

NOVAPOLIS

Andrew Kass

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*** PART ONE ***

< THE CITY >

<1>

The day we took for the Project, I stood on the road and watch troopers like grubs in and out the lodges we lived in since my borning. Everything of us packed in Mama's wheely-wire basket; well that, because when the troopers said all the people out then a flash and a whoosh and all the homeplace went aflame. We feel fire lick through the lodge where me and Sarey and Dugi and Lisey borned, the place where Papa and Dugi died, though we did not speak of them in this time.

We started then, and walked some days. The sky arched kindly, and the troopers not much worse, standing along the road, guns oiled and easy in the dust, nodding and grinning behind shade specs. Taking Papa's place I got chum and water fill from a blue caravan that the troopers called the roach coach in the morning and at the stops.

As we walked, me and Mama taking turns with Lisey in the basket, Sarey scuffing up dust devils beside, I saw more piles of smoke away across the Pampas, and knew soon there come hundreds more folks with wheely-wires and burrows marching on the road, waiting on chum from the roach coach.

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More people join our walking, speaking sounds that I think words but cannot decide what words. One day I ask Mama about these sounds.

Different people have different tongues, my Feran. That way one tribe knows itself from another.

Is that like the Uplanders, Mama?

Yes, Ranei, these cousins who chose the heights many hands of years ago. We trade still, be cousins still, so we understand each other, though they keep words close now and we yet speak the beautiful tongue of the Pampasei.

Who others walk with us, Mama? Old cousins too?

Mama coughs into her serape and smiles for me, brushing back Lisey's hair with her fingers as baby sister sleeps in the wheely-wire cart.

I do now know yet. We will discover this together.

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Walking a day and a week then the day Mama takes us to the prayer meeting to be baptized. She fusses us into slit towels and pillow covers to go and have an old round flowery-smoke man say some words in a nose voice and clap some water on our heads from a fancy bowl. Mama seems sad for all the fuss, but it feels good since we do not wash much on the road. I see sun through droplets hanging from Lisey's silky hair like tiny gems. She laughs and shakes her head, shucking light every way. The troopers all around the prayer meeting have their caps off and guns down easy, smiling behind their shade specs.

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Nights I am alone with the stars. As dust of day settles behind and around us, I locate myself, in a dirty blanket on hard ground, against the Great Crescent pointing north, the north I feel in my bones. Threads of cool wind that pierce the metal smell of the caravans lack only the shuffling of dreaming goats from my nights of far pasture. But not then anymore. Father's ghost with little Dugi cannot cross the mountains, cannot leave the Pampas. Yet we must.

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Our walking again and always, up, down, up, up, level: Wind perks up blown dust in our faces. Sarey doesn't mind, just screws her face tight and keeps walking. Mama holds her belly like she drank brown water, so I do not ask about her turn pushing the wheely-wire cart, I just push and squint down at Lisey in her nest of blankets. The whole world wraps around Lisey, the rising road, the wind cutting colder, the rain slashing through it. I am just like the thin man on the nose talker's big crossed stick, looking down at poor little Lisey shivering in her wet nest.

Nights we do as best we can, tacking our wet blankets with some others around the edge

of a dray. Sarey asks a trooper if we can sleep under a truck, but he tells her flat no.

Third wet morning, descending, the rain passed leaves everything mud, and Mama's got a croup. Before we start, after morning chum and packing, she takes me by and says, Listen Ranei, if I stop, you keep going.

I tell her, Mama, we stay together--

But she fetches me up.

Ranei, you must do this! You must take the girls through and keep them together, no matter what! Now you promise.

My eyes overwater, I try not to unman myself, Mama washing in and out of focus, old, older, not there but a blur. I promise. She pulls me tight.

My good boy, Ranei. You always pull the man's share.

But we have no leaving. We drag over one more rise, up and up against the low grey sky. We see people hit the top some ways up and stop, just a breath, before they get pushed ahead.

Something coming up, Mama, Sarey says.

Mama just, Uh-huh. She staring at her feet, one after the other, her old akalas sliding around her feet in the mud.

Sarey pushes along past the folks in front of us to see. We long ago lost our neighbors and kin from the Pampas, but the Uplander folk in front of us, our ancient cousins, run curious too. Sarey gets to the top, wind blowing her hair long. She points.

Set in the center of a broad valley plain sits a great walled village full of blocks, stepping up to wide buildings high like mountains in the middle of it all. Sun pokes through the clouds and lights the facing windows, real windows, like cold fire. Black smoke from maybe a hundred hands of chimneys hits the wind and flies away to a grey distance north and east past another, higher circling ridge.

This it, Mama? This the place? Lisey chirps.

Yes, baby. I believe so.

Mama sounds low, sick. This looks like maybe a place with doctors.

When coming down the hill the wheely-wire's right wheel pops off. I just catch Lisey from spilling out to the mud while the wheel rolls off on its way. Lisey can walk with Mama now that we know the way ends near. Sarey helps me rig shoulder straps from blankets, she takes a bed roll over her shoulders, and we keep going.

The way goes longer than it looks, the buildings bigger but not closer. The wheely-wire digs into my back with each step, I keep the steps short or it nicks the backs of my legs. Sarey's got her jaw set, plowing on like she will never stop though that wet old mattress weighs as much as she. Mama coughs away from Lisey, trying not to stop Lisey skippity-hopping in her hand.

