed utility cart in front of him. My request to interview a stalker took its time to travel through its circuitous channels, and had seemingly been approved and scheduled without my knowledge.

“Can you give me five minutes, please?” The teenager gave me a grunt-nod, and I closed the door.

Denise was sitting up in bed with a questioning look on her face. “It’s okay. I have to go, you can stay if you want. The door will auto-lock when you leave.” She smiled and lay back down.”

When I opened the door again, he looked at me and asked, “Did you pee? It’s going to be a bit of a ride.” I nodded, and he popped open the door on the side of the utility cart and motioned me inside. “Put that bag over your head if you will.” *If you will*, I guess I will, seeing as

I requested the appointment. I pulled it over, the world went dark, and I heard the door latch closed.

Yuri (not his real name) is a rarity. A stalker who lives to no longer be a stalker. His office is no more than a utility closet. I have no idea what sector of the Redoubt I am in. The teenager traveled for over an hour before we arrived. Too many turns for me to keep track. Elevators up, elevators down. When the side panel on the utility cart opened, I was disoriented. My eyes screaming against the overhead lights. Yuri's large, flat bespectacled face looming in my field of view. He smiled, and I realized his hand was extended.

"Welcome. Please, have a seat." He stepped away, and I saw the lightly padded steel chair in front of his metal desk. There were green metal lockers lining the wall, and a shelf full of old world antiques: a radio, a few lego figures, a leather bound book, its gold filigree declaring, *The Holy Bible*, an old plasticky coffee maker, and other trinkets I didn't recognize. That's when it hit me, the permeating smell of coffee. Coffee, an old world luxury more valuable than gold now. I rose out of the cart, and the teenager promptly whisked it away, door closing behind us.

Yuri waited for me to move towards the chair, before he rounded the desk and took his own. "Thank you for-" he motions for me to wait, and opens a desk drawer, pulling out two coffee mugs. An unadorned brown one, and a chipped white one that reads "world's greatest boss". He reaches to the shelf, pulling down the coffee pot, pouring generously into the two mugs.

"You had a late night last night. I think you could use one of these just as much as me." He moves the brown mug over the surface of the desk, putting it in front of me, and seeing my frown, "You asked for a meeting. I am a cautious man. I had to know who the request came from. So I may have had watched you a bit. I hope there are no hard feelings about that." I shook my head and took a gulp of scalding deliciousness.

"I am one of only three retired stalkers. Caution is part of the recipe of what I am. Well, caution and insanity. If it was just caution I wouldn't have been a stalker to begin with." He laughs at this, and there is a warmth to the man that is wholly disarming. He looks like someone's old uncle that happens to know a lot about plumbing.

I take out my implements - notepad, recorder, and he shakes his head at the sight of the recorder. "Just notes, please. I'd prefer there be no document of my voice on the official record. Not that I want to disavow anything I might say, but I think it's more to my advantage to have as little publicly known about me as possible."

I nod, sneaking the recorder back into its home in my satchel. "Where do you want to start," he asks.

"What are the stalkers?"

"Stalkers are a profession and a group. Think like a trade union, but illegal. We take on orders for items people, organizations, even the government wants or needs, but can't get itself. We foolishly brave the outside to retrieve these items. For a fee, of course."

"Illegal, but you take orders from the government?"

"Interesting, right? There are just certain things that can't be produced in here yet, or at least in enough quantities to be viable, or fast enough for emergency needs. So sometimes we even save the government's hide, which really, we see as everyone's hide. Generally if the government is looking to *procure* something, it's to everyone's benefit. Generally."

“That all makes sense, it’s the illegal part that’s not gelling for me.”

“Oh yeah, well, think of it like this. If going outside is nearly certain death guaranteed, it is in the interest of your society to forbid its members from venturing out. Beyond even that, messing around with any of the airlocks or breach-area and potentially exposing entire sectors would be even worse. So yes, what we do is illegal. Illegal but nevertheless, necessary. We take on the risk, and over decades have developed means of getting out and back in that minimizes that risk for everyone. There have been occasional crackdowns, but it’s generally not long before an order arrives and we know the government is calling on our services again. And for the most part we do what we can to remain invisible. Ignorable.”

“Such as?”

“Well, for starters, we don’t talk about what we do publicly. Everyone who does this has an assigned job. Maybe once a month they get sick for a day, or two, or three. And then they are back at work, no comments made, but they are tired, and their pocket a little fatter. Secondly, we don’t share the things we know with the public. There is an official narrative about what things are like on the Outside, and if what we happen to learn experientially contradicts that, well, best leave those things unsaid outside a conversation with a fellow stalker that has maybe experienced the same.”

