

I. *Diluvia*

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The world was ending, and it wasn't with a bang.

The first to go was Venice, home of the Second Renaissance, apex of the holo-pic industry and immersion suite technology, a tourist city that capitalized on its underwater exhibits, preserved and submerged 17th century homes, until the floodgates failed and the entire city became one morbid exhibit.

In response, suit-wearing naysayers planet-wide gave a collective gasp as if they'd somehow missed the doomsday cults and scientific reports, overlooked the voluntary exoduses and the region-wide evacuations condoned by governments enlightened enough to act preemptively.

Los Angeles was next, and then Miami. By then we were taking in refugees by the thousands; our fleet was large and we'd been planning for a long, long time, but even we didn't anticipate just how quickly we'd have to react.

Amsterdam. St. Petersburg. Nagasaki, but the Japanese were, as expected, a step ahead, launching pontoon prototypes of islands that claimed to float. A sovereign nation, insular even in the face of catabolic collapse, they politely, adroitly committed token forces to our relief efforts and drifted out into the Pacific. We lost contact. Their scientists, now a part of our international team, showed no signs of distress; they were, it seemed, were a geopolitical sacrifice, allowing their nation to strive forward unperturbed.

Our fleet reached maximum load when the Mediterranean swallowed the Peloponnese and Sicily. We were holy pilgrims once again, taking on the exiles of antique lands. Landless and country-less, we found ways to survive the inexplicable sudden storms and week-long calms. Our solar roofs sustained us through the relentless stretches of sunny days. The below-deck labs struggled to churn out our supplements, resources, meals in cups, but inevitably, they told me we had reached our carrying capacity. It fell to me, to my aides, to turn people away. I knew, as I did, that in their dinghies and scows, I was dooming these people to death.

Cairo. Bangkok. Vancouver. Images of carnage while the datanet still functioned – houses hollowed out by Hokusai's waves, animals and people buoyed liquidly along bullet train superstructures, aimlessly adrift in relief vessels. These survivors were frantic, a haphazard collection of emotions that ranged from cathartic renewals of faith to abject hopelessness, the unwanted vestiges of not-soon-enough evacuation efforts, questing for higher ground.

And these places were only the largest casualties, the cities with names recognizable enough to have meaning in headline news. The coastlines receded as we sailed aimlessly, a network of different nationalities, allied by circumstances it was too late to alter.

In contrast, our utopia seemed callous, unearned and unfeeling in the face of devastation on a scale our race had never before witnessed. We were a structural-functionalist's dream, a perfectly constructed, harmoniously operating web of specialized, divided labour in which everyone participated to run our ships, sew our clothes, manufacture our food. Our organization was the product of the greatest minds combined: biologists and sociologists worldwide, working in tandem to determine what was most efficient, a Benthamesque concoction to achieve the most good for the most of us, the last of us.

Despite our academic perfection, the situation felt tenuous. I vacillated uneasily in the affections of my people. I was not universally loved. But nor was I feared: I maintained, as best I could, an impartiality influenced only by fact and fairness. From the *U.E.V. Genesis*, I governed our fleet, heeding council from my experts and advisors, from representatives on each vessel. But I knew, distantly, that autocracy tempered by oligarchic wisdom would, when the gratitude of our homeless passengers wore off, give way to seditious rumblings, atavistic murmurs that question my decidedly un-divine right of rule.

My security clearance, my PhD, my UN ranking as leading administrator would, in the years to come, lose significance as chaos erupted on land and our traditional pillars of meaning and authority crumbled. We avoided the conflicts as the relics of governments struggled to replicate our technology. We practiced an insularity that was easy in our post-petroleum age. We came ashore in desolate places,

islands too small for names or once-verdant wastelands that had, over the half-century, given way to the unpredictable climatic shifts. We took what we needed and returned to the sea we had learned to live by and love.

