

Arthur: Section 1

Night's Shoulder

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

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

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

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

The flow of warm air from the day side of Lycaea had begun to ebb as autumn crept up on the city. It brought frigid winds off the dark wastes to the west and fresh gripes about aching knees from old men sat outside apartment blocks. It was going to be a bad winter, they said, but they always said that. Arthur rubbed at his eyes, before closing them and tipping his head back. He breathed in deeply, held it for a moment, and then exhaled, trying to find the words that would tame the feelings bubbling in his gut.

A peal of laughter echoed out from the street below. Arthur opened his eyes and looked down. A man and woman stumbled through the pools of weak orange light cast by the rows of street lamps. She was laughing at something he'd said. Arthur watched as the man hooked his arm around her waist and pulled her in for a kiss. She cried out a protest and playfully pushed him off. They disappeared into an alley, swallowed by the night. Silence fell once more, save for the hiss and hum of ambient industry.

The sound of rustling sheets came from the apartment behind him, followed by the soft sound of bare feet on carpet. The figure of a woman appeared in the balcony doorway. Arthur didn't turn.

"Money is on the table," Arthur murmured.

She didn't move.

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

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

He took a moment before responding.

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

"You've changed your mind, haven't you?" she asked.

"Yeah, I think I have," Arthur said after a moment, looking down.

A hint of sadness touched mouth, and she turned to leave. After a single step she topped, lingering in the doorway with her back to Arthur.

"Am I going to see you again?" she asked, her voice a soft whisper.

"No."

Out of the corner of his eye, Arthur saw her flinch. A heavy stillness grew in the space between their turned backs. Arthur sighed and dropped his shoulders slightly.

"Why do you still try, Alex?"

"Because I believe in you, Arthur. I haven't forgotten two years ago, how you used to be."

Arthur didn't respond. The sincerity in her voice threatened to light a spark of doubt in the dry kindling of Arthur's resolve. She turned to face him, taking a step closer.

"Arthur, please... It doesn't have to be like this. I can help you."

Stamping out the optimistic spark, Arthur turned his face away from Alex until her figure was just a shadowy blur in his eye's corner.

"Alex, no. Don't kid yourself. You're not wanted here. Tonight was a mistake, nothing more."

She started. Her shoulders bobbed as a choking laugh slipped out of her tense body.

"Why can't you just let me help you?" she asked, her voice hoarse. "You're going to die, all on your own in this shitty apartment, you know that, right?"

Arthur slowly nodded.

"Yeah, I do," he said, voice catching a little. He raised his hand to his neck and gently massaged it. Then, clearing his throat into his arm, he continued, speaking slowly as he thought through his words. "That's why I figured... may as well enjoy a cheap fuck before I go."

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

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

"Yeah," Arthur whispered back, his face slack. In the wet mirrors of Alex's eyes, Arthur saw the reflection of his own sin.

Alex paused, inhaling a deep breath full of tension and fury, and then punched him in the gut. He crumpled to his knees, soon to be sent to the floor by a follow up kick to the stomach. She left him on the ground, disappearing into the darkness of the apartment. All Arthur heard from the cold floor was the click of the door. Shortly after, her footsteps echoed out on the concrete of the street below as she strode off into the night. Once silence returned, he staggered to his feet. He bent over to pick up his cigarette, relighting it and returning to his spot leaning on the railing. Arthur brushed ash off his leg. The hot cinders had left a small patch of singed hair that crumbled away at his touch.

A wall of dark clouds was beginning to roll across the sky from the west, bringing with it a cool wind and the smell of rain. As Arthur watched the easterly gusts bend the spires of steam rising from the factory towers into swaying streams, he was struck by the sensation that what he was looking at was just an illusion. He wondered why he'd said those things to Alex, why he still got up to go to work in the evening, why the universe had ordained that he would live and live here and now. It all suddenly felt so queer and insignificant, and the dark sky before Arthur seemed to shimmer and ripple like a sheet in the breeze. But then the cool autumn wind touched his cheeks and he tumbled back into the reality of his illusionary life. Arthur rubbed the side of his face with a hand, clearing away the fatigue and pushing his thoughts back out of sight, turning his mind back to the monotonous grey skyline. Once he'd found the cityscape appealing in its own way, seeing a certain *grandiosity* in it, an elegance behind the lines of the skyscrapers and elevated light-rails. Now, it just felt bleak. Some folks said that things had gotten worse in the ten years since the Union had purchased the planet from the Yangtse Corporation. Arthur didn't have an opinion on it.

