

SVENIA HAUSWIRTH

The Chronicles of a Lost People



Atreus Crane is the one who destroyed my home country. He seized power when we were at our lowest, suffering from the sickness and abandoned by our international allies. Due to him, we have lived under complete surveillance for the better part of a quarter-century. I am considered one of the lucky ones because I got to see the day the regime fell. I don't feel lucky. The extent of our suffering was so great I doubt our country can ever fully recover.

This is not a story of triumph. This is a recounting of loss and heart-wrenching desperation. This is the story of how we failed, of the time we crowned the incarnation of evil and were led to slaughter. This cautionary tale can never be forgotten lest the sins committed be repeated.

I wish it had happened differently. I wish I could tell you how we overcame adversity when it mattered most and set aside our differences because surely if there ever were a time to do that, it would have been then. But that would be a disservice to the people and country I dearly miss, and already, there have been attempts made to soften the truth, to hide the wrongs committed against my people. We have been silenced for long enough, and we have not forgotten how you ignored our suffering. We don't trust you. I don't trust you to tell our story. Your inaction doesn't reflect well upon your leaders' characters. What happened to us is, at least in its duration, partially your fault. You might have taken up the role of the liberators when you occupied our country after Crane's death, but we remember. We remember how you trapped us within our borders and refused us aid when we needed it most.

You are not our heroes. We haven't suffered all these years just for you to ignore our voices again. What happened to us is not something you are allowed to diminish. Let me be the voice of the voiceless. Let me remind you of the suffering you have so callously turned your back on.

CHAPTER 01

Isolde Nightingale



The Justice Seeker

I died slowly over a span of months, but when I noticed, it was already too late. I used to be proud of myself, of the person I was. I am not anymore. How could I be after all I have done? I knew it was getting to me. The sickness and instability had made us all a bit too twitchy. However, I didn't realize just how much I had changed. It wasn't an instant shift; it was very gradual. I didn't use to be a violent person. I couldn't even watch a horror movie without having nightmares. Not that the nightmares ever stopped, their fodder just became my memories. Still, I could never have imagined that I could become someone who would pick up a rock and hurl it at a friend with murderous intent. I am horrified at myself. The justice seekers have twisted me into someone I can't stand to look at. I say they as if it is all their fault, but really, a better person wouldn't have allowed themselves to be twisted in the fashion I was. I suppose that doesn't matter anymore. After all, I am dying not in mind but body this time, the border I sought to escape over like a mockery I will never actually cross now. I'm sure I'll be one of the countless left unremembered, and maybe that is what I deserve. It's not like the person I have become is worth remembering anyway. I suppose at least I will have peace. Peace, what a foreign concept that has become.

This descent, I mention, had its origin several months ago, shortly after the initial outbreak. I suppose patient zero himself was a curious case. It all started with an unremarkable pensioner by the name of Alexander Hirst. The collapse of an elder in the middle of Main Square would normally not have caused much of a stir. However, seeing a man unexpectedly start to bleed from all his orifices and consequently pass out does make for quite the hor-

rific disturbance to an otherwise perfectly pleasant afternoon. He passed from blood loss soon after, and the sheer gruesomeness of his death was, of course, cause for concern. Especially when he did not remain the only one to expire in such a fashion. By the time I returned from my unsuccessful business trip two weeks later, the two parkgoers who had attended Hirst and seven of the personnel at Crane Memorial Hospital, too, had started to bleed uncontrollably. An atmosphere of panic had festered, and general uneasiness regarding the spread of a potential disease had set in.

It was precisely this panic and the disturbing symptoms of what was agreed to be a new and terrifying virus that led to the falling through of the deal I was supposed to close.

“You see,” the negotiator of the travel agency told me, “I doubt anyone would want to vacation in your country’s capital district any time soon. The horror moviesque deaths do pose quite the effective deterrent.”

I grimaced, he was right, of course.

“And,” he added, cringing, “can you imagine how irresponsible we would look to our clients? I mean, how would we even advertise this? ‘Top prices for magical city resorts with a high possibility of experiencing your favorite horror movie death yourself.’ I think not. You understand the position we find ourselves in. We may be able to reconsider a deal like this in the future, but right now, the only sensible option left to us is to decline it decisively.”

This was not something I could have argued against. His stance was reasonable. I, too, would have balked at the idea of purposefully risking death in order to go on vacation. In fact, prior to the meeting, I had contemplated not returning home for a while myself. Lacking the funds and the visa for an extended stay abroad, I had sadly been forced to discard the notion.

“I quite understand the impasse we find ourselves in. Al-

though I am confident the Department of Health will get a handle on the issue with post-haste. Dare I suggest reconvening towards the end of this year?"

Luckily, he agreed to my proposal, albeit a bit skeptical. It was the best I could've hoped for. The only other path would have been to discredit the popular belief of it being a virus and instead claim it to be biowarfare, which, apart from being completely unfounded, would imply terrorism. A strategy that would arguably have gone over worse.

Even though the meeting had concluded with the best outcome possible, I was now faced with the imminent threat of unemployment looming in my future. This had been the first deal I was allowed to take the lead on, and my boss, a sexist old white man, was unlikely to take kindly to my failure.

Somehow, that wasn't the most pressing issue I faced. No, that spot went to being stranded in the hellscape that constitutes the city-state's only public airport due to Laurel canceling on me. My other housemate, Anne, wasn't home either, so I resigned myself to taking the metro. To do so, I would have to wait another two hours because some brainless idiot had decided armed robbery of a metro wagon was the quickest way of getting cash. It occurred to me then that Main Street Station might actually be cursed. How else could one explain this exact scenario occurring on two additional occasions in the last five weeks alone?

Just as I was contemplating how much money such a robbery could even yield, I heard a muted thump and several exclamations of sheer panic. I desperately prayed for it only to have been part of my overactive imagination. But of course, I had no such luck and was, therefore, only moderately surprised upon seeing a generous splatter of blood covering the glass divider in front of me.

"Fuck."

If this turned out to be what I expected it to be, I should probably take my leave right about now. I had just picked up my bags and turned towards the nearest exit to do exactly that when the airport sirens started to screech incessantly.

“Attention, everyone!” the announcement began, “We have initiated lockdown protocol due to a passenger having been found infected. All flights are now delayed indefinitely. We request you all to remain calm as the situation is under control.”

As if to prove the last statement, medical personnel in hazmat suits arrived and took away the blood-covered young woman, who apparently had collapsed mere meters in front of me. God bless glass dividers, I thought. Imagine where I would be if that hadn’t been there.

In a matter of minutes, nothing but the fearful atmosphere remained of the horror that had just taken place. This was not even close to how I expected my Sunday to pass. Compartmentalization was about the only reason I was not a crying mess presently. When I got home, that was going to change. Right, I should leave. I was, however, again interrupted by a further announcement.

“According to the stipulations of the Department of Health, this airport has been put under a three-day quarantine. We thank you for your cooperation and understanding. Further information will be communicated as soon as possible.”

Well, that was not great. Currently, the probability of me having been infected was low, considering I had been out of the country for the last week. If, however, I was forced to stay in close proximity to a considerable amount people and use the same seating areas and restrooms as they did for the next three days, the risk to my health and life would skyrocket. And it was not only my life I had to be concerned for, no, once I returned to the apartment, Laurel and Anne would be in danger too. This was a very undesirable situation to be in.

Why couldn't we just return home and be remanded to quarantine there? I suppose it would be easier to confirm that nobody broke quarantine this way. Nevertheless, this heightened the risk of infection unnecessarily. Did they intend for us to die?

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I do have my moments of foolishly brave stupidity, deciding against returning home in order to protect my housemates decisively counts as one of them. Especially considering we were supposed to continue quarantining there for another week. I had at first intended to stay at a motel for that duration of time and then return home, but that was made an impossibility by the government urging the media to depict photos of those dodging quarantine. Apparently, my actions would end in either a hefty fine, which I could not hope to pay, or, more likely, jail time. Wonderful, I had no idea what I could do to get myself out of this mess. Maybe death would claim before I had to figure it out. There was, after all, a moderately high chance that I now was one of the infected.

This made me effectively homeless, and I couldn't return to my apartment unless I decided to face the authorities because there was no way I would put my housemates in trouble for harboring a criminal. I never actually considered I would become a criminal, especially not for something as idiotic as this.

The plan, as I called my three exceedingly obvious next steps, was to buy a tent, find an abandoned area, and wait until the infection risk was minimal at best. As it turned out, putting up a tent was more difficult than I had imagined. Most of the difficulty was likely due to my inability to see in the dark since finding an abandoned area had proved practically impossible.

So, this might seem quite obvious, but I didn't have the furthest clue on how to survive in the wilderness. Even the slightest noise of the woods I had found myself in terrified me, which is why my reaction to the group of people who stumbled across my

hideout was not dignified in any shape or form. I must have made for quite the sight, brandishing a rather unwieldy slab of wood and with my hair sticking to the high heavens, but somehow, they still welcomed me. And for a time, life was better.

We mostly stayed at an old junkyard belonging to a member of their group. They offered me food, and once I had shared my reasoning for camping out in the woods, they complimented me for my quick thinking and willingness to sacrifice myself to keep others safe. This made me feel rather validated, and more often than not, I chimed in with my thoughts about the current situation, which seemed to be a recurring topic of theirs.

With time, it became easier to reason that I was fine where I was and that returning home would only cause more trouble. Sure, this was not the path I would have decided on if I had other options, but I figured we were facing something close to the end times. I mean, I wasn't that religious or anything, but this admittedly was horrible enough that calling it divine retribution seemed about right. I wasn't as convinced of this as Father Jacob was with his nightly declarations of:

“God has come to punish us for our sins. May the sickness purge us of our wrongdoers and let the innocents triumph.”

