Settlers

Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'

Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades

For ever and forever when I move.

Ulysses, Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Chapter 1

Ben looked out the window at the crack in the street. Ten feet wide and raised three feet on the far side, it ran as far as he could see in both directions up and down the street. He remembered the headlines: “Scientists learn to control gravity. Bending gravity waves will capture greenhouse gasses, lower sea levels.” There was a car in the crack that hadn’t been there yesterday and he wondered when someone would pull it out. He wiped out his bowl and put it in the sink, took a last drink from his cup and looked out the window again. The sky was a lighter orange today but there was always the drizzle. Lighter orange meant you could go outside but still for only a few minutes and always with your skin covered. He put on his jumpsuit and picked up his backpack and opened the door. Turning right out of the door, he walked four blocks to the end of the street. Rows of buildings all made of the same gray composite material: blocks of condensed CO2 from Carbon capture that were supposed to lower greenhouse gasses but like everything else it was too little too late. He looked down the street as he walked at the crumbled buildings, brought to the ground by too much gravity, and tried to remember what they had looked like before. His mother had worked on the sixteenth floor of one of them. He turned left at the end of the street and walked two more blocks.

He stopped at a metal door and entered some numbers on a keypad. The door opened and then shut as soon as he walked through. He closed his eyes as a mist filled the small room. As the cloud cleared, a second door opened and he walked through that one. He put his backpack and jumpsuit in a small recess, which closed with a sucking sound as he walked away then got onto a bicycle and started pedaling, nodding and smiling to the man on the bike next to his.

“You know,” he said, “there was a trope, before, that in the future we would all just be batteries, or generators, for a super intelligent computer.” Wolfie looked over. “But it’s not that bad really.” They both smiled.

Chapter 2

“With my crossbow, I shot the albatross.” Anna read aloud and then looked up, thinking about the poem, written now over three hundred years ago, and about the situation they were in now. Like the Mariner in the poem, humans were certainly expiating for the way they had treated nature. Nature. This is the book I’ll take with me, she said to herself. Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink. There were times when she thought her life had been like the poem’s author’s life. The doubt and uncertainty. She had put certain of her beliefs in abeyance until further notice. There was no such thing as conservatism anymore. At other times, she felt her life had been more like that of the author’s friend, Wordsworth, with his steady conviction and sense of vocation. She felt like of the two, Coleridge was a more likely comparison as nature, so important to Wordsworth’s writing, was in very short supply. She wished that wasn’t the case.

She remembered when the first Settlers were sent back, about two years ago, as a way of escaping the present earth with too little food, too much pollution, too much cancer. She wasn’t sure who first realized that although bending gravity waves put too much strain on the earth, that it created a way back in time, an arch through time.

Chapter 3

Ben put his pack up, got on his bike and started pedaling. Wolfie was already there. “Did you ever wonder,” Ben said, “why anyone really would want to go back in time and live with dinosaurs? To settle?”

“Look around,” said Wolfie

“Right. But wouldn’t most people rather take their chances with the Orange, than face a Tyrannosaurus rex?”

They looked up at Settler’s TV, the screen on the wall. Video images of Settler’s lives came back from cameras that were part of Settler’s kits. The images travelled at the speed of light, which was thought to be the reason they could travel forward to our time, through some residual time anomaly, even though nothing else could. People were understandably fascinated at the video clips of people’s lives twenty, thirty, even eighty million years ago. Encounters with dinosaurs didn’t usually go as badly as most people thought they would; the dinosaurs, even the big carnivorous ones, usually ignored them.

Settler’s kits cost five thousand dollars, and Wolfie had made almost enough money pedaling to buy one. He was planning to go back to the Oligocene, about twenty five million years ago. No more dinosaurs. The images had confirmed for paleontolgists many things they had suspected about dinosaurs. They did indeed have feathers and were brightly colored. In one video image, a Settler stood transfixed as behind him what looked like a giant chicken appeared to be making a deafening roar. The sound, however, would still be left to the imagination of viewers, as sound did not travel with the images. Birds are the only dinosaurs I ever want to see, Ben had thought to himself.

