

“One of the Chosen”

Year 2067

Antonia

The wind beats against my flimsy jacket, attempting to pierce me with shards of icy air that whip through ebony splinters of burnt trees. I found this coat on the body of a girl who must have been about age 14. Her face was scarred with burns, and vomit covered her mouth—evidence of a chemical weapon. Miraculously the jacket was pristine—blue with a logo “Heavenly Ski Resort.” Yes, this place is just like heaven. If heaven smells like rotting fish.

Every day, I say thanks to that girl for giving me this jacket that has saved my life. I wish I knew her name. I should’ve buried her. Instead, I left her for the vultures. Well, if there are any left—and if they’ll eat a poisoned body.

Head down, I walk straight into the wind while trying to calm my chattering teeth. Twice a day I make this journey down to the lake’s edge to gather whatever bit of freshwater I can.

As I get closer, I breathe through my mouth, trying not to gag on the smell of hundreds of decomposing fish and dozens of bloated human bodies that litter the shore. My mind fixates on where I step, so I don’t slip on a decaying carcass. Falling into the pulpy mess is not easily forgotten.

I walk out to what must have been the center of the large lake. How pretty it must have been! Oh, how I would’ve loved to paint it. Now it’s a muddy puddle ringed by dilapidated homes and torched trees frosted with gray snow. I know from pictures that snow used to be a crisp white, glittering landscapes in a reflective glow. No white snow here. Decades of wildfire ash tinged with polluted rain create a shade of gray that reeks of atrophy. Last week was a warm

spell, so most of the snow melted. I can thankfully see the putrid bodies and avoid them. These are the blessings I give thanks for.

After scraping my plastic tub that advertises Trader Joe's Greek Yogurt in the small bit of water, I snap the lid on and make my way home. It has been weeks since Makoto and I saw a single human. I don't want to get my hopes up, but will today be the day?

When I turn onto our street, a loud humming fills my ears. My heart skips a beat. It must be them! I break into a run, and within seconds, I'm at our cabin. Sure enough, a black hovercar is in front. We are saved! Hallelujah, my prayers have been answered!

I rush inside to see Makoto in one of his moods—arms crossed, nostrils flaring. I give him a weak smile that says “sorry” and turn to face the two men (I think they are men?) in black. They have helmets on, so I can't distinguish anything about them.

“Are you Antonia Abe?” one of them asks.

“Yes, that's me.”

“Your request to join the Endurance Foundation has been granted. We're here to take you to the City of Prosperity where you'll work as a sculptor to create art for the courtyard that honors our great Benefactor. Makoto Abe, you will work with our climate team to monitor the surging storms surrounding the cities. We have a contract for yo—”

“Hold on, my wife and I need to discuss this,” Makoto interjects.

He grabs my arm and drags me to the back bedroom. Makoto shuts the door. As usual, it pops open a crack due to the warped wood, but at least it's some privacy.

“What have you done, Antonia?”

“I'm saving our lives.”

“Living in those cities is not salvation. I've heard rumors...”

“I have, too: fresh air, warm rooms, clean clothes, plenty of food—”

“Once you enter the cities, you cannot leave—”

“Why would we?! Makoto, we’ll die out here. There’s nothing to eat and the fresh water is drying up. All of the other humans have gone to the cities, so must we!”

“It’s not worth it to give up our freedom.”

“What is freedom if we’re starving to death?”

Makoto presses his fingers on his forehead.

“Our baby deserves to grow up in a safe place,” I say, rubbing my hand across the small bump that holds our precious child.

“They say terrible things like married couples are separated and babies are thrown outside the walls if they don’t meet their ‘requirements.’”

“You heard him; we’re being offered important jobs based on our skills. I’ll make art again! Plus, it’s rare for women to carry babies to term, if our baby is born, it will be cherished.”

“I don’t know...”

“There’s nowhere to go. This is our only option.”

He shakes his head, convincing himself. Finally, he exhales loud and slow.

“Alright, we can go. But at the first sign of trouble, we leave, okay?”