I wasn't sure about that, after all, I knew how infections spread, and that wasn't how that worked, but everyone needed something to cling to, I supposed. It wasn't like his beliefs harmed anyone. I kept my distance from him anyway.

In Amicus, on the other hand, I found a friend. He had fled his home after his sisters had been infected and had miraculously remained healthy. When I asked him about what they were like, he always got this misty, far-off look in his eyes and wouldn't answer. He oftentimes seemed angry, though not at me, more at the general state of things, which I could sympathize with. Otherwise, he was rather charming, and I enjoyed listening to him talk.

Amicus was one of my only outside contacts and belonged to the minority of us who still worked and, therefore, had access to the news. What he told me was troubling. The government didn't seem to do much apart from declaring Emergency Status to initiate a lockdown of everything nonessential, and the death toll seemed to rise exponentially. No one even knew to what sort of virus strain the sickness belonged. A vaccination or cure seemed infinitely out of reach.

"These are uncertain times," he told me. "They have no clue what they're doing, and internationally, they won't send any aid. Just stationed soldiers at the borders, but that's not going to help us, is it?"

He was right; foreign powers had given up on us, but that wasn't anything new either. When the Dalton Bank had gone under two years ago, pleas for help were similarly left unanswered, even though eighty percent of the people had had their accounts there. It had been up to Crane to fix it, and the poorer families still faced a near insurmountable financial burden. There were many more examples Amicus and I discussed, but it was safe to say neither of us expected to be saved by the outsiders.

One day, and I remember it very vividly, he came to the junkyard fuming and furiously exclaimed while pacing:

"They have lost it, how else is this to be explained? Instead of doing anything useful, they decide to do this. How is marking the houses of the infected with an X going to help anyone? It's not like we're allowed to visit anyone anyway."

"Oh, as if this is the first ineffective thing they've done recently." Markus heckled, raising his beer. He had already had a few too many.

"What, I am right, first they bring those cameras as if having eyes everywhere could help us. Now, it's the Xs, what's next?"

They're going to chip us like dogs? Should look for a cure, is what they should. But are they, sure as hell doesn't seem like it." he slurred.

He wasn't wrong, and we were all angry, mostly because we were so afraid. This is the part I am not sure about, we all ended up drinking too much that night, which is how most of our nights had ended lately. What I know is this: by the end of it, we had decided that if neither the government nor the outsiders were going to help us, we needed to do it ourselves. We were to be called the justice seekers, and because the only substantial thing we could do to eradicate the sickness was to call attention to it, we had decided to smash in the windows of one of the X-marked houses. Considering the cuts I woke up with, I could reliably say that I had participated happily. The worst thing about it was that I wasn't ashamed of it. I was proud; we had finally done something. Surely, making them see how the infected hurt us normal people would make them understand that they, the government, needed to act. Nothing changed, so we continued our retribution against those who threatened our society. The media called us *violent*, *thugs*, and *a danger to society*. How couldn't they see that this was the only way? The infected didn't deserve our pity when they were ruining us.

"Maybe," I cautiously brought up to Amicus one night, "maybe, if there is no cure to the sickness, we have to find another way of eradicating it. I mean, if I caught it, I would want to end it, wouldn't you?"

"Yes." He agreed, "Once they're infected, it's more mercy than anything. From what I know, as soon as they show symptoms, cognitive functions decline rapidly, they just suffer."

"They shouldn't have to. We could help both them and us if we ended it. They wouldn't suffer anymore, and we wouldn't get sick."

It's possible I started the talk of the culling. I don't know.

Perhaps it's what we all thought. Times were hard, and people were dying anyway. Maybe if we did something, less had to die. It didn't seem likely that the government would find a solution to the epidemic anytime soon. We were all just so tired of the state of things. And yet, it would be a while still before we started acting on these calls and took up arms against the infected.

"And somehow, it's again Doctor Crane who does more for the people than the government itself. With the test kits, we at least know who's actually sick," I said.

"Yes, but the government wants to use them to track everyone's movements. I don't like the idea of that, do you?" Markus interrupted.

"Well, it's not like that's going to affect you, anyway," Amicus retorted.

Here they went again. Markus blustered about how it wasn't his fault he was unemployed and how Amicus had no right pretending to be any better than him after what he had done to his sisters. I tried asking Markus about it once, in one of his more sober moments, but he only said:

"Girly, if he didn't tell you, I certainly won't. There's a reason we don't talk about it."

Later, when we didn't care about such moral compunctions as murder anymore, he told me that he had shot them.

"They were going to die anyway, weren't they? This way was easier."

And that was that. Talk of how Crane was the only one actually helping us common folk persisted, especially after the early December fiasco when the government decided to end the lockdown after a time of near to no new infections, and it horribly backfired and ended in several hundred dead. As if that wasn't exactly

what Crane, the virology expert, had predicted would happen. Why was the government so criminally useless? During that time, talk of culling the infected returned with a fervor previously unmatched, before, it had been purely hypothetical, but now there was too much anger for us not to be serious about what we called for.

“Hear me, justice seekers! It is God who has burdened us with the responsibility of ending the wicked. Their souls may yet be saved, but only if we cleanse them by fire.”

Father Jacob went about it more religiously than most of us would have, but we were united by the sentiment of his words anyway. That night, we set out for blood. Well, that was maybe a poor choice of words considering the situation, but it captured the savagery of what we committed perfectly. The screams of the dying and horror of the onlookers seemed to invigorate us, and not even law enforcement chasing after us could stop us.

“Justice prevails. *We* are Justice,” we shouted at them.

It was glorious. We felt unstoppable. Finally, we were doing something. We were saving ourselves, the people. How come they couldn’t see the truth of what we did? We weren’t *domestic terrorists* or *violent insurrectionist thugs*. Admittedly, Markus convincing us to throw Molotov Cocktails at Council Hall was perhaps a bit much, but we were eradicating the scourge of society. We were doing good. We were the justice seekers. We would make them see that we were right, it was just a matter of time. And could what we did even rightfully be called murder? The deaths of those infected had only been a matter of time. There was mercy in what we gave them. Death by fire was far more dignified compared to what the sickness would have made of them. We were justified, and everyone would soon come to see things our way.

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Then everything unraveled. Amicus got sick. He must have got it from someone at work. Never before had one of our own been infected, especially not someone most of us saw as our unofficial leader. What were we supposed to do when our usual response to the infected was justified murder? It was easy when we didn't know them. We didn't even have to look at them when we lit their houses on fire. This was different; it was personal. We reasoned he would die anyway; it wasn't like they had found a cure in the meantime, but this was Amicus we were talking about. Amicus, who was a friend to all of us. Amicus, who would bring me strawberries just because I had once told him I liked them. Amicus, who I jokingly had called my older brother. He was the only one I had left, the only one I really cared about anymore. I couldn't do this, could I? I knew I was selfish, but I didn't want to lose him. On the other hand, he told me what he did for his sisters, and I was sure he was convinced he helped them. I wanted to help him, too. It's what I would've wanted, I reasoned.

They wouldn't allow me to say goodbye. The only time I saw him sick was when they brought him in front of us at gunpoint. He was pleading with them not to do this, that he was their friend. I cried then because I was certain he was already too far gone to be in his right mind.

"We talked about this, remember," I cried heartbrokenly, "Amicus, we agreed that we would want it ended if we ever got sick. We're going to save you. It's all going to be alright."

"Isolde, what are you doing? This is not what I meant. I am your friend. We don't do this to friends! Please, you have to stop them," he screamed, and he, too, was crying, some of his tears, however, were just a bit too bloody.

"I am sorry," I choked out, and I was.

This was not how I wanted things between us to end. I steeled myself and picked up a rock. He saw my resolve, too.

“Please, I’ll leave. I won’t come back. I’ll go somewhere into the woods. You all won’t see me again. Please, just don’t do this.”

His begging was useless. I did what I needed to do and threw the rock. It hit his shoulder with a sickening crack. I turned away; this was too much. I couldn’t see him die. If I ran now, I would never have to know. If I ran now, I could pretend that he wasn’t dead.

I heard the shot just as I reached the fence that bordered the junkyard. It stopped me dead in my tracks, and I screamed. I was alone. There was no one left to me. No one I cared about was still alive. Amicus, my brother, was dead.

“Oh God, what have you done? God, why did you let me succumb to this insanity? Why do you hate me?”

I screamed and screamed till my voice gave out and my legs couldn’t support my weight anymore. No one came to check on me. Nobody cared, they were probably too drunk to do so. I never felt so utterly alone, and suddenly, I couldn’t do this anymore. I hated this country, and I had for a long while. I needed to get out. It was all I could think of. If only I could cross the border, everything would be alright. I could start over. I’d be free of the sickness, of the justice seekers and their cursed mentality. If only I could cross the border, then I would finally be free again.

And so, it was decided, this is what I would do. It was the only path forward. I did not care that there were foreign soldiers stationed at the border to prevent anyone from crossing over. It didn’t matter a lick how difficult this undertaking would be. I would cross the goddammed green border to the country over, or so help me God, I would die trying. Perhaps death was even the preferable outcome, at least wherever I ended up, I would see Amicus again. At least then, I wouldn’t be alone.

I was almost delirious from the frost when I reached the for-

est near the border. In a couple hundred meters, I would finally be free. I was ecstatic. I could hear owls hooting, even though their cries were almost cautious, they brought me joy. Such was life; happiness was found where one least expected.

It happened when I was within touching distance of the border stone. The first shot shattered my shoulder joint, the second, I didn't feel at all.