And as the first signs of cultish obsession became apparent, as my ministers began their treasonous plottings, as the workers bowed in deference when I visited their ships, I realized that something was shifting. The gleam in the eyes of the sail-makers when I stopped by their workshop for an afternoon. The soft reverence the introverted mutters of my chief engineer as she introduced me at the union meeting. The respectful, curated smile of my doctor, efficiently giving me my yearly radiation-resist shot.

I did nothing to impair my own deification.

I knew, as we regressed into a primitive social order, that my democratically determined claim to command would not be sufficient to maintain order. Becoming an object of worship was essential for our continued success. We had more or less projected this very outcome, knew it was one of the likeliest of possibilities. I began then to experience a sartorial obsession that I had never known before: I made sure that my uniform fell straight, stayed clean, my pale hair orderly and austere. I had an image to maintain.

Citizen Heinlein was the first of my aides to be executed. He was a political scientist, the world's foremost expert in game theory. He predicted, with models and theorems too abstruse to warrant contemplation, that our current situation put me on an inexorable trajectory towards draconian tyranny of the darkest, most perverse order. He was forcibly adamant in his insistence that I concede, that my role be divided, shared amongst those with lesser qualifications. But we had discussed this eventually and deemed absolutism essential at all costs. Without reservations, we put him in the brig.

When he escaped, we sentenced him to death.

Citizen Singh, Citizen Meyer, and, of course, the people of the *Genesis*, the menagerie of men and women throughout my fleet – they demanded it.

I knew as my Praetorian Guard brought him up from the depths of my flagship, that I did not want Citizen Heinlein to die. But the swell of the masses, the cries for justice and adamant declarations of loyalty to my life, my image, my honour, told me all too clearly that mercy was not an option.

As Heinlein stood straight and uncompromising at the railing of the ship, I remembered when we first met. A conference in Munich, scholars gathered in-person – a quaint homage to academia of the past – to retrospectively reflect on nuclear obsolescence. A cold week in early January. I had been impressed with his paper, given in clear and uncompromising tones, all the more forceful through the inflections of his German brogue.

I stood straight and tall on the deck of the *Genesis*, gloved hands clasped behind my back. I stared across the ship, met his stern, pale eyes, set deep in his grizzled face.

I remembered, as he stepped proudly off the edge of the ship, of my world, the bottle of French Bordeaux we shared after my own talk. The gentle clink of our wineglasses eclipsing briefly the delicate murmur of his accented English. He was the keynote speaker, and I was thrilled he'd even known my name.

But that was in an antediluvian world, and I had no time for such trifling nostalgics. Our mission was too important to risk compromise and Heinlein had too much integrity to be managed. I had a task; the future of our people depended on my continued rule. And deep below decks, lower still than the brig where Heinlein had anticipated his fate, the cells where others of equally questionable loyalties now rotted in wait, our scientists toiled. Microbiologists, ecologists, physicists of esteem and renown, an optimal think-tank assembled in the years leading up to what we now called the Great Collapse.

They worked, clandestine, as they had for seasons, engineering, replicating and creating - our primary source power consumption, dedicated to the single purpose that would ensure our continued survival.

Because, distantly, we all knew that life in the Nomad Fleet was a short-term solution, ultimately unsustainable as the presence of viable, uncontested land dwindled and the tides grew higher. We the administration were, my people began to say in their discontented murmurs, too indiscriminant in our initial loading policies. We let too much of everyone in, they complained as they convinced ourselves that

we might be *the only* survivors. There was not enough thought given to what roles were most important, what knowledge was most vital to preserve.

But we had been chartered with that purpose; the Fleet was instructed, back when instructions reached us and the chain of command was clear, to provide indiscriminant relief for those early floods. During those planning phases in New York, in a time that felt worlds away, my team had determined that the specialized roles necessary to our continued existence required little to no prior training. Indiscrimination was the only fair way to decide who participated. We responded to need, made no conscious choices. And thus each of the administration was called upon to make sacrifices; I may have saved Sicily, but I had not heard from my daughter since Lake Hammarsjön swallowed Kristianstad and their datanet went down.