“Okay!”

I’m so excited; I jump up and kiss him. A new beginning for us and our little one. My heart bursts with happiness. We run back into the main room, hand in hand.

I exclaim to the agents, “We’re ready to join the Endurance Foundation.”

“Good, please sit down. We’ll run a few medical tests to make sure you are not carriers

for any diseases, as well as a short psychological test. Should only take an hour, and then when you arrive at the City of Prosperity, you will be shown to your quarters, given a hot meal, a shower, and time for rest before you start your new jobs.”

Now this...this sounds like heaven.

Leanne

The expensive champagne tastes bitter on my tongue. I can't shake the images from my mind: police officers in riot gear barring the path from our bullet-proof car to the secure building, using their shields to block out the images of the hundreds of people screaming at us. As if those shields could block out the sound of their rage.

Decades of drought and endless wildfires have driven the remaining humans into the cramped streets downtown, huddled together to form makeshift communities in the shadows of barricaded skyscrapers. Starving and scared, the masses seethe as earthquakes rumble, bringing the threat of a deadly tsunami closer each day. It's only a matter of time, and we, the wealthy, are planning our escapes. My last name ensures my safety. This will probably be my last time in San Francisco—my heart aches to even think that.

Yet here I am in my teal satin gown, sipping champagne, listening to the sound of an accomplished pianist, instead of the sounds of the screaming mob swarming 20 floors below.

I feel my brother, Brooks, wheel up to me. His glass of champagne remains untouched, balanced on the sleek wheelchair that syncs to a chip in his frontal cortex. The furious look in his blue eyes matches mine. He can't push out the images of the mob down below either.

“Where's Evelyn?” I ask my brother.

“I don’t know, but I’m ready to say our ‘hellos’ and get out of here,” he says.

“She wants us to stay for Magnus’ presentation,” I say.

Brooks grunts his reply.

I force a smile as Magnus glides up to us with his beautiful blonde wife on his arm.

What’s her name? Oh, it doesn’t matter.

“Brooks, glad you could make it,” Magnus says, offering his perfectly tanned hand. My brother bares his teeth in a twisted form of a smile and roughly shakes his hand.

“You remember my wife, Chelsea?” he asks, presenting her like a cream puff on a tray of appetizers rather than an actual human. She smiles, not daring to speak and show her humanity.

“This must be the other sister!”

“Leanne. Nice to finally meet you,” I say, presenting a strong handshake to show him I’m not a cream puff of a girl. His eyes widen at my firm grip.

“Your sister Evelyn and her husband Michael have been absolutely integral to our project,” he says with a smile of perfectly capped teeth.

“We’ve heard,” I say as I gulp my champagne.

The hard knot of bubbles sticks in my throat and a cough threatens to wrack my body. By sheer will, I swallow it down and regain my composure. I’m not going to cough over stupid bubbles in front of this man.

“Ah, here she is,” Magnus says as Evelyn walks up to us.

It’s been over five years since I’ve seen her. Even though she’s only 24-years old, Evelyn’s already had work done on her face to make her look even younger. No sign of smile lines, wrinkles, or any blemishes on her perfect creamy face. My eyes take in her long brown hair glinting with blonde highlights. I feel the silk of her expensive dress as she hugs me.

She may not look the same, but she smells like my little sister. I close my eyes, soaking in the hug. My mind reels back to running together on the beaches in Monterey. Our hug ends, and as I pull away, I expect to see her eight-year-old hand in mine, but instead she has long, sculpted nails painted a light gray. Her entire appearance costs as much as it would take to feed a simple meal to the entire mob outside. This knowledge curdles in my stomach. My smile fades and my cold armor of defense rolls up: separating her from me.

“Lee, I’m so glad you could come. I know you’re busy with your work,” she says in a silky voice I barely recognize.

“Yes, a litter of wolf cubs is being born, so I have to fly back up to Alaska early tomorrow. As you are well aware, they’re the last pack of wolves alive,” I say, turning my gaze to Magnus. “The legislation you sponsored took care of that.”