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Isolde Nightingale died on Christmas Eve, less than half a year after the initial outbreak. The picture taken for the incident report shows her lying on the forest floor, blood seeping in rivulets from a shoulder and a head wound staining the white snow in a bastardization of a halo. One outstretched hand reaches just beyond the official border. Freedom was in her grasp when she passed, even though she would never know it. She would not be the first nor the last refugee to be shot by a foreign military on the grounds of international fear. The strict international non-intervention policy prevented even humanitarian aid from entering the country. Fear of the sickness spreading was all-encompassing and used to justify denying the city-staters their humanity. Isolde Nightingale died for nothing. Her existence at least deserves to be remembered.

CHAPTER 02

Atreus Crane



The Triumphant Doctor

“Let us have a toast to a brighter future. Much has changed in the last decade, and our situation was most precarious for a while. Only through unity and trust has this state, our motherland, prospered. While it is true that we have faced hardships most other countries would have broken under, I am proud to stand here today, being able to truthfully claim that we have grown all the better for it. Even a few years back, this state was known as a failure. Crime ran rampant in its streets, and corruption was the norm. And then, of course, one cannot hope to forget the sickness that claimed so many of our brightest too early. And yet, it is easy to judge without understanding. It is easy to write off a whole nation instead of helping her people, which is naturally exactly what those proclaiming their own moral superiority did. We were most cruelly betrayed, my friends, but today, it is not those countries that have achieved the supposedly impossible. No, today, it is us who have embraced the future. It is our city-state that has taken on a new metric unique in its progressiveness. Tell me, where else can one survive based solely on their trustworthiness? And was it not they who proclaimed everyone had the right to succeed and attain a better life? If that were the case, how come we are the only country that has eradicated unemployment? Does a better life not entail stability? You must forgive an old man for his biases, but I truly believe that we are the best country by any metric, and I am convinced that everyone here will do their part to bring even further justice to our people. After all, it is you that I trust most out of everyone. Let us feast, and let us give back to our great country.”

There wasn't anything Atreus Crane hated more than the incessant simpering and brown-nosing the upper class displayed

during such festivities. It was what he had signed up for when he had first devised his plan to take over the country's leadership, but he just couldn't stand their insincerity. Once more, he fantasized about how much easier it would all be if he ended the charade of civility. Naturally, it was out of the question; the farce was the most important hurdle foreign powers faced when trying to discredit his leadership, but a man could dream.

He had done rather well for himself, he supposed. Crane had been born influential; it was his family name on most initiatives the average citizens relied on to survive. Crane Scholarships, Crane Foodbanks, Crane Credit, need he continue? Of course, there was Crane Industries as well, a pioneer in surveillance technology and medical equipment, the city-state's most prominent employer. Children grew up on tales of his family's benevolence. Was it a surprise then that he desired more of their adoration? He was entitled to it, was he not after all he did to help them? Without the Cranes, this country would be worthless.

It was, however, not a spoilt upbringing that had convinced him to go down this path. No, he believed, he would've been rather content to let the vultures tear themselves apart had it not been for a series of unfortunate tragedies that befell his family and nearly ended in their fall from grace.

First, their housekeeper's negligence and inattentiveness had resulted in his sweet Ophelia drowning in the well of their country estate. He had never felt more helpless in his life than when his father had rushed into the dining room carrying the lifeless form of his younger sister. There was nothing to be done, by the time he had found her, she had already been dead for several minutes. He had vowed to himself on that day that he would do anything to never feel helpless ever again. Years later, the housekeeper had been the first person he murdered. The man had forfeited his life when he had let his Ophelia drown. He was worthless.

Yet, it had not been her death that had been the point of no

return. That wretched spot belonged to the break-in that had ended with his mother bleeding out in his arms and his father despising him for being the one who survived. In his drunken stupor, he would alternate between lamenting how he couldn't save his precious daughter, how his beloved Aurelia had died far too young, and cursing his own son's existence.

"You hear that, boy; I didn't raise a coward. You were there when that gun-toting scoundrel broke into the house, and what did you do? You goddammed hid like the weakling you are. It should have been you, why couldn't it have been you? It is your fault she is gone, you hear, all your fault."

His father didn't know what he was speaking of. It wasn't like he had been there. No, that man went out drinking on Ophelia's death day like he usually did. They weren't even supposed to have been in the townhouse that night. Every year, they returned to the estate to mourn. It was unbecoming of a family like them to publicly show their grief, as his mother used to say. The only reason Aurelia Crane had been face-to-face with that filth of a man was because his father had valued his drink over his own family.

With his mother's death, his entire support system had broken down, and it became increasingly difficult to cajole his father into not ruining the Crane name with his drunken escapades. Was it all that surprising the resentment had built up over the years? He never could quite figure out who had murdered his mother, so his father was the only other person he could blame apart from himself.

The way it officially went down was this: while on the way to his son's virology PhD defense, Crane Sr. drove off a bridge and drowned. His blood contained lethal levels of alcohol and several pain medications; his death had only been a matter of time. A true tragedy.

What the public, of course, didn't know was that Crane had

started to drug his father with painkillers months before his death. He couldn't handle the nonstop barrage of insults and the sheer embarrassment of having to retrieve his drunk of a father from the local gentlemen's club every other night. It was a major hindrance to his plans, which is why he had orchestrated his death to occur during his defense. He then would return home and heartbreakingly find the corpse of his only remaining relative, report the death, and go on with his life. Admittedly, he never expected his father to attempt to show up to his defense, where he undoubtedly would've tried to start a fight, but it did make for quite the ironic tragedy.

Gathering followers was a smoother affair than he could've ever hoped for. Having built up his image through charity and the sheer omnipresence of his name, he was seen as something close to a saint. And when the seemingly sole politician who cared about them called, the people followed or felt at the very least compelled to hear him out. Truly, one might question what government would allow anyone to reach the level of influence he had. If he was a worse man, he could've crashed the entire economy without bankrupting himself, such was life when eighty percent of the population worked for you. But of course, he didn't do that, ruling over ruins was not his aim.

Now, as far as assuming control over a country goes, he could freely admit his method might have been one of the bloodiest. There surely would've been other ways for him to realize his desires, but he was a man of passion at heart. Why would he let his virology degree go to waste when human pathogens were just so fascinating? This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, when else would he get the chance to watch a plague at work nowadays if he didn't engineer it himself? And there truly isn't anything that unites a people more than a common foe. It is quite captivating to observe humans return to their base instinct of violence when threatened, and his weeping angels did such a perfect job of frightening the ants.

It had taken years to create the perfect strain. Oh, how he could still remember the first time it was at work. It was simply beautiful and had the appropriate horror moviesque tinge to it. Oh, how the pallidness of the skin contrasted with the wine-dark blood leaking from every single one of their orifices. Simply magnificent. Their increasingly erratic behavior, as their brain shut down, was marvelous. One truly could play God if one just knew how to combine viruses. His combination of the Marburg virus and a mutated Parvovirus truly was something to behold. Once infected, the victim became unable to produce blood effectively, which in itself, if left untreated, would end in a slow death. His creation truly was a thing of beauty. There is a reason why early iterations of the news called it the bleeding sickness, and that is because the victim's cause of death was blood loss.

A nightmare to behold, it caused fear and mass panic. Quite politically expedient, if he dared say so himself. He was, after all, the city-state's only expert in epidemiology. It would've been quite remiss of the Council to not immediately hire him as a consultant. Dismissing him truly wouldn't have gone well for the already unpopular administration. You could only make so many elitist comments before the predominately poor population came to see you as out of touch. And to think the epidemic started with a single repacked can of deodorant still brought an amused tilt to his lips. Alexander Hirst could never have guessed what he unleashed upon his country that day.

It still amazed him how ludicrously easy it was to push the Council towards rather unfortunate decrees. Declaring Emergency Status was just about the only sensible decision they came to. Maybe things would've ended differently for the Council members if the city-state hadn't been as internationally isolated. As things stood, the quite frankly appalling response of foreign powers was to form a multinational committee that stationed soldiers at the borders to prevent anyone from crossing. They reasoned containing the sickness was the only sensible course of action they could

choose and, therefore, left the country solely at his mercy. Mercy, of which he didn't have much to begin with.

The X-mandate was perhaps the President's second worst idea. How he imagined forcing the infected to mark their front door with a red X wouldn't turn out horrible, Crane didn't know. So, obviously, that was exactly what happened. If he bribed some journalists to use increasingly more dehumanizing language to describe his weeping angels, well, it wasn't like that sort of rhetoric wouldn't have started up without a little push anyway. The President's horrified reaction upon hearing of the first burning was quite amusing to watch, especially since he refused to rescind the decree that so generously offered the justice seekers and other less prominent groups its targets.

He vividly remembered the first night of September of that year and bribing Martin or Markus, or whatever that drunk's name was, into influencing the justice seeker to attempt to burn down Council Hall. It truly was a highlight for him. If only Clearwater had died that day, he wouldn't have had to resort to a car bomb to get rid of his most stringent Council opponent later on. Well, needs must, he supposed. At least the attempted burning of Council Hall allowed him to enact the foundations of HELIOS. A fitting name for the artificial intelligence system that informed him of all the relevant comings and goings in his Empire. It was apparently quite demoralizing, too, he never thought a lack of privacy would so effectively break morale. Then again, he wasn't the one who lost his privacy, so he couldn't judge his subjects too harshly for their weak wills.

At any rate, the lack of a cure or at least a vaccination was what undeniably turned the people against their government. Not that such an undertaking would've been easy; it had taken him, the foremost expert of the sickness, an entire decade to create the former. Quite fortunate for the people he was willing to share. Well, willing to put it in their water supply. So, towards the end of

the year, a mere four months after the initial outbreak, the infection rate started to drop rapidly. The Council, naturally, assumed that the drop was caused by the utterly ineffective pill concoction hospitals had started to implement. To be fair, it did reduce the mental effects of sickness and made the patients more docile, but somebody truly should have taught the Council that correlation and causation weren't the same thing. The most foolish, yet somehow unanimous, decision the Council came to was that with the holidays approaching, the lockdown needed to be lifted, and alongside it, morale and goodwill towards their administration. Now, as the reasonable virologist he was, such a foolish decision was not something he could support, which is why he quit and publicly denounced the Council's actions.