The sun's gone off again and buildings block the horizon when we get to a crossroad. More like our road splits, left, right, straight on. People ask the govermen standing easy at the gores, but they just shrug. Some folks go left. Some go right. Most go straight ahead, what looks like the shortest way in.

Mama says, Babies, we finish wandering. Straight on.

Over a little rise just past the crossroads, and we see the wall, the top smooth, rounded down each side from a walkway. Thick gates as of giant lodges stand open to welcome us.

I slow, and Sarey too, but Mama just keeps going with Lisey, so we go.

The govermen at the gates still smile and nod as we pass the first gate, then a ways to the second. In its shadow, I see the wall goes not straight up but comes out wider at the top on both sides. The govermen at the inner wall nod but don't smile, clicking each of us in along with a red eye that blinks through each. Past the wall, another two sharp-wire gates, then big grassy fields, so much grass, and no livestock in sight. The buildings just ahead stand a hand of windows high, the rest up like steps to the bigger ones further in. I see nothing as small as even a council lodge here.

At the end of the field, troopers block the road and steer us into a big wide hall, like a feast house, the biggest I have ever seen. Everyone from our piece of road goes in there, and it does not fill. Tables cross the whole place in front of us, with governmen sitting and standing behind and little gaps to let through one at a time. Behind that I see two white tunnels, one marked with a straight figure, the other a figure with a triangle at its bottom.

Suddenly I stop, grabbed from behind.

Take off that basket, the trooper says, fast speak. Take it off. Won't need that.

He hoists the wheely-wire off my back. I feel like I'll float away, but ask him, What about our things?

Later, he says. You'll get it later.

Mama keeps pushing ahead with Lisey in the flow looking not one way nor the other. I catch Sarey; they rook her bedroll too.

Nothing we need, she says. All used up anyway.

I see up ahead governmen behind the tables asking questions of the people. Doesn't take long, then each gets a tag on the wrist, pass through, next. As I get closer I try to listen to the questions, but something about the space blurs voice, too much buzz, too much murmur. I see a flicker of Mama and Lisey with tags on heading for the triangle figure side, then the man before me goes through and I approach the table.

Govermen trooper woman, blue cap, specs, blue jacket: She speaks to a flat, lighted box on the table.

Name?

(Whingey lowland speak.)

Feran.

Fam-ly name.

Uhm, Jezraeg. (Close enough.)

Tribe?

(Tribe? What's that?)

Um, uh, ...?

She looks dark ice through those glary specs.

Look, punkin, we don't got all day. Who's your people?

The, the people. The Pampas--

Pampasani. Fine. Know yer age, punkin?

Old enough.

She is already writing on a pad with no paper.

I'm sure you are, punkin. Got family with you?

Mama. Sarey, Lisey, my sisters.

Know your mama's name?

About to say, Mama, I say nothing.

Figures. Stick out your left hand.

She quickly slaps a chip into a wafer and loops the band around my wrist. Quick tug, it's on tight.

Pass through. Left side.

The left side bears no triangle, I guess meaning men. White cloth walls, so white I have never seen, like the sun made flat. Little suns in cages under the roof make the whole space, bigger inside than the whole homeplace, bright as summer noon--

STRIP!

This trooper looms big muscled, not smiling.

Hop to it! Rags, frips, everything off! Down to the skin!

An elder with an Upland serape stops before the flap opening where the trooper stands. I see a mound of clothes behind a white screen wall.

But I wear the clothing of my people. It would be shame--

Off, Pops! Or would you like a little help?

Two more troopers step out from behind the screen. Bigger. They wave the elder in.
Me, too.

C'mon. Gotta clean you up. Getcha new clothes.

But I like my clothes. They wear well.

Get'm later. C'mon, Pops, nothin' we ain't seen before, ah?

Seeing this, I do not care about my rags, but I care about the elder. I put my forehead to his dry old hand.

I will go with you, grandfather, and help you if I can.

He lifts my chin with his other hand.

Blessings upon you, nephew. There can be no shame when two stand together.

Behind the first screen I see many men and boys undressing around a pile of clothes. I see upland serapes, Pampas djellabas, pantalons, all faded and soily against the white of the walls. The elder removes his serape, folds it, and lays it at the edge of the mountain of scatter bigger than a council lodge. I pull off my djellaba and fold it, the blood thread stripes almost worn through to spiderwebs at the knees and bum and shoulders. I lay it next to the elder's serape.

C'mon! Hurry it up! Move! Move!

Men at the edge of the pile herd to an opening hidden by the mound. I know it from the mists beckoning like mirages, disappearing, coming again.

The elder looks to me. His mouth moves but finds no words. He nods deeply, and shucks his brown wove tunic. I take off the white shirt from my baptising. He pulls off herder's moccasins. I kick off my akala tire sandals, almost new before the walk, plenty of tread left. They take some fresh blisters with them, just one more pain. The other men on our side of the

pile stand, watching the elder, waiting with their pantalons. All our cousins, sunburnt faces and arms, pale shoulders and bony chests. The elder closes his eyes, and unties his pantalons. His legs come clear white and lean, and I look away from the nest of his serpent. I drop my pantalons, see my own thin nest, my legs white and grey mottled like a dusty goat.

Frippin' brilliant! Now move! C'mon, cleanup time!