“Oh Leanne, let’s not talk politics before dinner,” he says with a twinkle in his eye.

The gentle clinking of a glass grabs our attention. A young woman with dirty blonde hair and a sharp angular face holds an empty glass while lightly hitting it with a silver spoon. The smile on her face feels at odds with her harsh demeanor. It’s disturbing to think of how hard she must be trying to appear pleasant.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Magnus says.

He strides up to the hawk-like woman, casting his perfect smile across the room of about thirty adults in tuxes and evening gowns.

“Thank you, Berit. Hello friends, new and old. As you know, we are in a time of unprecedented change, and our future has never felt more unstable. We face threats from both the violent weather that changes in an instant and the violent masses who envy our hard-won

abundance. These mobs will not stop until our luxuries are ripped from us. I, for one, will not roll over and submit to these lazy, entitled people who wish to steal others' hard-earned property."

"Here, here!" an old man with pale jowls shouts from the corner.

I force down a snort of contention that almost makes me fall into a coughing fit. With silent deep breaths, I keep the cough from exploding out of my body and bringing attention to my disdain.

"We must prepare for a new era. But that does not mean that we must give up our way of living. At the Endurance Foundation, we are building three cities where we can live our days in safety, luxury, and prosperity. Enclosed in protective domes made of the cutting-edge technology, you will forget the ravaged environment and remember the relaxation of the past, which will become your present. You will be surrounded by your peers and feel at ease each day. Our slogan is 'Chosen to survive. Built to thrive.' We are inviting you to be one of the chosen," he says.

With the flick of his wrist, 3D images populate the room with models of the polished white cities, brimming with sterile interiors and artificial intelligence technology. 'Oohs' and 'Ahhs' swish around the room.

All I see is a complete departure from the natural world and a further enslavement of our final few precious resources. I look over to see that Brooks shares my disgust. We grew up running through the forest and swimming in the ocean—until that natural world was murdered by human greed. This plastic world is abhorrent. Evelyn, however, smiles with complete serenity, her perfectly toned arm resting on her husband's.

"We know that survival is simply not enough. Not only will you have access to the most

advanced medical care, ensuring that you will live as long as possible, but we are also, with the help of esteemed geneticist Michael Harper, creating a new generation of advanced humans who are built to survive in this new world. Your genes can live on in the most advantageous way, securing your legacy.”

Once again, I suppress a snort, but this time, I can’t stop the coughs that wreck my body. Harsh, ragged coughs cut through the air. I look up through tears blurring my eyes to see a glass of water being handed to me by a kind young woman with light brown skin and shiny black curly hair, dressed in a waiter’s uniform.

“Thank you,” I choke out in a whisper to her.

“A brochure has been downloaded to your consoles. With the right size investment, you will join our Members of Society community in the City of Prosperity and live out your days in peace and pleasure. Our doors are open now for new members as we populate these exquisite cities. My dear friends, please join us in building a new world that is truly designed with you in mind,” Magnus says, ending with a flourish.

Applause erupts across the room. Couples rush up to Magnus, enthusiastically shaking his hand.

“And they call Icarus a monster, yet her community isn’t some imperial caste system,” Brooks scoffs into his glass.

“Are you still working with her team?” I ask while watching my sister across the room.

“Yes, her methods may be unorthodox, but I’m helping Icarus’ team save as many endangered species as we can before people like this,” he says gesturing to the gushing couples, “make it impossible.”

“Oh shit, here she comes,” I say, watching Evelyn turn toward us.

“What did you think?” Evelyn asks with excitement brimming in her eyes.

“How much are you trying to get out of me?” I say, my emotional armor rolling up.

“Maybe you should read the brochure before we talk,” she says.

“How much, Evelyn?”

“\$100 million is the recommended investment,” she says.

I burst out a mocking laugh, right into her abashed face.

“I knew it. You want me to turn over our parents’ trust to you, so you can pay for your pampered life. Well newsflash little sister, they left me in charge of the trust, not you.”