“As an expert in my field, I find myself in a difficult position today. Our Council has proclaimed the end of the lockdown, and while I do not wish to undermine them, this is not a decision I can stand behind. It would be negligent of me not to caution against this outrageously ill-conceived assessment of the current situation. Presently, there is no proven medication or even cure for the sickness. The drop in infections could merely be a successful result of the lockdown. It is, therefore, my duty to warn against abandoning all measures implemented to protect you. It is also my duty, I fear, to refuse to work with a Council that does not consider the advice of experts when making such life-altering decisions.”

From there, the situation devolved rapidly. Most didn't heed his warning and paid dearly for it once he stopped drugging the water supply a mere three weeks later. In the meantime, the council began the process of suing him for fearmongering. Too bad calling it fearmongering didn't stop people from dying. In any case, the Council soon faced bigger issues than his speech when the President himself caught the sickness and fainted on national TV. Instead of the expected sympathy, the general public called his demise karma for needlessly endangering the citizens. The disastrous loosening of restrictions had not endeared the administration to

anyone. Riots became increasingly violent, and talks of rebellion were shockingly common. The antigovernment sentiment was, of course, not helped by Interim President Picolus Oveja fleeing the country. A past comment of his became a symbol of the hatred:

“If you all dislike it here so much, you can always retire to another of your houses in the more rural part of the country. It’s what I would do if I didn’t need to be here to work on Council matters.”

This was a shockingly tone-deaf statement, considering the recent economic difficulties due to the near collapse of the city-state’s foremost bank. It most assuredly came back to haunt the Council. No matter how innocent the original intentions behind the misstep might have been, it had been twisted into a representation of unchecked corruption. How come the Interim President had no problem crossing the border and abandoning them when anyone else who even approached it was indiscriminately shot? It is safe to say that in those days, nobody would let themselves be caught uttering anything that could be taken as government support, lest they be considered part of the corruption.

By this time, his ascent to power had become a given. He had always been well-respected, but since he openly denounced the Council’s actions and left them floundering, he became just about the only public figure the people still trusted. He couldn’t have planned the timing of Oveja’s flight any better himself. It was fortuitous then that he had distanced himself from the Council.

In early January, the Council dealt itself a fatal blow. Of the original seven members, only two had not yet vacated their positions permanently, and neither felt capable of shouldering the burden their office demanded of them any longer. With presumably a heavy heart, they decided to end the Emergency Status to allow for new elections. They had, however, not taken into consideration that of the twenty-two surviving parliamentarians, four had been infected with the sickness. Of those remaining, a majority were too

afraid to show their face in public, be it because of the epidemic itself or the riots that had infamously targeted politicians. Crane did not need to resort to blackmail to prevent enough parliamentarians from being present at Council Hall. Elections could not be held that day. This remained an issue for several days and effectively put an end to the government. Even the last loyalists couldn't deny the sheer ineptness of the administration, and the remaining vestiges of support broke.

The time that is called *The Eight Days of Inaction* even today, came to a close with the seizure of Council Hall by Crane and some of his less violent disciples. That Crane crowned himself President was accepted remarkably well despite there having been no elections held. The people genuinely believed he would lead them out of the instability and fear the last administration had caused. Some even unironically called him the people's President.

He didn't constrain his power through the Constitution. Clearly, it had to be revised if following it had led to the catastrophic events that had made him taking on the role of the President necessary. Although most weren't exactly overjoyed with the new surveillance measures, no major outcry occurred. If giving up some of their privacy led to them finally being safe, it wasn't a hard choice to make. The people wanted clear-cut directions to surviving the epidemic. They wanted to be understood and heard, and they wanted to be able to trust their leaders. Crane capitalized on that. If the people wanted to be able to trust those in power, the leaders, in turn, needed to be able to trust the general population. An objective, he claimed, that could only be achieved if untrustworthiness was penalized.

"This country," he claimed, "is inherently corrupt. I know this is not what you want me to say. I know this is the moment when you want to be reassured, but I believe we all have had just about enough of the empty platitudes of my predecessors. This is not a time for words; it is a time for actions. It is a time for trust to

be rebuilt. We all have a common goal here. We all want to do the best for our country so that we are finally allowed to prosper. I am of the opinion that your actions towards that end deserve to be rewarded equally as much as those who endanger our society by being untrustworthy deserve to be punished. It is time that those who selfishly choose to enrich themselves, harming everyone around them, those who leech off your goodwill without any valuable contribution to the betterment of our country, and those who have used their positions to escape responsibility face the consequences for the crimes they have committed. With those concerns in mind, I have created a new governmental department. The Department of Moral Integrity will henceforth be tasked with improving citizens' moral quality and serves as an overseer of parliament in order to bring an end to corruption."

*

Yes, Crane thinks fondly, his plans have come to fruition quite splendidly. It is with self-satisfaction that he allows himself a moment to drink in the city he has carefully rebuilt. Today, exactly a decade after he had first declared himself President on the charred steps of Council Hall, no visible reminder of the horror of that time remains. The atmosphere is festive. In the afternoon, he will hold his customary annual speech thanking his subjects for their trustworthiness and informing them about how the improvement efforts are proceeding. He will sadly have to deny them travel to other countries for a further year because the soldiers of the multinational committee still refuse to open the borders. They are too afraid of an epidemic that has been handled years ago. Isn't it sad how little they still trust us? He'll have to advise them against trying to talk to them as they are still prone to shoot on sight. But that obstacle won't be as important after he's had the chance to show them how much the school children's learning standard has improved this year alone, even though the opposite applies. He's slowly ensuring that with every year of his rule, less and less knowledge is taught in schools. It's just not efficient to teach these topics to everyone, only

a handful will have a use for them later on anyway. Maybe in the future, when the economy allows it, this is something that can be changed, he promises without any intention of following through. It wouldn't do for them to be able to question him. And if they have no prospects anywhere else, well, they'll just have to stay, won't they? Then again, it's not like most people realize that the reason nobody is leaving the country isn't because of the foreign soldiers but due to a subsection of his disciples, those with rather more violent tendencies. Yes, the brutish types do have their use for guard duty. The truly sinister look that flashes across his face at that thought is at complete odds with the character of the beloved father of the nation that he plays in public.

Closing the balcony doors behind him, he smiles genially at the woman bound to the chair in front of his desk.

"Now, Clara dear, those discrepancies you have found in the reports the redistributing office gave you, they are just not something you talk about in polite society. I must admit your mother had quite an impressive temper for someone of her disposition. But you see, around here, we don't like dissent. I wanted to trust you, Clara, and under other circumstances, I perhaps could have overlooked that sort of treasonous talk, but you tried to involve the press. You should have known better. I am just glad young Viktor proved to be a loyal disciple of mine. Well, I suppose I should thank you for bringing the blatancy of these inconsistencies to my attention. I can assure you it will be fixed."

Yes, he has never felt more secure in his position than now. His days of helplessness were finally over. All hail the Doctor, savior of the people and bringer of trustworthiness. What a marvelous system one could create with the commodification of loyalty and how easily people could be bought or silenced depending on the occasion.

Dealing with Dissent

Dissent is a curious thing. When he had announced the exceedingly harsh restrictions of his morality system, he had expected a lot more resistance than had, in all actuality, been the case. There hadn't been any significant opposition to his usurpation of power either. It is, he mused, possible that his people had cultivated a distaste for democracy, and who could blame them? The last couple of administrations had been paradigms of corruption and criminally inept. For the betterment of society, drastic changes needed to happen. The simple truth was that the city-state's democracy had been dying for a long time, and everybody had known it. Crane had merely accelerated the timeline with the unleashing of a plague on the completely unprepared population. Any opposition he faced from then on could easily be equated to a threat to national safety. Not submitting to his judgment meant actively prolonging the epidemic, which was not a favorable position to be in after so many had died and effectively doomed any attempt of opposition to failure. Not that there were attempts of enough importance for him to bother to deal with them himself apart from claiming to be disheartened by the apparent inability of certain groups to put aside politics in favor of their common foe, the sickness.

The desperate need for stability and long-term change didn't spellbind the population to such an extreme level all dissent had been curbed. No, this power could perhaps be traced to the progress that had occurred in the surveillance sector over the past decades. In a state of total surveillance where there remained no plausibility of privacy, where human interference was no longer needed, and where a spy system existed that was so complex it encased every single household, what form of undetected resistance could even

hope to exist? He had destroyed any hope of organized opposition in one fell swoop with the creation of HELIOS. Humans remained fallible, but his algorithms did not. The moment the personal house assistant HESTIA became mandatory, every conversation and every twitch in facial expression became a point of data in the centralized data hub. There was no hiding anymore. He could access the files of every single person in his Empire. If he wanted to know what a specific person of interest had eaten for breakfast any given morning since HELIOS had become fully operational, he would be informed in a matter of seconds. The time for large-scale dissent was over. There remained only individual failure to comply, which was accordingly punished, and mostly due to citizens cracking under the pressure of performing to his very reasonable standards and proving themselves to be worthless. How unfortunate that not everyone was strong enough to be part of the country's future. Their sacrifice was a necessary evil.

These days, only a few special cases caught his interest. HELIOS operated mostly in a self-sufficient manner; regular interference was hardly necessary. Now, he wouldn't deign to stoop so low as to kill every single untrustworthy individual that inhabited his Empire. No, the imperfect ones had their uses. Occasionally, he needed to make a few into examples. He couldn't let everyone forget the price they would pay if they didn't show him loyalty. In the end, most just needed a little reminder of their powerlessness, nothing spectacular or public. They usually had a lasting change of attitude once they faced the consequences of their defects. He remembered the dissenters the regime faced, at least all those he had dealt with personally. It was vital for HELIOS to keep special tabs on them, their families, and colleagues. They were not allowed to lose the fear of the consequences should they even dare to think of disobeying. And if they couldn't trace the drop in living conditions back to anything in particular they had done, the system was all the better for it. Perpetual anxiety, after all, bred anticipatory obedience, and those who held any reason to complain were themselves powerless and never would gain the influence needed to pose any

serious threat. They were already disreputable enough that a heavy hand would be overkill.