I take another sip, no longer searing, and the bitter, earthy taste of it is all I think about for a second. I’ve only ever had coffee once before, years ago, so I lack the proper context to make the claim, but I tell myself this is a damn good cup of it.

Yuri watches me with appreciation and amusement. He likes bringing experiences to people. “Can you give me an example,” I ask.

He turns his face a bit. “Are you sure? It’s hard to put the lid back on once it’s taken off.”

“Please.”

Yuri lets out a *pff*, and runs his fingers through the gray ringlets of his thinning hair. “There is so much.” His face takes on deep lines as he considers deeply.

I put out my hand, palm outwards. “Wait. I don’t want you to say anything that you feel may put you in danger. I won’t share anything identifiable about you in my report, but I still don’t want you to feel like you’re putting yourself at risk.”

He stares at me blankly, wide-eyed, then throws his head back in booming laughter. “Wait, oh, hoo, you’re worried about *my* safety.” He literally wipes at his eyes while laughing. “Look, don’t get me wrong, I’m not worried about my safety. I’m worried about *your* safety. There are things that people may tell you that probably shouldn’t end up in your report. The government knows. They choose to cover certain things up. I’m sure it’s classified and only the people born from the right uterus, who are taught the correct words and speak them in the correct order are allowed to know. You know, the people who breathe rarified recycled air and fart rose petals.”

He pulls down the pot, refills his mug, and extends it in offering. I start moving my cup, but hesitate. This man is offering me a fortune. My eyes go from the cup to his face, and he gives me a nod. “Are you sure,” I ask, sounding a bit too timid.

“My friend, I don’t do anything I’m not sure of,” and he starts pouring. In the quiet of the pour, I notice for the first time the hustle and bustle just outside the thin door separating us from the denizens of the Redoubt. Children and delivery people and other everyday workers. Yuri’s hideout is in plain sight somewhere.

“I’ve been outside. I’ve looked the beasts of the earth in the eyes. You don’t have to worry about my safety. I am, on the other hand, going to give you a chance to finish that cup of coffee as friends, talking about anything and everything, other than what you’ve asked... unless you ask again.”

“I am authorized as government attache on the inquiry on the status, conditions and causes of Redoubt life. Of course I think there are things I do not know, but I do not think there are things that I am not allowed to know or uncover in this inquiry.” For a brief moment Yuri looks taken aback, my words carrying a bit too much naivete for him to bear.

We sat for a moment more in silence. I broke it. “Please, tell me what you know.” He thumped his fingers rhythmically on the desk metal for a few seconds, took a sip of his coffee.

“Okay. Okay. I think the most immediately surprising thing is that there are in fact people on the outside. We are told that everyone is dead. That there is no one else. That’s not true. There aren’t many, but we have encountered them, and the ones we have are mad as hatters. Not quite human any more, I would argue, but biologically so nevertheless.”

I took a beat processing this. How could anyone survive out in the blasted wastes? A sun that doesn’t quite shine, everything covered in dust and ash, and the demons...

“It was a surprise to us as well, the first time we encountered anyone. There were three of them, fighting over a dog’s corpse. They caught scent of us, like they were animals, and tracked us for a while before we managed to make an escape. They community mostly in angry grunts, and looked the wear of the wastes. We’ve had several encounters. They are not common, but not unheard of either. And it’s always the same, not quite human. Some weird uncanny valley of a former human.”

“How? How can anyone live out there?”

“Why with great difficulty, I imagine. But there they are. Everyone knows about the demons, or monsters or whatever word you want to use. It’s important to make people aware to keep them from wanting to go outside, but less so with people. Some may get the idea to go looking for loved ones. Doesn’t matter that there wouldn’t be anything of that loved one left, even if they found the living body, they may go anyway.”

“You think that’s why the government doesn’t acknowledge this?”

He shrugs, “Don’t know. Makes sense to me though.”

“What else?”

“Things are different out there. In ways people wouldn’t expect. Like the laws of physics itself breaks down here and there. There are weird pockets, anomalies, and very little that distinguishes them to the eyes, but step into one and you might rapidly age a few years before you step back out, or lose memories the longer you stay, or even yet, relive a single event over an over while standing totally still to an outside observer until someone, hopefully, knocks you off your place. There are places where a path appears straight to the eye, but following it always leads back to where you started in some strange loop. I mean, there is a lot of weird out there. I could keep you here for days.”