The words beat like clubs and we go at a trot to the misty flap. I glance back before I enter, and see the next group enter in rags, bewildered.

The next chamber has rain, early spring chill. Some boys laugh, some men too, at rain inside a lodge. Then a low voice which seems to come from inside my head says GRAB A ROPE. Everyone whirls around, so all have heard it. Again: GRAB A ROPE NOW.

Many ropes loop down from above. I look to the elder. He grasps one, examines it.

False hemp, he decides.

I take up the rope behind him.

Suddenly the line next to us begins to move toward one of many large tubes at the end of this rain chamber. The men walk with it, curious. Just before the opening they all look around again. Then they are inside. I hear shouts, some screams.

Our rope pulls.

Stay close to me, nephew. I will guard us with what wisdom I have.

The voice: CLOSE YOUR EYES.

A few paces. Again:

CLOSE YOUR EYES UNTIL TOLD TO OPEN THEM.

A test, the elder whispers. It must be terrible to behold. Be strong.

He reaches back the hand not holding the rope. I take it, and close my eyes.

A scream directly ahead of us. I clamp my eyes shut. Not a rain now, a spray, thick, like sheep mucus, all over, slick. The smell is of wet chalk. A solid ground lays beneath so my feet

do not slip as I am pulled by the rope, but my hand must grip tighter to the rope. It pulls us to a sound of whirring machines.

Men, still howling, their sounds are moving away. Whoops ahead. The voice says:

FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY, KEEP YOUR EYES CLOSED.

Thin rain. Then leaves or cloths slapping at my skin. The rain increases. I am pulled right into a whirring something, then through. A small cry before me, and I stumble over the elder.

My eyes open. Immediately they sting, sting terribly, but I cannot mind it. Spinning trees of grey cloth whirl all around, naked men blindly following ropes, one soon will step out from the trees behind our line, on me and the elder. Blob creatures approach from the mist.

You must rise, I tell the elder. My arms around around his chest, I lift him, I don't know how, he finds his feet and I get his hand on the rope, just as the man behind me splutters out of the whipping tree. No room for me between them. I dart around the elder and grab the rope before him. Just before the next spinning tree, I see the blob shapes move off, muttering. I close my eyes.

The cloth leaves become softer as the rain stops. We cross a sudden desert of hot winds, brighter through my eyelids. I peek.

I find another white chamber. At its end I see wheels turning each rope up, the rope returning to where we started in the rain room. Before the wheels are blue govermen with strange devices. One takes a man off the rope, puts the device to his wrist tag. The tag goes into the device, which is then placed on the man's bare left shoulder blade. Another goverman blocks what happens, taking the next man off the line.

FOR YOUR SAFETY, KEEP YOUR EYES CLOSED UNTIL YOUR AIDE ARRIVES.

I must not be the only one peeking. Somebody to my right, a tall beardless man, runs. With nowhere to run, the govermen get him anyway.

Ya dumb sandshagger, one says.

My turn. I close my eyes.

Let go of the rope. We'll get you clothing.

The man's voice comes soft, bored. Lowland.

I'm taking your tag. This is your identity and automatic money. I'll put it where you won't lose it.

The tag gone, I feel a pressure inside my shoulder blade. Then no feeling there.

Done. Open your eyes. Get your clothing, your kit and your housing assignment.

Another opening. Long rows of tables and shelves to the far end, like a plowed field of goods.

Arms out! Keep moving! Right along, let's go let's go!

I turn to look for the elder. He stands right at my hip, his eyes glazed with wonder.

What prison is this? he mutters.

Arms out! Let's go!

I lift his arms, and mine, and we go. Nest pants, short shirts, button shirts, trousers, foot gloves, bootlets, short coat, cap. The govermen ask size but don't wait, a glance, a turn, a parcel, move along. The pile in my arms shouts bright green, a color celebrated in the Pampas, where colors not of blood and stone are hard to come by. One lays a small grey box on top of my pile, and we stagger through the next doorway.

Get dressed! Get dressed and form up at the exit. You know how to get dressed, right?

This chamber has rows of benches, scores of men and boys pulling on the same pretty green. My clothing is loose. I have not worn nest pants since my first working harvest; strange but not unpleasant. I find that I must wear the footgloves or the bootlets slide around my feet. My old akalas felt better made, with stronger stitching and more grip; I do not know the material of these. I put the extra things in the box, which has small, interesting items whose use is

mysterious. I recognize soap, a furry cloth, a comb, a tiny brush on a purple stick, among some tubes and metallic devices.

The elder wears everything but the box. With his pinched face, streaked beard, and wide eyes in the cocoon of bright new clothing he looks costumed in jest. I take his hand and we go to the exit. This takes us down a wide road going into the earth, but smooth white and bright as day from sun-pots along the walls. No govermen here, but all the bright green men and boys still push along as though herded.

Then the ground rumbles around us, and everyone stops. The sound grows, the path shakes beneath our feet, the low roof above roars like a great animal. Many fall to the floor, praying not to be slain. I see the rising of the path ahead, and a change in the light. The elder seems turned to stone.

Come on! I tell him. We can get out.

I drag him past the prostrated many as the noise and motion fill the way. We join those on the rising, those already running. But before we reach the top, the ground roar has stopped.