He remembered the taxi driver, whom they had nicknamed Chatty before she stepped out of line. He supposed with such a name, it had been inevitable that she would unfavorably gain his attention. After the Department of Education had to regrettably inform her parents that her sister had sadly lost her scholarship due to underfunding, she didn't have the time nor the guts to continue blabbering anything of substance to her clients. Although she could never prove it, she remained certain that she somehow had brought ill will upon her family with her chattering. People soon stopped using her nickname. It didn't quite fit her now sullen personality.

Now, dear old Martha shouldn't have suggested that the people would be better off without the system. It was possible her lapse could've been attributed to her old age; she did gain a temper the older she got, but that was no excuse. Fine, if she so badly wanted to be rid of the system, she certainly could get a taste of how life without its benefits would treat her. It was just rather unfortunate that her former moral standing had allowed her insurance plan to cover her husband's cancer treatments, but her now diminished standing did not. Paying for chemotherapy out of pocket certainly was expensive. There couldn't have been much left of their pensions after that.

Then, there was talented young John Walker, a special case. Too bad he got into that accident during his mechanic internship. He could have gone far in that field. It is just so tragic that he lost those fingers. He should count himself lucky Crane Insurance covered his surgeries, and if it wasn't for last year's employment reform, who could say what would have happened to him? Admittedly, he never wanted to be a typist, and he is a bit slow with his missing fingers, but it does pay the bills. Shattered dreams are just the price one pays for not conforming to the rules.

He, of course, couldn't forget about Aamon. He just disap-

peared one day after he left work. One would think that with the number of cameras everywhere, there would be no way for something like this to happen. Nobody speaks of him anymore. He, of course, knows what happened to Aamon. He became a rather cooperative test subject for one of the virus strains Crane enjoyed experimenting with. It is safe to say the cure he had administered to the dissenter hadn't worked, but at least his death was in the name of science, and in the end, he had proved to be of some worth.

What those examples had in common was their unimportance in the grand scheme of things. The downfall of multimedia conglomerate owner Triston Lamia, on the other hand, was entirely different and a lot more remarkable. As the owner of *The Daily Truth*, the country's most-read newspaper, and the second-richest man in the city-state, the catastrophic impact of his criticism could not be underestimated.

Early on, upon seizing control of the state, he had called the elite to Council Hall, for he feared the possible repercussions of them refusing him their support. He ordered them to stay out of politics. In return for their concessions, he granted them privileges those more closely bound to the whims of the system were refused. It had never been his intention to be a fair and just ruler. He had never intended to end the extreme wealth disparities the state had long since been plagued with. Crane had no plans of creating a utopia for the average citizen. No, in a utopia, an authoritarian ruler would become redundant. Everything would be self-sustaining. And if there were one thing he refused to become, that would be obsolete. So, he kept the rich happy, and, in turn, he received their funding to build up his regime and, with it, his power.

Naturally, it wasn't that easy there always will be a foolish man who thinks himself exempt from the rules when he just isn't. In this case, that man was Triston Lamia. He decided to condone the publishing of articles condemning Crane's surveillance measures and his character.

Crane, a totalitarian wannabe?

*Morality Improvement or Social Control. Everything we know
about the new morality decree.*

How trustworthy is our unelected leader really?

Headline after headline dropped, each more damaging to his reputation than the last. Lamia just didn't know when to keep his mouth shut. If he had worked with Crane, he could've made an even bigger fortune. After all, it just doesn't do for a leader to treat his allies poorly, a lesson Crane had learned long ago, alongside the importance of a good old power play. Lamia needed to be put in his place; otherwise, the remaining elite would get unsavory ideas.

Now, there was a thing or two the regular citizens might not be aware of when it came to Lamia's rise to nouveau-riche status, for one, he started out as the proud owner of a stagnating copper mine. Two could play the game of discrediting. Crane just chose to oppose him in court and not in the papers.

Lamia had an interesting past regarding providing workers with adequate safety gear. Due to his funds drying up, working conditions in the mine were so horrendous they broke close to all of the rather lax worker protection laws of the decades prior to the sickness. With his championing of citizens in need, such an issue would not have been that strange a cause for Crane to bring to the court's attention. Not that he particularly cared about the workers, but corruption was an easy method to rile up his subjects. He used it to justify the creation of the morality system and based the legitimacy of his rule on being the only non-corrupt politician; it was rather fitting that this line of reasoning would now take down another one of his enemies.

Once one started to dig, it was amazing what crimes could be uncovered. Who would've guessed that the CEO of *The Daily Truth* himself was so untrustworthy as to evade taxes? Crane sup-

posed this was one way to get rich, but it was so easily exploited if one had the means.

While Lamia's articles had proved a nuisance, the hit his popularity took was easily forgotten once the highly publicized trial took up steam. Tipping off the media to some of the first improvements already achieved under the new regime assuaged most fears. Then Lamia broke down in the courtroom, raving.

"He's targeting me," he screamed wildly, gesturing at Crane, who had appeared in the courtroom for the first time several days into the trial proceedings. Spittle flew in all directions, and Lamia had a mad glint in his eyes. He looked absolutely deranged, and with his tall build, he made for a threatening figure.

"He's targeting me. He knows I know what he's doing. He's trying to silence me, you hear. He's evil. You have to stop him. All of this is a smear campaign. He's lying to you. He's not doing this to help you. Goddammit people! He doesn't care about any of you. All he wants is power."

It was when he tried to lunge for Crane that law enforcement finally stepped in and dragged him back to his holding cell. Lamia struggled to escape and cursed Crane and his evil plans until his voice forsook him. The rest of his trial was held in absentia due to his lawyers claiming he was too mentally disturbed not to hurt his reputation further with another incomprehensible outburst.

The damage, however, had already been done. *The Daily Truth's* board unanimously voted to fire Lamia. The new leadership post-hastily denounced the articles criticizing Crane's newly formed regime as "the rantings and raving of a brilliant man gone mad," suggesting he might have survived a milder form of the sickness and, as a result, lost his faculties. The press jumped on this unlikely facet like bloodhounds, and soon enough, Lamia's name had been so thoroughly put through the wringer that not a single word he spoke was believed.

Delusion and Memory Problems. Did Lamia genuinely forget about the horrid working conditions?

Raving billionaire or pitiful survivor of the sickness?

Long-term consequences of the Sickness. What we know so far.

There, of course, was no such thing as a milder form of the sickness. Crane, as its creator, would know. Nevertheless, it was quite an interesting fashion in which to call someone mentally unbalanced. The case of Lamia would not be the last time this tactic was used.

There were no questions of whether Lamia was guilty or innocent. The result had been clear to everyone since Crane had first called for the trial. Their beloved leader wouldn't accuse an innocent of the horrible crimes Lamia was charged with. On the grounds of breaking worker protection laws and tax evasion, he was sentenced to 35 years in federal prison and the seizure of all his assets. The second richest man in the country was no more, and *The Daily Truth* never criticized the government again.

Lamia's wife became dependent on alcohol as she couldn't cope with her new status as a working-class woman. She had befallen a fate worse than death if polite society was to be believed. Her worst nightmare, being poor, had become her reality. Crane, the good soul he was, offered to pay for her rehabilitation treatment in the fresh-aired countryside, but she had spat in his face. She had drunk herself to death mere weeks later and would never come to know of her husband's fate.

Triston Lamia, for his part, successfully escaped prison three years into his sentence but was shot hours later when trying to flee across the border to seek political asylum in the neighboring country. Nobody would ever know that Crane had sent several of his disciples disguised as antigovernment partisans to break out his disgraced former critic and get him killed. It worked wonders as a

distraction from the HESTIA project's implementation problems. A few articles about Lamia's shocking lack of repentance and the elite were again on the chopping block for suspected corruption and possible mental instability due to having survived a milder form of the sickness.

At any rate, no other high society business owner challenged him. They were all too aware that if he had so easily taken down the richest and most influential of their midst, they stood no chance of going up against him. Cooperation was in their own and their family's best interests. Crane had just gotten away with executing one of the richest men on the planet, and his international allies had done nothing to save him. They had pitied his mental decline and broke their contracts with the conglomerate, and that was that. Nobody would come to their help. They were entirely reliant on remaining in Crane's good graces.

It was this apprehension that forced the trappings of civility upon them. The women simpered their admiration for Crane's achievements, all the while disgusted by his old age, coldness, and successful implementation of an increasingly restrictive morality system. The men, for Crane, only held business meetings with them, excessively complimented him on his reforms, and, at the same time, could almost physically feel their power slip away from them. When Crane called for them and demanded financial support, they paid and didn't ask questions. They had irrevocably tied themselves to a madman. By now, if Crane went down, so would they. Not one of them wanted to contemplate how many human rights violations were tied to their fortunes and names. Crane had threatened their lives and livelihoods, and they had eagerly parted ways with what little remained of their integrity.

In the end, Crane was one of them. He knew their customs and the right steps to take in any given situation to impress high society. He knew what questions to ask, whose gossip was the most accurate, and most importantly, what palms to grease. When the

elites realized how much power they had willingly handed Crane, the deals they had made with Crane Industries were not ones they could end without severely costing them. He wouldn't even need to step into a courtroom to ruin them financially. The downfall of Triston Lamia had cemented in their minds that nobody was safe, and that Crane had no qualms whatsoever about killing off those who refused him.