And so our crews were wonderfully eclectic, artisans and businessmen, children and elderly, physicians and hybrid electricians, and while my people may have resented their randomized shipmates, I never regretted this panoply of earth's inhabitants. I knew that there could have been no other way, no lottery to determine what lives to save. What trades we needed we preserved, and feudalistic apprenticeship served to perpetuate the knowledge that had to transcend generations to keep us afloat. And all the while, our scientists, their assistants, slaved away in the recesses of the *Genesis*, giving life to inert matter so that we might have a home again.

Our sick died. Our young and healthy paired off and gave birth. As I aged out of my middling years, I adopted a stern serenity of being that endowed me with calm but unwavering policies for decision-making and governance. It was in this, the second decade of our interminable voyage, that some began to call me the Revered One, Nyström of the *Genesis*, mother of the light.

Superficially, these names amused me. But as I walked among the intricate hanger bays and spoke to an underwater water welder and her teenage child, as I watched a inept soy-gro trainee berated by his Master Baker, as I spoke eloquently and briefly at the centennial birthday dinner for the fleet's eldest inhabitant, I knew that my judgment was what soldered together our once disparate ways of life.

As I wandered the hallways of the *U.E.V. Rakhasa*, uncaring of echoing clangs my boots made on the metal beneath them, I smiled at the voluble torrent of angry Italian that poured out of a cabin door. A Language Master was fighting for control, berating querulous children into submission in an attempt to render them more amenable to uni-lingua lessons. A modern day Esperanto, our panel of linguists had developed the uni-lingua language under the principles that it must be flexible, simple and rapidly learnable. Conquering the language barrier was one of those first challenges we faced in the loading process, but it was one of the conditions of boarding; each refugee committed to the study and practice of the uni-lingua. But here, decades later, in the darkened hull of a massive sea vessel, cultures clung desperately to their lexical lineages, their holidays, their traditions.

I climbed above deck and had the crew extend a bridge on the port side, linking up to our scholar ship, the *U.E.V. Socrates*. I passed Citizen Ruiz, the anthropologist, the scribbler committed to what we all privately thought was a fruitless venture. The project manager for our cultural preservation efforts, Citizen Ruiz co-ordinated interviews and collated information, extracting knowledge from our crew to save on technology that would likely be unusable within the next five years.

As I passed from the *Socrates* to the *Zulu*, the *Zulu* to the *Champlain* I thought of Xerxes, hopping the Hellespont across a bridge of ships, conquering nature in the name of building his empire. I wondered what had happened, how that story had ended. Distantly, I knew the Persians floundered, falling victim to too many predators, an empire lost to an even more powerful will. I vowed as I crossed the translucent plastifibre bridge, heedless of the ocean's swell beneath my feet, that I would never succumb to such weakness.

The engine team bowed as I passed, following my wordless gestures to extend the last bridge back to my flagship. I reached the *Genesis*. My aides immediately fell in line behind me, trailing wordlessly as I ascended to the upper deck, entered my pavilion and took the Command Chair.

Typhoon warnings, I re-plotted our course to accommodate. Production flaw in the latest batch of soy-gro, I signed the recall order and authorized a fleet-wide broadcast. Weather-proofing improvements proposed by the Tailors Union, I granted permission to generate prototypes.

Authorization for military action against the *U.E.V. Ultima*.

I remember with absolute clarity the unwavering resolve in Citizen Chen's face as she made her unprecedented request. The dissent that Citizen Heinlein had predicted, all those years ago, was finally making itself known. Somewhere out on the far reaches of my fleet, discontented rumblings had given way to outright indignation; sedition mounted, just as the aged political scientist had warned.