We emerge to a long, rigid lean-to facing another across a metal road. On this road, closer to the other side, sits a great caravan of three smooth silver trucks, linked one to the next. It reveals no windows, but shadows flit across the silver skin. A bell rings, shouts volley, and the caravan rolls away left, to a long turning and descent to a flat cave mouth.

We find a fence at the edge of the lean-tos before the caravan road, and gates with troopers. I can see across the road now, from our shadow to the light on the faces of women in white suits and caps, waiting as we wait. I look for Sarey, more than for Mama and Lisey, Sarey who will find a way to be seen.

And she does, she climbs the fence directly across from me, looking, kicking at the troopers grabbing at her legs. I call out, and plunge forward to the fence with the elder dragged after. She sees me; they have her legs. She points toward the cave, and lets go. I cannot see her

in the sea of blue. I grab the fence.

Hands off! You'll lose ya fingers.

A trooper looms over my left shoulder. Past him, a green caravan emerges from where the silver caravan went underground. I understand that the men will go into this caravan, and be delivered somewhere different from the women. I want to leap at the fence as Sarey did, but I would have to release the elder at my other hand. I cannot; it would do no good. I speak to the trooper.

Sir, my sister is across the road....

The big hand on my shoulder is firm, not unkind.

Don' worry kid. You'll see her soon enough.

The caravan rumbles in. It has great size and weight, but not loud and fearsome as it sounded underground. The sun races along the metallic green, slows. Doors stop at the gates of the lean-to. Troopers slide the gates back. The double doors slide open by themselves, into the walls of the caravan.

Awright! Load it up! Two by two! Let's go!

Men mob up and pass the gates like water through a sluice. I am barely able to hold on to the elder behind me as we slide toward the gate. Another man jams between us. I am almost to the gate, my arm pulled back, and back.

Please! Please let me hold on.

My voice becomes lost in shouting, though my shoulder screams louder than all of it. I feel the elder's dry skin slipping from my hand, try to clench it, try--

Gone. I stagger into the caravan.

That's it! Close it up!

The doors slide nearly shut. Someone yelps, yanks, the gap in the doors disappears. I stand surrounded by frightened strangers, all in green. To my surprise, one can see out a little

through pinholes in the caravan's skin. I see the elder's face at the gate, blank and lost. It slides away. We move, packed tightly so impossible to fall.

Building shapes slide by outside, blocking the sun. The caravan descends into a cave; a small sun globe whisks by, another. Inside the caravan has bright all around. Men grip rows of metal tubes along the ceiling. I cannot reach these, and cannot get to any of the poles down the center of the truck. The men do not speak; I can smell that someone has wet himself. Perhaps good to be small here. I think of the elder, lost at the platform after our journey through the government lodge. I think of Sarey on the fence, Mama and Lisey walking to their white room.

Will I see them, any of them, again? For here we are moved by another will.

The caravan slows, the sun globes streaking not so swift. The lights of another lean-to underground, large characters on the walls.

NORTHWEST FORTIETH.

The voice again. The men stir. The door opens, and a few stand bolt upright.

STAND ASIDE. LET PASSENGERS OFF. STEP LIVELY.

Men scurry, shove, stampede off to the platform. Once there, they stand. No government in sight. I squeeze against the inside of the doorframe until the tide empties.

STAND CLEAR OF THE CLOSING DOORS.

A bell sounds. The doors slide closed.

Space now to grab a pole. Men lean to avoid a yellow puddle of urine that moves as the caravan moves. The sun globes do not pass as quickly, slowing as we approach another landing.

NORTHWEST THIRTIETH.

More men jump. The doors open, and they shuffle out as though on leads. The rest of us stand aside as commanded. The doors close.

The cycle repeats. At the next landing, some men in brown clothing and caps step into the caravan, now not so crowded. One points to the poor man standing at my pole, his green

pants dark as moss below his nest, his new shoes fixed in the center of the yellow puddle.

Look, they've already squeezed out his manhood!

The others snicker. The voice sounds gruff, not Uplands but not lowlands either. The poor man stares down at his shame. The men move away, brown parting green like a pestle through meal.

At Northwest Tenth, the shamed man jerks upright. The doors open. His eyes widen. His knuckles whiten around the pole. Just as we all hear the Voice, I understand that he feels a command to leave the caravan here. But he will not.

He screams suddenly and clutches his head. He takes a step to the door, slips and falls in his own water. The men in brown are howling with laughter. The caravan starts to gong steadily. The shamed man crawls out the door, leaving a trail behind him. The doors close; the gonging stops.

Hang on, a brown man says.

The caravan starts so fast I lose my grip and fly back through the caravan. The brown men roar above me.

How you like the schedule adjustment, Little Greenie?

I do not answer. I am not meant to. I gather my crumpled box. A brown man has picked up one of the metallic tools that has spilled.

Oho! Someone thinks Little Greenie needs a razor.

Mmm, lessee. Nah, I don't think so.

The caravan slows again. I face the men.

They gave that to me. Mine.

The brown man leans over, his green eyes shiny as the tiny blades in the razor.

Oh? Let's see how well you shave.

CENTRUM.

The caravan starts gonging again. Still late.

If a strong beast can outrun you, and you must fight, thrust your palm heel to the point between the eyes. Then run. I pick up the razor and run off the caravan as the doors close. I glimpse the other brown-clads catching the one I have stunned, the seed of their laughter and his anger, before the caravan surges away.