Arthur spat over the edge to clear out the taste of ash that had been building in his mouth. He massaged his neck and coughed shallowly to clear his throat. Cigarettes in the working districts were cheap, typically made from synthetic tobacco with origins in low-tech organised crime labs. They burned in the throat hideously, but imported alternatives were scarce and expensive.

A crack split the night air. The shockwave sent ripples through the clouds above, as if some god had dropped a giant pebble into the sky. Faint streams of golden light shone from behind the thick layer of grey clouds, emanating from the epicentre of the ripples. The streams snaked out across the sky, their luminosity ebbing as they spread throughout the night. Arthur watched as one dipped below the clouds, casting the industrial stacks and metal scaffolding beneath it in a shimmering golden radiance. They were The Winds, the energy locked in the underbelly of the universe now seeping through to the material plane. An enormous hunk of metal slowly sunk through the clouds over the docks on the north bay, an intergalactic freight ship delivering supplies to the colony from the greater galaxy.

Arthur watched the metal leviathan descend with a mix of resignation and dread. The freighter had arrived two days earlier than expected, which meant that his factory's production schedules would now be put under even greater strain. The thought of the long shifts and stressed supervisors the rest of his week would hold lodged a queasy feeling into the pit of his stomach. He took one last pull

from the roach of his cigarette and flicked it off the edge of the balcony. It sent out little sparks of hot ash as it spun. With scarcely a thought his slip of papers appeared in his hand while the other dug out his pouch of tobacco. He felt a twinge of annoyance at the unintended reaction, but it quickly faded. He had tried quitting, but it never lasted. The balcony filled with light once more as Arthur lit his next cigarette.

The roar of distant engines drifted across on the breeze as the freighter finalised its descent. Too large for conventional docking, it opted to land on the water in the bay. The hulking cargo cranes covering the water's edge had begun to fire into action, supported by smaller freight craft that were now rising from the warehouses along the coast.

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

Arthur awoke to the sound of rain. The clouds he had watched blow in last night had settled over the city to deliver a steady downpour. From his bed, he could see that the city outside the window was shrouded in the mist of rain. The suns had set and the last hints of scarlet could be seen touching the western clouds, framing the skyscrapers against a pastel sky of navy-grey flecked with red. Arthur slipped out of bed, wincing as the movement irritated his bruised ribs, and dressed into his work overalls. He'd slept poorly, his troubled mind granting him just three hours of fitful rest. He slid open the balcony door and breathed in the cool air of the sodden city. Arthur always thought the character of a place could be taken from the smell of its rain. In the warmer cities to the east, they said you could smell the fresh soil, in the mountains to the north it smelt of woods, grasses and flowers. In Eridu the rain smelt of concrete and dust.

The balcony door of the flat next door rattled and his neighbour, a well-built and attractive man in his thirties named Ollie, stepped out into the rain, fully naked. He held his arms out wide and raised his head to the sky. The droplets impacting on his skin coated his shoulders in a fine mist. Arthur watched him quizzically from his balcony door. He wanted to slink back into his apartment, but worried it'd create an awkward situation if Ollie saw. After a few seconds soaking in the rain, Ollie began to wash himself, starting by rubbing under his armpits and across his toned stomach. He

hopped from one foot to the other, presumably reacting to the cold, laughing gaily. Some way through his routine, he noticed Arthur. Ollie stopped cleaning himself, grinned, and raised a hand in greeting.

“Mornin’ mate,” Ollie said, leaning against the railing closest to Arthur. “You just get in from work?”

Arthur shook his head. “Heading out,” he replied.

“Ah yeah, you’re one of those perma-night workers hey. You’ve gotta look after yourself then mate, have some fun and all that. Get real depressed otherwise.” Ollie paused, and then smiled slyly.

“Though from what I heard through the wall last night, you might’ve got yourself some fun, eh?”

Arthur opened his mouth to respond, but hesitated. Instead, he shrugged noncommittally. Ollie laughed.

“That’s how it be sometimes, I ‘spose.”

“Would you stop flashing the whole city?” an annoyed voice called out from the apartment behind Ollie. He grinned and winked at Arthur.