“And how did stalkers manage to learn all of this?”

“A lot of deaths. A lot of close calls. Not for nothing, but like I said, I’m one of three retired stalkers. It’s why we offer a deal with every member – you go out there and come back with an order, you get your pay. You go out and you don’t come back, we make sure your family

is looked after. It's a lot easier to risk it all if you know the reason you're taking the risk to begin with won't shoulder your loss."

A quiet moment passes for all those dead.

"And have you found anything out there that can help explain what happened, why the world changed?"

He laughs. "No, nothing, though you don't want to get me started on my crazy theories..."

He clearly knows I do, but wants to be goaded. "I absolutely do."

"Language is a technology. A tool. It allows for knowledge accumulation, propagation, and coordination. It allows us to build conceptualizations about the world. All great things, these metaphors give us. But I think something happened at some point. Things stopped meaning what we thought they were supposed to mean. Some breakdown in shared understanding that itself broke reality down. I don't have any evidence of this. Just a gut feeling, and all those strange reality bubbles outside."

He sips his coffee. "Like I said, crazy."

"I've heard crazier inspired by less," and my words send him into another laughing fit.

"'Crazier inspired by less', I love that." Another moment of silence passes between us as his laughing peters out. "It's a strange time here. There is some sense of terrible change in the air. Surely you feel it too."

I took a moment to consider this. "I don't know about 'terrible change', but it definitely feels like there is some urgency to everything. Like there is some invisible deadline everyone is working against."

"Yeah, something like that. I think the election is part of it. I think so many people are sick and tired. They just want something drastic, anything really, to happen and change how we've been living."

"And you think this election will bring that?"

"Well, look. Between you and me, most of us stalkers are mostly, if not perfectly, rational people. But we've had the current government, or something much resembling it, for well-nigh seventy years now, if you don't count the non-stop emergency of the period when the Redoubt was first taking shape. We've reached a baseline of safety, but the trade-off has also been a slow decline in belief that we, or our children, will ever get out of here. The government in all of its focus on survival and understanding, somewhere also forgot that life has to be about hope. People are angry, living confined lives in darkness. This can't go on forever, and left with no other options, sometimes one thinks destroying the system may lead to something new."

"Are you saying that you and other stalkers are Amy Amalric supporters," a little amused, but trying not to show it.

"Yeah, I know what you're thinking. Look, we're not zealots. At least not most of us, but sometimes you have to accept that what we're currently doing isn't working, that we should try something new, and now.. Insanity, doing the same thing, expecting different outcomes."

"I spoke to someone recently that said that oftentimes progress is being made even when it looks like we're standing still, and that it's easy for us to take what we cannot immediately see for granted. It's an idea that keeps returning to."

“Maybe. And change isn’t always good, even when we want it to be. I guess we’ll find out soon enough either w-” His words were interrupted by an intense rumble – like a long thunder unfurled just beyond the doors. Our chairs shook, and we locked eyes in alarm.

“I think it’s time for us to get you back to the world of the everyday,” He stood up, walked a few feet to the left wall, and thumped it three times with his closed fist, then turned back to me. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” I offered, a bit shook up. “Do you know what that was?”

“No, but I have a guess.” And just then the steel door behind us opened. The goggles-wearing teenager stood there with the cart, terrified. He looked from Yuri to me, then popped open the panel for me to enter.

“It was a pleasure meeting with you,” Yuri offered me his hand, and I rose to shake it. “Rog will give you a means of contacting me if you wish to talk again. For now I think it best if he returns you to quarters.”

“Thank you.” And just then, another rumble, more distant, but with the door open, it could also more clearly be recognized for what it was. An explosion. I steadied myself on the back of the chair, but Rog was impatiently waving me into the cart. I climbed in, and the world went dark.

6.

There was screaming, wailing, anguish and pain in that darkness. There were stampeding sounds, and chaos. And throughout, breaking through any lull, the furious squeaks of the wheels that carried me home. Rog had lost his gentleness. We were moving fast with turns taken sharply. My head thumped the sides here and there as we turned, my backside nearing numbness from the thumps and bumps along the way. Whatever sector we were passing through was in chaos. And then I heard it: the high-pitched, whining, sucking sound of a breach. The explosion opened the sector to the outside.

And the cart was roughly tugged, I lurched forward, slamming my face into the opposite side of the cart, as we turned, and with even greater speeds, Rog took us away, through some other route.