“Probably because they expected something like this,” Brooks adds.

“It’s not like that,” Evelyn says in a tiny voice. “I have cancer. This is my only hope.”

“Ha, join the club! Who doesn’t have cancer?! We’ve poisoned this world to the point that the only thing left to kill is ourselves,” I say.

“I believe in my husband’s work,” she says a bit stronger.

“You want to live out your colonial fantasy. Evelyn, look around at all the faces of the people who are invited to be a ‘member.’ They look familiar, right? Then look at all the faces of the people who are serving those porcelain faces. They look a little different, right? I’m not going to invest in a world that continues to oppress others,” I say.

“There are other groups forming that aren’t based on oppression,” Brooks says.

“Icarus? She bombed our construction crew and murdered twenty people!”

“These cities will kill even more people—the emissions alone will tip the scales toward irreparable mass extinction,” he leans in and whisper-shouts.

“I can’t believe my own brother is sticking up for a terrorist!” Evelyn exclaims.

“Stop it—both of you. Evelyn, the only way you’re getting our parents’ money is over my dead body,” I say, beaming a wicked smile. “And you may be in luck! The doctors only give me a month to live. Lung cancer, you see.”

“I didn’t know...” she says, shocked.

“Unlike you, I’ll use my last days to ensure that others besides us privileged few have a shot at survival,” I say. “I’m sure you’ll have no problem stealing the money from my daughter once she inherits it, but I want you to remember the price you’re paying for your...comfort.”

“This is our only future left,” Evelyn says.

“Mother was right: you never had the stomach for justice,” Brooks spits out.

“Enough,” I say patting his arm. “This is the last time we’ll see each other. My only hope is that you’ll someday grow out of this selfishness and actually try to help the world,” I say with a cough bursting through my final words.

“Lee, I don’t want things to end like this,” Evelyn pleads as we head out the door.

I feel her aguish, but I don’t look back.

Evelyn

I shouldn’t feel nervous, but butterflies flit in my stomach. It’s just dinner—dinner with both me and Michael. But I know...a woman always knows when a man is thinking of more. My whole life has been spent in the shadow of men’s hungry glances.

One of my most vivid memories is of my mother slapping a man with her purse, pulling me away, her eyes frantic, primal. I was nine years old shopping with her in a Nordstrom, buying a jacket because snow was coming in September. Even then I had to suffer through these looks

from men. When my breasts came, I started to see these looks as a source of power to draw men in, use them, reward them, punish them, and discard them. Of course, sometimes I was the one used, abused, held down, mouth covered, told to be quiet.

I button the delicate fabric buttons that hold up the thin purple halter dress that flows around my tan legs. Gazing at my reflection, you would never know that a month ago I finished a brutal battle with cancer. In the old days, my breasts would be butchered in the name of health. But now with the advancements in the City of Prosperity, my perfect breasts remain intact.

“Ready?” Michael says.

I turn around to see my husband admiring how I look. My brother has the brains, my sister the passion, and I have the beauty.

“This is a great honor to be invited,” he says.

“My heart fills with gratitude at the invitation,” I say, properly demure.

Six months since we arrived here, and I’m still learning the proper phrases, the proper customs, and the perfect level of submissiveness to display.

“Good,” he says and walks toward the door. I follow.

We arrive at the Benefactor’s private residence, present our faces to be scanned, skin samples to test, and DNA to check. The white door slides open and tinkling classical music greets our ears. Together, we step into a pearly white residence that’s twice the size of our own already huge one.

Everything is modern just like in our space, but the furniture here is a touch nicer, fancier, richer. Several helpers bustle around, laying out trays of appetizers and pouring glasses of champagne. I accept a glass that is offered to me, and the sparkling bubbles dance on my tongue. I love champagne, always have, always will.

“Antonia, this sculpture is impeccable—you captured my son’s piercing gaze perfectly,” Magnus says while swiping the air to rotate the 3D image of an imposing marble statue of him and his son.

“It’s a pleasure to serve you Benefactor,” Antonia says in a timid voice.