“Love Jess to bits, but she just doesn’t get it,” he said. Arthur wondered what there was to ‘get’ about this situation, but he held his tongue. “Well then mate, see you around.”

Ollie returned to his apartment, and after a moment Arthur did the same, closing the balcony door behind him so that the rain didn’t wet the floor. Arthur’s apartment was small, a narrow room with just enough space for an undersized bed and cramped kitchen counter. Showers and toilets were in a communal block down the hall. It was peak hour, with the twilight-shift workers coming home and night workers heading out and seeing as Arthur didn’t feel quite as bold as Ollie, washing was out of the question. Besides, on a good day only half the showers would be hot. The weather called for a coat or umbrella, but Arthur had neither on hand. He was not particularly bothered. The station was only a short walk away, and he figured the rain might wash off the layer of ash and sweat coating much of his body, even if the rain itself was far from clean.

He took the last two slices of bread from the bag on the counter, picked his hardhat up off the floor, and undid the door’s lock. He lingered for a moment, looking back into the shadowy mess of empty bottles and discarded clothes. The money from last night still sat on the counter. Shoving a slice of bread into his mouth, he turned and walked out the door.

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

“Arthur mate! Hold up.”

A teenager in grimy clothes and an equally dirty mess of curly hair ran up to him, a gap-toothed grin plastered across his face.

"I saw some chick leaving your place this morning. She didn't look so happy," he said with a cheeky wink.

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

"Come on Arthur, fill us in."

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

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

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

"Mind your own damn business dickhead," Arthur said angrily, jerking his arm free and striding off towards the atrium doors. Jasper tailed at his side, slipping through the gaps in the stream of oncoming workers, following him out the doors and into the downpour.

"Hey, maybe you could get me some, you know? Sort me out with a source and all that. See, I know this girl, real cute, yeah? Maybe we could sort something out? You know, I scratch your back, you scratch mine or sometin'."

"No."

Jasper was unphased. He moved in front of Arthur, backpedalling one step ahead as he continued his pitch.

"Alright, alright. I get it, you've got your pride or whatever. How about cash, plain and simple, no bullshit."

"Fuck off."

Jasper stopped in his tracks, scratching his head. Arthur continued walking, stepping around him and out onto the asphalt of the street.

"Just think about it, yeah? Let me know!" Jasper called out from behind. Arthur didn't respond. When Arthur was safely out of earshot, Jasper hacked up and spat a thick gob of phlegm onto the wet pavement. He wiped his wet hair out of his eyes and muttered:

"Dickhead."

Arthur took the 8:48 South-Line train from Station 8. His carriage was packed with grim-faced industrial workers but was quiet, save for the clattering of the rails and the sound of rain on the metal roof. Arthur recognised several of the workers, exchanging nods where appropriate, but nothing more, instead opting to watch the passing rooftops through the rain-speckled windows.

When the doors opened, some of the workers slipped on their helmets to save their hair from the rain. Arthur's was already soaked, so he didn't bother. The station was simple, two dirty concrete platforms walled off by chain-link fences, with one toll gate per side. The suns had fully set, and the two lamps on the platform provided insufficient light, creating an oppressive darkness that hung heavily over the station. A heavyset older man in stained high-vis and work boots sat against the wall of one of the corrugated tin shelters that were scattered along the platform. He had a shaved head and plentiful stubble on his wrinkled face. On spotting Arthur, his face morphed into a broad smile.

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

"Yeah alright Gus. You know how it is," Arthur said as he stepped under the cover of the tin shelter, wiping sodden strands of hair out of his eyes. Gus's handshake was crushing, and Arthur couldn't help but wince. Noticing his discomfort, Gus gave a hearty laugh and whacked him on the back.

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

"Speaking of, yer looking thinner than usual. Them some nasty bags under ya' eyes too. You been getting enough food mate?"

Arthur forced a reassuring smile.

"Don't fret on it Gus. Just a rough week. Bad sleep is all."

Gus eyed him closely.

"Well, let me know if there's anything I can do to help, 'specially with grub. Mary and the kids would love to have you over for dinner sometime. M' sure we can fix you up something decent."

"I wouldn't want to be a pain..."

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

"You've done plenty for me since then, Gus."

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

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

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

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

Gus laughed and slapped Arthur on the back.

“Just yourself mate. You absolute beauty. I’m getting a bit excited now.”