I stand alone on the platform, as last alone in the fields, but the flock nestled and stars shone and I knew the way home. No stars live in this cave. No home exists here. I look through an arch in the white wall on this side of the cave, an arch on the other. A long passage, steps up and down.

The Voice becomes aware of me.

STAY WHERE YOU ARE. GET ON THE NEXT TRAIN, TO SOUTHEAST TENTH.

It almost sounds weary, weary as I feel. I peek into the darkness of the cave. Two even sunglobes are approaching. I step back as the caravan rolls in. The doors open, no gongs. My heart leaps as I see the elder, clinging to the pole. We embrace, but he does not loose his grip on the pole.

At Southeast Tenth, we both heed instructions to exit.

A few men stand with us as the caravan disappears deeper into the cave. The cave walls feel smooth, the grey liquid stone we have seen on government roads to the lowlands. A red sign mounted at the center of the shelf where we stand bears an arrow pointing to a gap in the wall. Through the opening, the passage floor rises, turns back on itself, rises again, and again. Sunlight appears at the next turn, and a strange curved window at the turning shows tiny green figures rising to one side, a slice of sky on the other. A small face beneath a green cap looks back at me as we pass.

The passage expels us to a way of liquid stone between liquid stone buildings touching the sky. I count up four hands of glass windows, the same on the other side, as far as I can see.

The elder sees what I see, turns to see more of the same past the cave mouth, its round sign of a green U on a white circle. The others remain around him, Uplanders and Pampas alike in new green clothing and caps.

We have greatly displeased the Great Ones to be delivered to such a place, he says.

WALK EAST ONE STREET TO 4550 SOUTHEAST TENTH STREET.

Everyone jumps. The elder shakes his head and presses on, all swaddled. Some men go in the other direction, looking back. We pass three entries. Only wind and we walk these streets.

We cross another wide path, signed with characters, made to know this way as Southeast 45th Avenue. Shops face the buildings, but my heart is burdened by the sight of more streets such as this stretching away to either side, with a false brightness in the distance to the right.

A wide entry, the second past the avenue, summons me. Glass and wire doors open by themselves. The elder and I enter. Voices echo bodiless in the hard, cold halls. We follow to a metal door that slides open to a tiny cell. We hang back. Something bellows within me to enter. I do, and hear a tiny beep.

The elder stands at the threshold, his face tightly closed.

Come, I beg him. We have come this far. Let us complete the journey.

Breathing with difficulty, he steps in. With a second small beep, the door slides closed and the cell begins to move upward. The elder sags to his knees and I kneel to hold him, my own stomach falling. He shivers as though feverish; his sweat stains the green of my new shirt. A lighted window flashes changing characters, then two characters, the second repeating the same characters while the first waits. The climbing stops, and the cell door opens.

Behold: a closed way full of murmurs, much like the entry to the building, liquid stone walls dyed pale green. We step out, and see only weak sunglobes and dark green doors. The cell door slides shut.

19E. IT IS CALLING YOU. GO.

Something pulls me left, then stops me at a door just before the corner on the right. The characters, first two matching the last I saw in the rising cell, must say 19E.

I open the metal door.

Inside we find a square chamber, with a clear wall to other buildings and a slice of purple sky along the top. Pale yellow walls surround four sunglobes, two over the two beds to the left, two over closed wall chests and devices to the right. In the center of the shiny brown floor stand a small shiny table and two shiny chairs to match the walls. A peek left of the door reveals a small water privy.

The elder steps in slowly, looking at everything, touching nothing. At the window he gives a little cry, and staggers back. I go to look, hear the door snick closed behind. Down the shaft are windows all around, into darkness. Up; there is one ring of windows, then sky. The first stars come, even here.

I will die here, the elder says.

I open some wall chests, one an empty electronic chamber with many pictures of how to use it with food, the next a cold cabinet holding packaged food.

Not today, grandfather. Not today.

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<2>

I wake in a bed, dry and swaddled, facing an untouchable sky. A metallic wind hums through regular cuts in the wall. The elder sleeps yet in the inner bed, his breathing harsh and ragged.

Food awaits in the pantry.

Mama, Sarey and Lisey abide somewhere else, somewhere like this.

We have nowhere else to return.

I rise and go to the water privy. I consider the hole, smooth and raised, with a yoke-shaped seat. I leave my waste, and find a roll of white cleaning paper at hand. When I rise, the waste rushes away, replaced by grey water.

The privy stands between a tall box with a high water tap, and a water basin also having a tap. I try the right-hand lever on the basin. Water shoots from the tap, clear and cool. I lean over and drink. I try the left-hand tap. Water again, but warm, getting hot. There soap lays in a hollow beside the basin. I wash my hands and face, and dry them on a fuzzy white cloth hung next to the basin.

In the main chamber, a screen device wears moving pictures. It speaks in a murmur, but without interruption, telling the lore of this place.

Welcome to Project Novapolis, a place created for the health and well-being of our State's poor and nomadic people. Here the health and well-being of all will be provided for, and productive work arranged. As our First Consul said in creating Project Novapolis, none shall hunger, and all will find a useful place in the great society of our Nation.

The voice squeaks lowlands but careful and precise enough to have come from almost anywhere, or nowhere. The pictures show the building of the Project at high speed. I wonder about people who can labor so quickly and intricately, and how the sun can jump over the work

quickly as a wolf over a fence.