As she rises from her bow, I’m struck by the raw intensity of her caramel brown eyes. I stifle a gasp as her swelling belly appears while she stands up. A pregnancy! So rare.

“Since the statue pleases you, may I see my husband Makoto?” she stumbles out.

“He’s very busy with the climate models. I’m sure he’ll get a break soon,” Magnus says in a smooth voice, “Ah, my guests have arrived. You may leave Antonia.”

She rattles out a stiff nod and pivots to the door. Our eyes catch, and I drown in her suffocated expression. It’s as if she’s throwing a rope to me, asking me to pull her to shore. I try to convey that I am drowning in the same ocean.

The door shuts, and only we remain. My feet draw me toward the floor-to-ceiling screens highlighting the majestic rocky cliffs of the now submerged California coast.

“A little bird told me that you love rocky coastlines,” a silky voice says.

Magnus slinks up behind me, laying his warm hand on my hip, enveloping me with his arm. Claiming me, owning me. My guts scrunch in alarm, but I stifle my instincts below an accommodating smile. I know how important this is for Michael. I must not be difficult.

“I grew up in Monterey—it’s very special to me,” I say.

“Glad I chose correctly,” he says.

His arm is still around my waist, his greedy blue eyes inches from my face. I can feel his hot, minty breath. For a second, I feel suffocated, but I exhale and smile.

“My heart fills with gratitude,” I say, demure again. I’m getting better each time.

The entrance slides up, and Berit storms into the room, rage glittering in her cold eyes. As she sees the Benefactor's arm around me, my husband several feet away sipping champagne, she realizes that she stumbled into a social affair.

"Dear Benefactor, I apologize for the inconvenience, but I come with urgent news," she says.

Magnus detaches from me, and I feel my insides expand and breathe. Like a rabbit sensing the predator has moved on, I move my body again and stride toward my husband. Magnus gestures for us all to sit on the plush couches.

"Come, my lieutenant, let us all chat in comfort," he says.

"Sir, this is a confidential matter," Berit says.

"Anything you say to me you can say in front of our two largest investors. Without Evelyn's inheritance, our great city would not exist."

Berit taps furiously into her console and a crisp 3D image populates in front of us, above the glass coffee table. It's a horrible sight: hundreds, maybe thousands, of desperate people clamor outside of our great dome, pounding on the walls, and living in filthy encampments in the barren wasteland next to our luxurious city. The desperation and anger in their hollowed-out faces frightens me.

"This is right outside?" I say, my voice wavering with fear.

"Yes, and the crowd keeps growing. We must act," Berit says.

"Once again, people who did not earn something want to take it away from the worthy. Generations of lazy people sucking on the teat of hard-working citizens. They were not chosen to survive, so I have no interest in their survival," Magnus says.

"There are children out there," I say softly.

“Children who inherit the same lazy, entitled attitude of their parents. They will not accept the gift of safety that we offer and assume their station with gratitude; they will cry and scream for equality. If they were worthy of equality, they would’ve earned it by now,” Magnus says, taking a sip of champagne. “You saw how Antonia asked for something that was not offered. Now multiply that by the thousand greedy souls out there.”

My heart screams out that this is wrong: how can a child’s destiny be set? I am not the carbon copy of my mother. I should know, I’m her greatest regret. “You always were a selfish child. Even as a baby you pulled my earrings until they ripped out of my ears, blood streaming down my neck. Your siblings never did that. Nothing has ever been enough for you,” she said on her deathbed with disgust glimmering in her eyes.

How can these children be thrown away because they were born into a family who couldn’t afford to be “chosen”? I open my mouth to say something, but Michael shakes his head at me. I obey and drop my eyes.

“The nerve gas then?” Berit says, her finger poised above a command on the console.

“Sure, why not!” Magnus says, clapping his hands in excitement.