CHAPTER 03

Clara Nemcova



The Silent Observer

In ancient times, they used to think of the sun as a god. The Greeks called him by the name of Helios. Hyperion, the one above, was one of his epithets, and in line with that, he supposedly journeyed through the sky daily on his quadriga, a chariot drawn by four white horses. Due to his journey, he's commonly depicted as all-seeing, which is why he was often invoked during the swearing of oaths.

While nowadays only a few follow the old ways, even fewer around here, in this godless state, some remnants of the past prevail. We, too, are very aware of HELIOS's all-seeing gaze, though his stare has nothing sacred to it. I'm, of course, describing *The HELIOS Surveillance Group*, the government's monitoring and recording systems and algorithms. They are everywhere, the cameras, the microphones. In the beginning, I made a habit of counting them. I stopped after I hit triple digits, knowing where they were didn't assuage the anxiety I felt and still feel in regard to being watched.

In hindsight, back then, it hadn't been that bad yet. Crime was reduced by half in the first six months alone after Project HELIOS was implemented, so we were all alright with trading off some of our privacy for safety. Since the beginning of the sickness, that had been what most of us wanted anyway: to feel safe. It didn't, however, end there, and the descent into madness continued.

It started with emotion and focus tracking cameras in the workspace. When it had been implemented, it felt like they didn't trust us to do our job, which was mostly confirmed since the aim of this was to improve economic growth. I didn't like it then, and I still don't, but it made sense. The economy had been on its last legs

since the previous recession two decades back, and after the sickness started, well, starvation had not been that uncommon a cause of death, so if the blasted cameras were going to help, so be it.

With the education reform, cameras were installed in the three universities this country has, after all, we didn't have the funds to put those unwilling to learn through higher education, they said. Right now, not even Crane himself, who so graciously sponsors most of the student population, could afford it. It really says something when not even the richest man in the country has money to spare anymore, doesn't it? Nowadays, not even the kindergartens remain camera-free. With the steady stabilization of the economy, the reasoning behind this has changed. Currently, the government argues that the presence of cameras improves moral quality by encouraging citizens to be on their best behavior. With that improvement, we supposedly will finally regain the international status of high renown that we once held, which is funny because we have not had this few university graduates in over a century. I checked when the records were still publicly available.

What I believe is the worst addition to Project HELIOS is HESTIA. It was introduced to us a few years ago as merely a more advanced version of your run-of-the-mill voice-activated assistant. The pinnacle of cutting-edge AI technology, if you will, another cog in the surveillance machine. There wasn't enough state budget to eliminate the rationing, but we could afford to subsidize smart home technology? The dissonance between the starving populace and the billion-dollar investment in a glorified spy system could not have been greater. And yet, there were no protests or outcry. We had learned our lesson after a few banded together to protest the internet shutdown during the epidemic. Rubber bullets hurt, and we knew we wouldn't be heard anyway. On the state networks, anything remotely political, such as criticism of the government's actions was shut down and severely punished, so there wasn't really a way to organize either.

I absolutely despise HESTIA, but even I have to admit that sometimes the cursed thing can be a lifesaver, literally. If it had not been around when my mother had her accident and was left lying paralyzed at the bottom of the stairs, I am pretty sure she would have died. I wasn't around much back then, and by the time I would have grown suspicious about not hearing from her, several days might have already passed. That doesn't make me hate the thing any less. It is watching us, listening to all our conversations, waiting for us to slip up.

I do not feel safe or, in fact, comfortable in my own home. I have not had friends over in years, let alone a date. The only company I have left are my mother and our cat. I wouldn't be surprised if my behavior puzzled them. A woman who seems serenely content with her life and at the same time is utterly lonely, but I do not trust them, those who watch us from behind their screens, which is exactly why I dare not look unhappy and why I think the smile is permanently frozen unto my face. Most times, it feels like I am cracking. I do not dare cry where they can see. Only at night, my face pressed into the pillow is where the smile peels off my face.

They must under no circumstances think that I am against this system, this regime in any way. They must not suspect my true feelings. My standing depends upon it, and so does my mother. Now, if only she, too, were more careful with what she lets slip. I can only play off her more questionable statements as those of a woman delirious due to her pain medication so many times. Oh, she is perfectly lucid, don't get me wrong, she just doesn't think herself important enough for the government to come for her. I swear her tempting fate is giving me premature gray hairs. And it's not like her standing isn't already bad enough because she counts as an unproductive member of society.

They told us when this all started that it was a measure needed to improve trustworthiness and moral quality in a country so sorely lacking it. They told us that it would bring progress and

civilization and that it would ensure our safety and regrant us the international renown we have lost. Our country has long been a source of shame for us, the crime rate, the low education, the lack of progress. It was bad even before the sickness, but ever since, nobody wants to be associated with us. It is like we have become the plague ourselves, and I suppose, in some ways, we have and still are. The sickness is not gone after all; this is only a dormant phase. But even so, it is not my mother's fault she cannot be a "productive" member of society. She is not lazy; she would like nothing more than to work. This state of inertia is as surely killing her as the pain is. And yet, she cannot work. The country's infrastructure is hardly accommodating to wheelchair users. They told us modernizing the subway system is a work in progress. Yet, I have not seen any progress in the years since they promised this. They told us they would be more accommodating in the workplace after the economy has improved, that they just couldn't spare the funding such a project required. Not right now, when the people still face hunger, and their basic needs are left unfulfilled. But does my mother not also face those same problems? Does she not also deserve her basic needs to be met?

They tell us a lot of things, make a lot of promises, but in the end, all we get is the consolation that soon, things will be better. Soon, surveillance won't have to be as ubiquitous as it is now, that is, provided we behave that is, provided we follow their rules. But how can we follow rules we do neither know nor understand? They have made announcements and declared laws, but how should we know what we are prohibited from doing when their wording is so vague?

Discontent towards the regime results in lower standing.

We are aware of that. But what counts as discontent towards the regime? Is it just open criticism, or does looking unhappy suffice? We don't know. They don't like for us to ask questions. We at least know that that always results in a deduction. Over time, I have

come to believe that this is purposeful. They need us to be afraid. They want us to conform in anticipation of punishment. Insecurity and fear are what keeps them having the upper hand. We have the numbers, but they have drones, so not even that matters anymore.

There are several other laws that I often think about. I think about how ludicrous they must sound to anyone out-side this system or how the government openly flaunts them.

All interaction between citizens and noncitizens is prohibited and considered to have the intent of slandering the country's achievements and reputation. Punishment will be dealt out accordingly.

How ominous, and yet are our borders not closed? How would we have the chance to “misrepresent” this regime to anyone not living under it when all our devices are only connected to the state networks? Well, that is except for those in the export offices, but then again, who would be foolish enough to try anything with armed guards at their back? And is not one of the core goals behind this system to restore the state's international reputation? How can there be renown without interaction? We can only conclude that restoring our reputation is not one of the goals, after all, unless we desire to delude ourselves into believing interaction will be allowed again after “moral quality” has improved. I am neither naïve nor stupid enough to believe this. There is no use in asking what they don't want us to tell the rest of the world. Telling them of anything that happened during the last decade would probably cause an international outcry. Then again, nobody seemed to care about what happened to us during the epidemic, so who really knows?

Violence against fellow citizens is strictly prohibited. Any violation of this law results in a negative record and, if severe enough, a prison sentence.

This is probably the law I think about most. It is fairly ironic since the current regime also called for the eradication of the in-

fected when the infection rate was at an all-time high. They even seriously suggested burning the houses of the sick down with them inside. I wonder how many deaths of innocents they are responsible for. How many have ended their own lives instead of living under these constraints?

There are rumors of people going missing. Rumors of red vans pulling up outside their houses in the middle of the night and taking them away, never to be seen again. But they are just that: rumors and nothing more. They cannot be more. It is not safe for them to be more.

Yolanda Rhetta from 2B has told me, told everyone really, that the Reds have come for old Joshua from a block over. He was a kind old man, never used to have a bad word to say about anyone, though lately that had proven to be untrue. He didn't like the new regulations. Truth be told, we didn't like the new regulations any more than old Joshua did, but he was vocal about it. Despite the wisdom of old age, he didn't keep quiet. He didn't learn that our voices, our integrity are the price this regime demands of us. He didn't learn that there is nothing we can do, that we hold no power, and that we can only be safe if we comply. In many ways, old Joshua was one of the best of us. I didn't tell Yolanda this. I didn't tell her anything. I glared at her, and that was all. She didn't talk to me again.

Soon thereafter, the obituary of Joshua Manson was posted. "Died of old age peacefully in his sleep," it said. This is what I choose to believe happened. I know it is untrue, but this is what I must believe. I cannot allow myself to think the government would kill its citizens. It is a reality too horrible for me to consider, even when I know better. If I start to think of everyone around me as expendable to them, I will go mad. I don't understand how we let it get this bad. I miss the time when I didn't have to smile, when having an opinion was not tantamount to treason.

I miss reading. I used to be an avid reader, and I even en-

joyed dystopia as the oftentimes cringe-worthy genre it is. Now, even if we were allowed to read those kinds of books, if they had not all been burnt, I wouldn't. I used to laugh about their farfetchedness. Centralized surveillance of the inside of everyone's homes, yeah, very likely! Now, those stories have become a bit too realistic for me to enjoy them ever again. Saints above, how I wish this were just another plot of one of the books I used to read!

I used to think we liked freedom too much for something like this to ever work out. And yet they frame this system as freedom, too. Freedom from instead of freedom to, I suppose. Freedom as another word for absence instead of choice. They don't use it to denote the latter one anymore. I have never felt the difference more clearly than I do these days. I used to think we liked freedom too much for this to happen, but I suppose in the excess of fear, there is a lot we are willing to trade off for temporary safety.