This short vid will help you to familiarize yourself with Novapolis, your new home.

High speed transportation is provided by the four tube lines, Silver, Green, Yellow and Red. You will find a map in your bureau drawer. The Silver line serves the Northeast and Southwest Quadrants. The Green line serves the Southeast and Northwest Quadrants. The Red line runs East and West, and the Yellow Line runs North and South. Each line takes a wider loop as it approaches the perimeter of Novapolis, with transfer points to adjoining lines at the Perimeter, and to all lines at the Centrum station at the center of the City.

I remember silver. It must mean that Mama, Sarey and Lisey are somewhere along that line. The endless streets of huge, blank buildings at least have labels I can learn to read, much as I read the stars to find my way home after tracking a lost yearling deep into the Malaterra.

The Centrum is the hub of Novapolis. This is where shows, games and shopping are focused. Parks and recreational facilities are all around the perimeter of Novapolis, and there are gymnasiums and social halls in each building, with larger event halls every ten blocks along the avenues.

This cannot be a village --

The elder speaks, sitting up in his bed.

It wants kinship among the people. Where might be seasons?

It may become a village in time, grandfather.

His white beard quivers against the new green shirt.

I hope you see truly, nephew.

*

After breaking fast with dried fruit, thin bread and gummy cheese, I hear a beep and see a piece of paper where none had been, issued from a device next to the moving screen. I carefully tear it off: A map, a path shown to the Green Tube, to a place at the edge of the Project with the

symbol of a green four-spoked wheel. Next to the wheel we behold a picture of a number screen like the one on our wall, but the ciphers are different. The moving screen must know this is a puzzle, as the next thing it shows is a number screen. It speaks:

This is a clock. It tells the time of day using numbers. These pictures tell you numbers.

It shows and speaks one finger and a cipher, two fingers and a different cipher, three fingers, and so on. At two hands, or ten fingers, it shows two ciphers, the stick cipher for one and a circle it calls zero. Then the screen adds toes to the two hands, more double ciphers, more names, eleven, twelve, thirteen. With two hands and two feet, called twenty, the left cipher changes to that called two, next to the circle called zero. The number lesson starts again.

The elder stands confused. Not by hands and feet, as headman he would have counted all flocks and portioned the small highland harvest, but the translation of one thing to another, all the new symbols and the moving, talking screen itself, that overwhelms him. I try to explain with fingers, and he nods, accepts the words, but when I point to the clock and ask of him the first two numbers he shakes his head.

The moving screen returns to what it calls the clock.

Using what we have learned about numbers, you can see that the time is now seven-eighteen.

The elder shakes his head.

So one does not say zero-seven, and one-eight becomes eighteen.

Let's see what these times of day mean:

0:00 is midnight, the turning of one day to another.

6:00 is morning, wake-up time! In winter, the sun will not yet be risen; in summer, it will be well above the horizon.

6:30 starts morning lessons. You are watching morning lessons now.

7:30 morning lessons end. Time to go to work!

8:00 the work day begins. Don't be late! The tubes are designed to get you anywhere in Novapolis in twenty minutes or less.

12:00 is noon, the height of the sun. It is lunch time. Food and drink will be provided at your place of work.

15:00 is afternoon rest. You may nap, watch the screen, exercise or play a game at your place of work. This is also the end of the work day for the children of Novapolis.

15:30 is the start of school for the children of Novapolis, and back to work for the rest of us. Schools are located at your place of work, so children who work together can learn together.

20:00 ends the work and school day. It is evening at Novapolis; in summer, sunset is still an hour away. It is time to go home and check your self-supplying pantry for dinner at home, or go out to sports fields for play, or shop at the Centrum or the avenues to enjoy some of your well-earned credits. If you like vids or theatre or community activities, you will find many choices in Novapolis. And no cash or barter is required! Just show up, and the credit system of Novapolis will take care of the rest.

There is much more to talk about, and so much to see and do at Novapolis. But this is your first day, and you see that your clock now reads 07:30 -- time to go to work! Take your guide sheet with you, and don't be afraid to ask one of our friendly counsellors in blue for directions.

Welcome to a new day in Novapolis!

At this the screen flashes GO TO WORK, beeping lightly with each flash.

The elder stares at the screen. I think him bewitched until he speaks.

I will not live much longer here. This place calls for those who may yet learn new ways.

You can learn, grandfather. You abide, wise with years, strong with experience.

His eyes turn to me, empty of spark.

My wisdom means nothing here. My experience -- a lost world. My people scattered.

What purpose to such a life?

I take his dry hand in mine. The beeping grows more insistent.

I beg that you let me guide you. Maybe we can find our people again, and make this a good place.

He does not resist as I lead him out the door. Before the door closes, I hear the beeping stop.

*

Easy to find the tube, and the caravan comes right away to take on all the people in green waiting on the platform. In the caravan some wear brown and yellow who occupy most of the seats. These do not look about at new things, but watch palm vids or nod in rhythm with clips on their ears. A few look at papers with series of pictures and characters whose words are expressed in ciphers.

Reading. I must learn to read.

The elder clings to a post, holding tighter at each station as, its name called, the crowd thins. At the station called Red/Green Transfer, we must leave the almost empty caravan. He closes his eyes and continues to grip the pole.

Grandfather, we must go!