Berit pushes the button. Our eyes are glued to the image. Thin vapors of smoke steam out of vents in the dome. I watch as the people outside see the puffs of gas, their faces twist in horror, and they start to flee. The elderly and the young children are too slow; many are trampled as the chaos of fear creates a stampede. I see a baby fall from a woman’s grasp. The mother’s eyes widen in panic. My eyes are glued to her face, watching her desperate plea to stop people from running, then the glimpse of the small head being trampled, and the woman bending down to pick up the battered tiny body, falling, and joining her child in a brutal death.

I want to puke.

The smoke overwhelms the crowd, and hundreds fall to the ground. Within seconds, their bodies start twitching and seizing, their skin erupts in boils, and their screams echo across the crowd. I have to look away; it's too much.

In ten minutes, it's over. A mile of bodies stretches out from our walls. The price of safety.

Brooks was right—the cities will bring more death than Icarus could ever inflict.

“Fantastic work, Berit! Love the new nerve gas, very efficient. Much better than waiting for the pesky environment to kill them slowly,” Magnus says.

“We will leave the bodies as a reminder to not come near our city,” Berit says, her cruel face emoting her version of joy.

“Great idea.” He stands. “Now if you'll excuse us.”

“Of course, sir. It is my honor to serve,” she says, bowing to Magnus and shuffling out of the door.

Magnus lifts me up from the couch; his arm quickly wraps around my waist again. I am a conquered land.

“Michael, you can go,” Magnus says.

Like an animal who has realized his foot is caught in a trap, my eyes jump over to my husband, wide with fear.

“It is my honor to serve,” Michael says, not meeting my eyes and slinking out the door.

“Now, let us celebrate a great victory,” Magnus says, nodding to a helper to fill my champagne glass.

My tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth, I can't speak. I'm in shock that Michael left me here like a set of keys he's forgotten. After all that I did to wrestle my inheritance from my

niece, enduring her wounded looks of betrayal across the courtroom. He was supposed to be by my side. That was the deal. I didn't know he was making other deals behind my back.

What a fool I've been.

Leanne was right—she was always right.

Magnus guides me to the dining table, where only two settings are laid out.

“I'm so happy to hear that our doctors cured you of that nasty cancer. You look radiant,” he says.

“Thank you,” I croak out, my mouth dry.

“Now that you're healed, we can move onto your greatest purpose. At the Endurance Foundation, we want our next generation to be born of the very best genetics,” he says, leaning in and kissing my neck. “My dearest Evelyn, I invite you to be a vessel of my own.”

He doesn't even wait for my reply.

“Michael is perfecting the fertility technology, so we don't have to rely on outliers like Antonia. We cannot secure our future with her genetics, but we can with yours and mine.”

What can I do to protest? Nothing. Where could I run to? Nowhere. I'm supposed to be the one locking the door, not the one trapped inside. I funded this damn city!

Stupid Evelyn, you built this prison and locked yourself in. The only exit route is death. I've fought this long for my health. I'm not ready. I shudder thinking about the infinite beyond. Is it endless cold, black nothing, or is it heaven? Would I even make it into heaven after all I've done? No, I can't face it. I can't. In this moment, all I can do is what is expected of me: obey.

“It would be my honor,” I say, bowing my head, choking back tears.

“Of course, it would,” he says. “Ah, look at this beautiful soup, please eat.”

I stare at the soup and the silver knife lying next to it on the crisp napkin. I could end him right now and avenge those poor people. My fingers trail along the metallic edge of the knife as my mind spins back to my sister: the leader, and my brother: the rebel—who am I? The beautiful idiot. My fingers leave the knife and drop into my lap.

Leanne was always right. “Your beauty opens doors for you, but you may not like the rooms you enter. This is a dangerous game, Evelyn. You’ve pushed us away, and in the end, you’ll be alone. I wish I wasn’t right, but no one knows you better than me,” she said to me last year, her voice full of sadness.

It doesn’t matter that she’s right. She’s dead and I’m alive, trapped in this city I helped build. My brother is aligned with Magnus’ enemy—no one is coming to save me. There’s no way out for Antonia, for me—all that is left is only survival within.

I pick up my spoon and smile at Magnus.