I used to like myself and my grip on my integrity, but I suppose I, too, am a fool, and when it comes down to it, I have no integrity. When it comes down to it, I am willing to bend and discard my morals like toys. Useless and, in the end, of no importance. I miss reading real books, I mean, not the propaganda hogwash that's still available. Those I refuse to buy.

I miss the time when I felt safe, when I was unwatched and could truly be alone.

But I am safe, I tell myself. Why wouldn't I be?

I tell myself this as I put on the finishing touches of my make-up, concealing the dark circles left below my eyes by another sleepless night. I tell myself this as I check my expression in the mirror. Do I look serene enough? Does my mask look unnatural? I tell myself this as I hug my mother goodbye.

I am safe. Why wouldn't I be?

It's like a mantra, repeated over and over again in my head

along with all the others, like Keep smiling. Keep quiet. They are watching.

And that is the crux of it; They are watching. And suddenly, the sentences I keep repeating are no longer mantras. They are threats. The *Or else* so implicit, it is almost screamed.

It's not *I am safe*; it's *I have to be safe*. I have to comply. If not for my sake, then for my mother's. It is a reminder to never step a toe out of line, lest it ruin everything.

And so it goes, day after day. Hour after hour.

A smile fixed firmly on my face while I am screaming internally. While there is nothing, I want to do more than to kill everyone who forced this system upon us, while there is nothing, I want more than to kill *him* and then preferably myself.

They can never know my true feelings. I have to be safe.

I have noticed a new tendency of mine. This rambling in my head. I don't think it is healthy, but then what is in this reality I am forced to live in, and where else am I to put the agony I feel? My thoughts are the only thing left to me. The last vestiges of privacy, I am sure they would also get rid of if they could. Maybe someday I won't even have this. I think that is when I will end this torment for good. I think not even the thought of what would happen to my mother without me could stop me.

I am cracking; I know that. I have been for a while. It's the lack of being able to be my authentic self. Human beings were never meant to have no privacy.

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Twelve minutes 45 seconds, that's how long it takes for me to get to the redistribution office, that's how long the outside cameras glare at me. The silence of the streets is oppressive. Nobody talks to each other anymore. I nearly sigh in relief as I open the office's

front door. There are no voices heard here either, but the rhythmic click-clacking of computer keyboards is soothing, a balm to my fried nerves.

Like every day, I start the computer and clock into work. This has become quite unnecessary nowadays. They know when I am working, how concentrated I am, and how happy I am. They always know. Clocking in is a remnant of the past, an absurd ceremony of pretense, of normality, despite that nothing about this can in any way be considered normal. It doesn't matter that it has even started to feel like it.

Work goes by in a blur. I periodically remind myself to keep looking serene, but I don't really take notice of the names, especially not of those that I am forced to condemn. I make a point of it not to. It's the small things that keep us sane.

It is my job to check the utility allotments, house by house, name by name. Today's task is electricity. We were unprepared for the hit the economy would take during the sickness, and even before it, most of us, that is about half of the populace, did not have secure access to essential supplies. After the borders were closed and trade was practically frozen, the situation got so much worse. To call it a supply crisis would be like calling our political situation a democracy, utterly ludicrous, and yet that is what the government insists upon. It is difficult for me to comprehend, even now, how callously unmoved they were towards our plight on an international level.

Better keep the borders closed and let them all starve than get infected, we used to joke. It wasn't funny, not even back then, and yet what else were we to do but joke to keep the despair at bay? Everything has remained rationed: electricity, food, water, whatever one can think of. All of it in an effort to prepare for another international betrayal. We are not fool enough to believe it could never happen again. Self-sufficiency is what we now strive towards. With the new regulations on electricity, that is to say, the

new ration cuts, they want to make the final push in the energy sector. The cuts mostly affect the lower end of social standings, so while the mansions will continue to have all their windows illuminated at night, we will have to revert to candles again if we still have some left or other more dangerous means of open fire. This is how it is now. The system meant to improve our lives through economic reforms and trustworthiness rewards has divided us even further. The gap between the rich and the poor has only widened since its implementation. They say being loyal to the regime and having “good moral quality” is all that is needed to move up in life. It’s a lie. Certain avenues for improving one’s standing are only accessible to those who already have an abundance of money. Donating to charity is one of those, ultimately, how can I donate to charity when I do not have enough to feed my family for the next week? They say all this is to improve moral quality, but it is not. This whole system was created to divide and conquer us. Everything always comes back to control.

I snap out of it when I notice her name: Connie Aliza. I know her, we were friends once, before all of this happened. She was a bit of a stickler for rules but otherwise rather likable. She’s exceeded this week’s allotment. Protocol says I have to report her, but I don’t want to. She’s clearly struggling, just as I am. I think of forging the numbers, but they have algorithms for this, too. My job is essentially useless busywork, and they’d notice quickly if I went against the protocol. I am sure of it, and I cannot afford to lose this job, nor can I afford to go to prison. My standing would never recover. Covering for her would only make it worse for the both of us, I decide, but even to myself, it sounds like an empty platitude. I hate who this system has turned me into, but I consider the possibility that they could make an example out of us. Something along the lines of how corruption and untrustworthiness are a cancer to society and need to be eradicated, I am sure, followed shortly by our very literal eradication. No, I decide, I do not have a death wish. Besides, if I did, I would at least have gone out with my integrity still in one piece. It’s too late for that now, so I flag the

report. I am not sure how Connie is going to manage.

This job is becoming exceedingly demoralizing. It's wearing me down. I hate being a cog in the creation of misery. Then again, it's not like this was my choice. I never wanted an office job, but they selected me anyway. I cannot even decide to quit.

I refocus on the text in front of me. Getting caught slacking off is not something I can afford right now. I force a mask of serenity upon myself once more and try and utterly fail to pretend that it doesn't bother me that I just had to condemn an old friend of mine.

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As I come home, there they are again. The disciples, I mean. I can already feel the tiredness setting in, why are they always here when I am having a particularly bad day? Never mind, that's the entire point.

"The third time this month," I remark tonelessly, not exactly directed toward their supervisor. I dare not sound annoyed, even though that's exactly what I am.

"You know how it is," he says, and I do.

I don't recognize him. They change out the squads for this. I think it is to prevent them from empathizing with us. After all, after the fifth time or so of raiding the same poor old woman's house, they tend to start to feel guilty. They wouldn't want that; the disciples' righteousness is part of the whole schtick.

"We have to do this. With your standing being this low, you understand."

A strange smile crosses his face. Half pained, half pleased. He may be enjoying this, but I am not sure. I know some of them do, it feeds into their superiority complexes. It makes them feel strong, even though the only thing this is is pathetic.

“Yes,” I say, “I understand completely.”

And I do. I understand that this is a scare tactic and that there is no practical reason behind this raid. It is not like we could hide anything with HESTIA firmly installed in every room. Nothing we do or say is private. This whole charade is a disgrace, but I can see why they think it to be necessary. We are considered untrustworthy. They need to scare us to remind us that we are not safe. It is fear that prevents us from stepping a toe out of line and from getting unsavory ideas. As the low-ranking members of society, we are the least likely to believe the propaganda they’re shoving down our throats. After all, where is the better future they’ve been promising us for the past couple of years? For us, it has only got worse. They want us to live in a constant state of anxiety, not knowing what they’ll do to us or take from us next and, most importantly, when. It assuredly works very well.

I pretend to be torn and then finally add, as I always do in the meek and apologetic manner that makes me want to bash my head into the nearest wall:

“My mother, she is not well. Would it be too much trouble for you to leave her be this time? She needs her rest.”

A muscle jumps in his jaw, and I already know that this battle is lost.

“Listen here, your mother’s legs don’t work, alright.” He gestures at her, sneering. “We get that, but with all the free time that leaves her, well, it wasn’t her brain that got damaged, was it? Who knows what ideas she might get up to, all alone.”

I duck my head. This is how it always goes. They never talk to her directly, and I don’t get to make demands; they don’t like that one bit. But not insisting on her behalf might end up worse. They could think me a bad daughter, and I can’t afford that.

After they have ransacked the entire apartment and left cha-

os in their wake once more, I slump against the door. For once, the tiredness and fear I feel are appropriate emotions to display. A dull thud accompanies my head hitting the door. Then, a sigh. Eyes pinched shut, I let out a frustrated groan.

“No use in delaying the inevitable,” I murmur as I begin picking up and righting the furniture. This in itself is a familiar routine.

When I am done, everything looks the same as before they came. The only difference is an old mug, now broken. I suppose this, too, is fitting. Everything has a veneer of order and calm nowadays, but underneath, underneath the pot is always seconds short of boiling over. Fear has kept us in line for now, but it is only a matter of time till something has to give, and no method they can think of will keep us subjugated. We aren’t meant to live like this, constantly surveilled and forced to become performers and actors. We are meant to be free, and someday we will be free again. I do not know how or when, or even if I will still be around when it happens. I just know this: no regime can withstand our collective rage and strive for freedom. Maybe someday, I’ll finally feel safe again, but that day is not today.

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I stare at the report uncomprehendingly. This can’t possibly be true. This has to be a nightmare. Mother and I have never exceeded our allotments I made sure of that. The name of the report doesn’t change: Clara Nemcova. The bright red letters feel like a taunt, a cruel joke the universe is playing on me. Maybe if I changed the numbers quickly enough, nobody would notice. There isn’t really another choice. Once condemned, you never hear of those households again. Maybe they are just moved to another district, and that’s all that happens, but I can’t take the risk. I swallow back bile. It takes a few clicks of my keyboard, and mother and I again appear to be the model household I have forced us to be. I pray that this won’t alert them and that I will remain undiscovered, but I have a

bad feeling about this. This may just be it for me, and yet I could swear those numbers had to be wrong. They made no sense unless none of the numbers I got were accurate, and that would be huge. If that were the case and people were made aware of this conspiracy, it might just be enough to start an uprising. I needed to make inquiries. This had suddenly become so much bigger than me.