I tug at him. He stays, shaking his head.

The doors begin to close. I block them with my body.

Grandfather! Come, or the doors will crush me!

PLEASE DO NOT BLOCK THE DOORS!

I see blue troopers approaching on the platform, hands on short clubs.

The elder opens his eyes and looks wildly about. He suddenly darts under my arm to the platform, and I too jump clear.

The doors shut. The caravan moves off. The troopers stand over us.

Is there a problem?

My grandfather fell asleep. We almost missed the station.

A lie, but the troopers relax.

Yes, well, that's not a good thing to do, son, even if y'have a good reason. Nex' time, go to a nex stop, go aroun' t'thother platform and come back. These trains'r automatic, an' they don't like waitin'.

Friendly now, I take the guide sheet from my pocket.

Sir, we are going to this place?

Mm-hm, Kruger Tyre. Follow the wheel symbols to the foot bridge. Move smart, too, you just goin' make it.

Thank you, sirs. Good day.

Goo'day to you, young man.

As we move off to the first wheel sign, I hear the troopers talking behind us.

Aeach, greenhorns.

Yah, well, I wish my boy minded like that'un.

Wheel signs appear as the trooper foretold. Where the station ramp turns back, a wheel sign points to the straight up way. The cave fills with morning light: The sun, arisen before us, surmounts the east barred by a vast lodge beyond the Perimeter wall. The buildings stand lower here, none more than a hand of windows high, and fields of grass – sports fields -- become mown as we watch by a man in a motor cart. The smell and the sun enliven us.

Just before the field the walk leads into to a wide, covered footbridge with the wheel sign on its roof. We join a stream of green, brown and red clad people in the wide tube. The crowd moves quickly, the scuffle of feet replacing talk. The Browns push through. Reds check the time displays and walk quickly. Those in worn green follow the Reds. The rest of us try to keep up.

TWO MINUTES TO GATE.

The Voice fills the tube, whose even white glow starts flashing yellow. Reds rush past us. I look back and see that a gate has begun to descend on the opening. People yet run in.

The other end of the bridge lies the same distance ahead. No gate yet. I tug the elder's hand.

Come, quickly.

He complies with a long Uplands stride. We make halfway down to the wheel place when the Voice says ONE MINUTE, and the flashing goes red.

The gate slowly descends. At this pace, we will walk through without stopping.

Racketing steps behind us. I peek back as a wave of Reds come racing over the low crest of the tube. They all share a wide-eyed look of terror.

Faster!

Mere paces from the gate the Reds run through us. I hunch my back and get low like when caught in an arroyo wash, but the elder stumbles into my path and I tumble over him. I sit up, dazed, looking back at a tube littered with crumpled green shapes. One looks up, bald, a woman, her cheek gashed, her face pleading: she cannot get up. I look to the gate.

The gap now only a meter high and closing. I grab the hand of the elder, who clutches his side, and drag him through. I hear a cry behind me, but the blood pounds in my ears, my breath is heavy, so that I must hold for a moment on the smooth liquid stone, where appear black boots issued from blue pantalons.

C'mon, geddup, ain't got all day. Nex' time you get here earlier, ah?

I am lifted to my feet, so. The elder draws himself up, scuffed but straight.

Is this how you regard people? Like animals?

On the other side of the gate remain about a dozen people, huddled a small distance back. I must ask.

What about them?

The trooper, ignoring the elder's question, answers mine.

They stay. You go, thataway, green sign.

The elder walks to the gate, reaches toward it with spread fingers that clench as his hand jerks back.

I stay too.

The trooper mutters something toward his lapel. Suddenly the elder gives a little cry and arcs back. I catch him, feel a tingling in his old limbs.

Green sign. Now!

I shoulder the leaning weight of the old man into a branching way that rises in a liquid stone tube with sunglobes every ten paces. These government love liquid stone, love tubes, love sunglobes more than sun. They put you on ways that you cannot figure for distance or direction, but render very clear maps for how to get there. A small resistance in this place may be as a grain of sand to a huge machine that irritates until it is ground to dust. I agree with the elder that this all feels wrong, but even in a bad place one must first survive.

The green path ends at a room of government behind glass, the wheel sign on their blue tunics. Five queues, two or three people in each. I cannot hear their words, but they flow questions from the blue side, mumbled answers from the green. A buzz door waits to the left for when the talk is done.

The Voice directs me to White Line, nearest the door. I go with the elder. The Voice speaks displeased.

Nestorel Fligha to Grey Line!

I knew not the elder's name, but the Voice does. The elder pulls himself up, and lays hands on my shoulders. He smiles a little, then walks off stiffly to the grey line marked on the floor. He looks straight ahead, standing his tallest as he would from a height to seek a lost sheep.

Before me another government lady in spectacles and dark lowlands hair cut short looks at something inside her glassed chamber, a vid reflected in her glasses, not at me.

Feran Jezraeg?

I nod. She looks up, cross.

Feran Jezraeg?

Yes.

Her attention returns to her space. I can see but her head above the shelf that tops the closed partition.

Station 10. Take this and report to Foreman Brach.

A blade of paper grows from the partition. I take it. The elder has one too. The government behind the glass lean back. No more green shirts behind us. As we go through the one door, it closes.