The Nomad Fleet was built without a military component because our utopic ideals brooked no devolution into anarchic violence. Such disarray was lethal to our mission. Citizen Chen bore the closest semblance to military personnel, and she was an ex-war room strategist turned political negotiator whose only battle experience was as a combat engineer. But I knew any request of hers was founded on inscrutable evidence and meticulous analysis.

"Revered mother," a skinny, dark skinned man knelt in front of my chair. I looked at Citizen Chen, who gave the barest nod of accession. He was her source. "They whisper that you have lost your way. That you," he hesitated, a product of the cognitive dissonance of a man who thinks, but is not sure, that he is doing the right thing, "you have given up on Atlantis. That you intend to cling to power and keep us adrift forever. They have planned in secret to seize control."

I did not acknowledge the man. Instead, I surveyed my aides. They stood straight in their double-breasted black uniforms and each met my gaze with the knowledge of what this meant. We were transported, each of us, in memory, traversing backwards in time to that day when we planned for this eventuality. We never imagined then, the actuality, the feeling of being here and being responsible.

"Contain the ship. Disable steering. We need a quiet quarantine." I glanced up to Citizen Aristov, co-ordinator of our Master Helmstaff. "Cancel that revised course. Take us in to the typhoon."

I caught Citizen Chen's nod of agreement, but around me, I felt the unease. I looked each of them in the eye.

"We knew this was a possibility. We must stand firm. We will find shelter in the storm everlasting".

I felt their acquiescence, their doubts melt away, as they murmured in turn: "We will find shelter in the storm everlasting."

I glanced down at the man at my feet. I closed my eyes for the barest of moments.

"Put him back on the *Ultima*. No one must know."

I met his panicked gaze as realization seeped slow into his brain.

"But Great Mother, my loyalty, I have –"

My voice was steel.

"Sedate him. No one can know."

Citizen Chen stepped forward with an injector gun, and the man was inert in a heartbeat.

"We will rendezvous three hours before storm-warning. Go with the light."

"Go with the light."

They left me alone with the consequences and my conscience.

Climatic shifts were common place in our way of life. Sudden slashes of lightning across a calm sunny sky were sometimes all the warning we received. We had predictive technology and a team of meteorologists, but their models were outdated, crafted in a time without rapid fire changes in weather and temperature. With so much changing so suddenly, our newer predictive strategies were often worryingly ineffective. We learned to cope; our helmstaff were trained under Citizen Aristov's scrupulous watch and though there were close calls and weeks spent in relentless rain, we were adept survivors. Without a destination, we had no set course to diverge from, no deadlines to meet, so often the easiest choice was to change direction and avoid a storm front all together.

The storms regularly interrupted our communications, impeaching on the frequencies over which our signals were broadcast. They were always dark, an unnatural blackness that could set in at dawn and last for hours, committing us to days of shadow. And they were loud, chaotic as each Deck Master or Citizen maintained order in rare moment of de-centralized control. During the storms, each ship was a nation unto itself.

This fortuitous confluence of factors meant that I had no reservations about implausibility as I gave the order to sink the *U.E.V. Ultima*.

Citizen Chen held the remote detonator in loosely curled fingers. Citizen Aristov had placed the charges two hours earlier. I closed my eyes as her thumb closed over the button. There was no way to hear the explosion over the wind, the thunder, the roar of the ocean.

I pictured in those subsequent moments the sides of the hull exploding outward, plastifibre and metal lancing out into the sea. The *U.E.V. Ultima* was a water purification ship, its personnel trained in the operation and upkeep of our Martineau Converters. They must've known in those final hours that something was wrong. But without a way to contact another ship and without steering control, they would've floundered, bound to the trajectory we had remotely ordained for them. They must've known, their leaders must have realized with cold certainty, what lay ahead because the Nomad Fleet brooked no disunity. We were the last bastion of our people, a beacon in the dark that must stay lit and whole so that we may be born anew. In their traitorous hearts they must have known, as the non-ship personnel were blown to bits, as the family quarters filled with frigid ocean, as the water turned winedark with the blood of unacknowledged martyrs, they must've understood that this was the only way.