CHAPTER 04

The Unraveling

The Unraveling

Paranoia was a cruel mistress. Rationally, Crane knew he had enough leverage so that no one could betray him. He had control of HELIOS, goddammit. If anyone tried anything, he would know. Rationally, Crane was aware that the state of mind he had descended into was something he should be concerned by. But paranoia wasn't rational. With his health failing, he had become painfully aware of the hatred most everyone around him had for him. It wasn't like he had trusted them during any point of his rule. He knew better than that. Trust brought betrayal, and with betrayal came helplessness. He never wanted to feel that again. No, trust would endanger his control, his power. Maybe he wasn't paranoid after all. No, who was he kidding, of course, he was. It's what kept him in power for so long. His doctor, whom he had executed, had advised him to slow down. His paranoia apparently caused him too much stress, which in turn affected his blood pressure. He couldn't let anyone know about the weakness his body was now prone to. No, he saw the greed in their eyes, they would dispose of him, divest him of his power, and he couldn't have that. They couldn't win, he wouldn't allow it.

So, of course, he came to the reasonable conclusion that adding a self-destruct program to HELIOS was the only way he could prevent anyone from using his achievements for their own purposes. 24 hours of not accessing the system, and everything would blow up spectacularly. If the servers, the algorithms, and the programming were gone, his opponents would be hard-pressed to reinvent his masterpiece. He shuddered to think what horrors his advisors, who themselves were part of the elite, would commit if they had HELIOS under their control. That could never be allowed

to happen. He was the only one who could be trusted to use the surveillance system for the right purpose. He, Crane the Doctor, had enabled rapid progress in countless fields of science. Under his guidance, the city-state had flourished. No longer could anyone dare call them primitive or underdeveloped. They had become pioneers of science. Oh, how he shuddered when he dared think about what any of the avaricious elite would do to his country. Wealth had never been one of his motivations for gaining power. He had already had plenty, and it would've been such a close-minded pursuit.

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They were after him, he could tell. They'd been eyeing his food suspiciously. Had they poisoned him? Was that why they looked so strangely at him? He needed to make them remember who was in charge. He should make an example out of one of them. That would show them. Even though HELIOS didn't indicate any possible wrongdoings on their part, he just knew they were up to something. He spent more time watching them through HELIOS lately. Their inaction didn't sit right with him. They were the elite; they always wanted something from him. What in God's name was it this time?

He had remained silent for too long, and his stake looked like mush. Had he continually been cutting it into tinier pieces? He was losing it, wasn't he? He was just so tired.

"Sinclair, tell me, how are the new military recruits doing? Anyone special we need to keep an eye out for?"

"They are doing as expected of them, sir. Regarding their aptness, cadet Adder might be a better a better fit for guard duty. He's shown a remarkable abundance of viciousness but, so far, has been a bit too eager to shoot everything that moves."

Crane sighed; he didn't care about such trivial matters. HE-

LIOS would summarize the happenings in his country later. He was getting old.

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He had retired to his study for the night and had advised anyone who valued their current standing from disturbing him unless the situation was dire. Just as he had finished his nightcap and decided on brooding as a suitable preoccupation for the rest of the evening, did he feel the tumbler slip from his hand and his arm go numb. Had he been poisoned? He staggered and dropped to the ground. What was this? What was happening to him?

When he next came to, all he could feel was the agony that plagued his head. His body had finally failed him. He should have listened to his godforsaken doctor. This was it then. What an anticlimactic death for the country's most important person. Lying outwardly unresponsive on his study's cold floor, he suffered unable to move or cry out for help. It took hours until someone dared disturb the silence. He could hear his housekeeper's shocked gasp, then her hurried retreat. Crane could cry, he could be saved yet. Surely, she had run to fetch a doctor. He would yet make a full recovery, but that was not what happened. Instead, one after the other, his advisors came to inspect the situation and, in hushed voices, argued about how they could handle the apparent conundrum. Many reasoned that bringing in a doctor would result in them being punished for disclosing his ailing condition to an outsider. Useless morons, the lot of them. Crane wanted nothing more than to have them shot for their incompetence, and he vowed to do just that should he survive this.

He was the most powerful man in the country, yet he had never felt more helpless than in this moment, with those ranked below him standing over his failing body and discussing his fate. It was clear they were too afraid to get him the help he needed. Thus, the fear he had inspired would become his undoing. Machiavelli had written that it was better to be feared than loved if you couldn't

be both, and Crane had never found a way to compel those closest to him in status to love him. So, he had reasoned that fear would have to be sufficient for them to respect him. He realized he had used fear as a crutch in his final years. His death was the price this overuse demanded, and what a uniquely unspectacular passing it would be. It was shameful that this weakness would become part of his legacy. An ordinary brain bleed had inflicted the damage that so many had wished upon him. At least he could count on the destruction of HELIOS to overshadow that detail.

He managed to hold on just long enough to hear the first explosion and the frantic calls his treacherous advisors made once they recognized the direction it came from. His lifework was gone, and now so was he.

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When the late Crane's inner circle realized just how entirely reliant the governance and organization of the city-state had been on the now-destroyed HELIOS, they panicked. What were they to do now? Not one of them was aware of even close to a shred of how HELIOS had operated. Additionally, now that they didn't need to follow Crane's lead anymore, they could not agree on how the country was supposed to be run for the life of them.

After several screaming matches, they came to the decision that they wouldn't tell anyone about the destruction of the surveillance system. It would only result in mass panic and riots they didn't have the capacity to deal with when Crane's death alone would be cause for great uproar.

Two days later, the mourning flags were hissed, and Ernest Dalton announced the death of the Doctor.

"My fellow citizens, it is with great sorrow that the Doctor's advisors have today come before you. It is my regrettable duty to inform you of the passing of our great leader, Atreus Crane, who

has, after a prolonged illness, finally lost the fight against death in the early hours of the morning two days prior. Doctor Crane was a great man and the heart of our country for close to seventy years. For twenty-three years, he has been the president of this illustrious country. Many of you might not remember a time when he was not yet our savior. Crane, who was dedicated to the improvement of our city-state and under whose rule great progress has been achieved, constitutes a great loss to our people. It is with this in mind that we, as his closest advisors, have decided to hold a parade in his honor this very evening, after which his commemoration will take place. Atreus Crane might be dead, but his name will forever live on in our history as the man who has lifted us into the future. Long live the city-state! Long live our trustworthy people! Long live progress!”

It was within the hour of the announcement of Crane’s death that the riots began. People who had been oppressed for the better part of their lives had finally found hope again. They prayed that if they acted swiftly enough, while the future of the country was still uncertain, they could put an end to the regime. Buildings burned, law enforcement opened fire upon the freedom fighters, and the city looked war-torn. The streets were bathed in blood and corpses, and those who were old enough to have lived through the initial months of the sickness were forced to remember the similarities of the carnage the justice seekers and their like had left behind.

As soon as the citizens started noticing HELIOS wasn’t working, most redistribution offices were razed to the ground, and those who had been afraid of the repercussions of being identified as untrustworthy by the surveillance system joined the fray. The situation had devolved into an outright civil war in a matter of days. High-ranking regime members started to flee the country. Ernest Dalton was strung up on Main Square for his apparent support of Crane and beaten to death by an enraged mob.

Eventually, not even the neighboring countries, who had not

broken their non-intervention policies for over two decades, could support the ongoing violence. They occupied the state under the banner of bringing peace through a joint military operation. This didn't endear them to the city-staters who had not forgiven them for their inaction and for trapping them within their borders. Their neighbors had abandoned them to Crane's mercy. Although their intervention had put a decisive end to the oppressive regime and the morality system, the citizens didn't trust them to have their best interests at heart.

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Today, several months have passed since the beginning of the occupation. My country remains in a precarious position. Reintegration into life without constant surveillance is difficult, especially for those who have never experienced such a thing. Unemployment runs rampant. As it turns out, a lot of the jobs we were assigned to were pointless and don't exist outside the regime. Schooling is another matter; our credentials are useless, and much of our knowledge is outdated. These days, our economy is entirely reliant on the benevolence of the foreigners. Our credit scores have no value due to them being based on biased datasets. Not that that would matter. They were part of the data lost in the explosions when HELIOS self-destructed.

On one hand, I am glad that nobody else has the chance to get their hands on the programming that defined the surveillance system, on the other, without the servers, there is much less evidence that can be used to convict the high-ranking regime members during the Capital Trials, where they stand accused of crimes against humanity. Without knowing what exactly was stored on the servers, we will never know for sure to what extent the regime has violated our privacy. We will never know what counted as untrustworthy enough in Crane's books to be punished. We will never know the whole truth. Without this information, there is nothing we can do but speculate. It will be that lack of corroborating ev-

idence that will be used against us in an attempt to diminish our suffering, and it will work I do not doubt that.

Nobody knows what the future holds, but we can't allow it to be silence. It will take a long while before my country will be able to support itself again. I am sure some will try to recreate the system we have suffered under, and to those, I can only say: There are reasons why regimes such as ours never last. Humans are not built to live without privacy, sooner or later, they all wither under the constant surveillance. And there is nothing more dangerous than a group of people who have nothing left to lose.

There are a lot of things we are left having to consider and a lot of questions we must ask ourselves. Asking ourselves what we are willing to sacrifice in the name of progress is just the beginning. One thing, however, is for certain: We have far too few laws that truly constrain the extent of digital surveillance and invasive algorithms. The suffering my people faced is only one example of how technological progress can be abused. Let us strive for a future where such blatant violations of human rights are made impossible. Let us strive for a future where neighbors do not turn their backs on each other. Most importantly, let us strive for freedom.