A door opens just ahead on echoes of crushing mechanical sounds, like some waking beast of flesh and metal both. Through the doorway we find four choices of way, marked with colored ciphers. My paper shows the double cipher, one-zero, called ten, on a violet dot, and glyphs under this which I have not learned. The elder's paper bears nine, the most senior number, on a blue dot. Both take us through the rightmost way.

It curls back around the government office, another sunglobe tube with a blue floor on the left, purple on the right. We hear the angry mechanical sounds, smell a harsh odor like an improper offering -- no, like a truck, burning, like just before death took Papa. I tasted a grit in the air then, and so now.

The way splits, blue turning down a ramp to a switchback, very loud. I begin to go this way with the elder, but he stops me. He points to my paper.

Go your way, Feran of the Jezraeg, and learn what you may. I take my path.

Yes, grandfather.

My reply falls on his back.

The purple way to Station 10 continues for another thirty paces before it too descends and turns back upon itself. Loud, yes, but not as metallic. More a hollow *thump thump thump*. The tube descends, and turns again, opening suddenly to a space vast as the mesas, full of bodies and machines in motion.

CARD!

A fleck-faced Brown with wild red hair bellows from a high perch by the outlet of the purple tube. He snatches my paper with short, thick fingers and passes it over a device strapped to his forearm. He peers at it and scowls.

Great, another frickin' school kid. Well, Jezraeg, you're just two-thirds of a worker for me, so I ain't settin' for no whinin', y'hear? Show up on time and do what you're told, starting with me, Foreman Brach. Follow!

His entire elevated seat moves.

Leto, get the kid rackin' thirteens.

A tall, dark Red boy with old eyes turns from a cart holding four rows of tyres, many hands across.

Get gloves.

He points to a bin full of white work gloves, all big, all the same. I put on the first I grab.

Follow me.

Foreman Brach already departing.

An' if he has problems wit' the thirteens, move him up to fourteens!

Leto does not acknowledge the instruction. He stops before a rack of smaller tyres.

Take the tyres from the hook and put them on the rack. That's it. Don't stop till you're told to.

Hooks move in a ceaseless line from another part of the factory, a tyre on each. Men and

boys pluck a tyre, turn, put it on a rack, turn, pluck a tyre, put it on a rack. Leto looks me over with old eyes.

Do your work, you'll be okay.

Work. People of the Pampas work from the time they can walk. Sowing, gathering, herding, milking, salting, carding, weaving, mending. Tasks that move in a cycle of time, like breath. Here, machine work, the same task, over and over and over. Grab a tyre, turn and rack it, again, again, again. These smallest tyres weigh no heavier than Lisey. I turn my mind free to wonder about my sisters, my mother, one day into this new life, shutting out the pain of repetition in my shoulders and back. Are they in such a place now? Mama sick; Lisey small: Are they caught between gates on a bridge somewhere?

I drop a tyre in the last slot on a rack. When I turn back there another rack stands empty. A tall Uplander in worn green works from the top row. We barely nod in passing.

And Sarey: What do the govermen do with strong spirits like Sarey?

I see the map, with every tyre I pluck from the line, I see the tubes, and recall the Silver going out, a fourth-piece of the City, but a start.

A horn blows. I turn back to the line, to an empty hook, stopped.

Lunchtime, ladies.

Foreman Brach cruises the area.

Hit the canteen and the head, but be back and ready to work by one.

I follow the drift of men and boys. Then Leto hovers at my shoulder.

Get some food. Noodles and fish are good and cheap. Bean soup's decent. Lay off the sausage. Get lots of liquids, and make sure you get to the toilet before you come back -- leave your gloves.

I cannot place his accent, but Leto's guidance shows true. The smell of food draws people from all around to a great low kitchen with long tables. Greens and Reds herd along a

food counter, filling trays with food and drink. I realize I feel hungry and dry, and greedy in filling my tray.

I look where to sit with my food. Leto is the only person I would recognize -- or the elder. Nestorel Fligha, Section 9. I do not see white clothing, as would be worn by my family, at all.

Boy! Come.

I glance, and see the tall Uplander who hoisted tyres with me, seated at the end of a table. I sit. Two Upland youths nod up from their sausages.

I am Gindel Oraia; these are my brother's sons Gelas and Mihel. You have no landsmen here?

I tell the man who I am, my people. Then as my mouth clears enough to speak again, I ask if he knows the Uplander elder Nestorel Fligha.

He is our people's Altimo. It is a blood blessing on you to have preserved him thus far.

Gindel speaks simply, and very low, mixing in odd words with Uplands. His nephews study me over bites of potato.

We lost him at the centre, my people and our paid friends in blue. My nephews and I had come to scout several moons ago, but found that we could not return a warning. We hoped at least to spare him this.

You will find him in Section 9. He refused my offer to walk with him.

Gindel stares at the oily soup. Getting cold now, less fragrant.

That is well. The sub-foreman is a man of the earth. Arrangements may be made.

What about our foreman, Brach? And Leto?

Brach is a beast set to rule over men. He is cruel but lazy. Leto is ambitious: the sea-boy will sit on Brach's carcass yet.

Gindel's eyes soften.

You must bring the Altimo to our place -- or tell us yours, so that we may not fatigue him.

We exchange locations. Gindel and the boys have a flat (as they call it) on Northeast 22nd Street. I ask how one finds people here.

There are ways. Now, finish up and clear your place, we must water the trough before the break is over.

*