I opened my eyes and waited for the storm to subside. In the morning, we made the announcement.

On the surface, nothing changed after the disappearance of the *Ultima*. There were no apparent lapses in deference. There were other water purification ships, and they were able to compensate. We hosted a memorial; I spoke with conviction and sincere grief. The days protracted into weeks and soon the matter was no longer discussed. There was agreement: the storm had taken them.

Moving forward, our prayers were imbued with a conviction we had never before known. My people prayed for shelter from the storm, for Atlantis, our mythological destination.

I prayed for stability because I felt it in the air, saw it in the downcast eyes, and heard it in the suppressed conversation of my Citizens. Some, I knew were in awe, convinced beyond any scholastic justification of my divinity of wisdom. But others cradled their misgivings, held them close like barely-living flames, shielded them from the razorblade wind that my will could become.

I felt the rumblings beneath my feet and in my heart; I knew we didn't have long.

That's when Citizen De Souza assuaged all our fears.

"We can do it," he told me at his monthly status update. "We can build Atlantis."

Plato invented Atlantis, our historians insist, as a model of his ideal city state, an ideal that fell tragically to the ocean floor in the aftershocks of a failed invasion. For Plato, the world was a plethora of abstractions, an increasing series of similitudes that receded further and further from reality until we were all little more than shadows on the wall, breathing, eating, functioning but failing to *live*.

Our Atlantis would reach into that ideal world out of a Petri dish. It would grab its Platonic blueprint by the metaphoric horns and slam it into existence. We would burst forth from our snake skin doppelgangers selves, leave behind the hollowed out versions of us that this lifestyle made real, and live again with land beneath our feet.

Ironically, the ideal climatological site for our Atlantis was right where Plato had placed it: past the pillars of Herakles and off the coast of what was once called Spain.

I gave the order to begin.

By then we had emulated the pontoon city-scapes of our long lost Japanese rivals, but we did not want *floating* cities, subject to the ebb and flow of tides we could no longer predict. We wanted stability, rooted soil with at least enough weight to hold us steady through the worst that the angry world could throw at us. And that is what our engineers and scientists had discovered; technology that twenty years ago was laughable magic was becoming a reality before our eyes.

I sit here now and write as the project forges on outside my window. It seemed important, suddenly, that some personal record survive, attesting unscientifically not only the devastation, but to the survival that emerges from these times. A subjective account of the phoenix in the ashes.

I am on the *Genesis* and it is the seventh year of our building project. I am overseer in name only; the complexities of the prefab structures, of the nano-construction and genetic manipulation needed to build and grow our island are far beyond the comprehension of any single mind.

It was the longest the Nomad Fleet had ever been moored in one place. We were forced away when the climate shifted, we had our work destroyed, our workers endangered, our lives lost. But in the pursuit of a project we were all promised as the end goal, our dedication did not waver. This was home, and we were the light in the darkness.

Tomorrow, we move into the city. It is not our planet in a natural sense. It integrates with our ships so that, if necessary, a hasty evacuation is always possible. It has no animal life, no fauna but that which we have inserted ourselves. But it is earth. It is the only land that can promise us safety in a time when desert turns to sea and solid ground to shifting plates that refuse to sustain life.

I write this with the knowledge these are only the first steps. That as the Great Mother of my people, I will have to lead us onto this new landform and into this new world. That we will spearhead the return of our race. That the remanufacturing of our planet is in my hands. It begins with Atlantis, and it begins in a storm.

But I do not worry. Instead, I pray.

Let us find shelter in the storm everlasting.

Children smile, boots splatter in mud, a slippery surface they have never before known.

Let us seek temperance in the age of indulgence.

Citizen Chen smiles at me. Citizen Aristov bows his head low.

Let us tread wisely the path before us.

I step forward, arms out, and enter Atlantis.

Let the darkness give way to a world renewed.

Our journey is only beginning.