“So what do you do when you get there, to the Oligocene?” Ben asked.

“You know, start making a new life.”

“With what?”

“The things in your Settler’s kit,” said Wolfie.

“Things like what?”

“There’s a saw, nails, a compass, water purification tablets. Then you start making things. Like it all happened before but faster because you know what’s going to happen. You find ore, and melt it and make nails. Then you make things to make nails faster and go from there.”

“Sounds great.”

“Look around.”

Ben got off his bike.

“Also one book.”

“Have you decided which book?”

“Euclid’s Elements.”

“Geometry? To help build things?”

“No. I just like it. The abstractions have a certain charm. An independent world created out of pure intelligence.” Ben looked at Wolfie who had started pedaling again.

“Or maybe a drawing pad. And some paints,” Wolfie said. “A tabula rasa.”

Ben nodded.

Most of the electricity generated by pedaling was used to run the enormous web of quantum computers, Qweb, that ran almost everything. “Web” was an apt description, Ben thought, as it suggested the importance of the computer to the ecology of everyday life but also had a certain elegiac meaning. Like a spider’s web.

Ben pressed the water button. Pressure was lower today. Qweb had lowered the pressure here, diverting it to some place where it was needed more. The same for the protein mix. Fewer packets on the shelves. He looked at the latest avatar of Qweb on the wall: a circle with wires radiating out of it, kind of like a sun, with a simple, smiling face in the center, and then removed his electrodes.

He had peddled for an hour, generating one tenth of a KiloWatt Hour. The attendant handed him back his chip after adding ten credits. Wiping his forehead with a towel, he removed his backpack and jumpsuit from the locker. Zipping up the suit, he went through the double doors and out onto the street.

Anna was waiting for him outside. They smiled then hugged and she gave him a quick kiss. “What can ail thee knight at arms, alone and palely loitering?” she said. He looked at her and smiled. “The sedge has withered from the lake and no birds sing,” she finished and looked at him. They sometimes found it funny that people were still going to college and that you could still major in something like literature. “People in a Triassic Utopia someday may need to learn Shakespeare,” she had said one night. “Or Thomas Moore,” she added with a laugh. They were sitting on a bench by the river and he turned his head to look at her. “So you’re getting a Settler’s education?” he said. She didn’t say anything.

Chapter 4

Bill Wilson ran his fingers along the hieroglyphs, translating a few of the symbols then glanced at the Egyptian and Greek and wiped a cloth across the stone. Curator of Antiquities, he said to himself. Being Curator was not much different from being a janitor, which he had been just before. When the last Curator died, of glioblastoma, they asked him. I don’t know much about antiquities, he had said. You know how to clean, they said. Most but not all of the air was kept out so most of his time he spent wiping down the artifacts. People still go to museums, he thought to himself.

He walked to the end of the hall, past stone lions, anthropomorphic animals, and up the stairwell, looking at Roman mosaics. Now walking past rows of Greek vases in glass cases, he stopped to look at one. A satyr was grabbing at a woman’s gown who looked back at him. What maidens loth? He walked into the Parthenon gallery and looked at the friezes. Some had been destroyed and some had been brought here. If they were outside today, they would not last very long. Men on horses, women carrying amphora, a procession for a goddess. He walked slowly along the length of the gallery, looking up. Most people today, he thought to himself, probably look at these and just think about how clean the air was back then. Then he saw it, small and partially hidden behind a chariot. A car. He thought maybe a Toyota Corolla. He stared at it for a few minutes trying to make sense of it.

“Someone has broken the fiver,” he said out loud.

Five thousand years. “A Fiver.” This was how far back you had to go, to Settle, to not affect our time line. Five thousand years before that to not affect that one. You couldn’t break this rule. The Fiver was determined accidently. Historians were the first ones interested in the Arches, wanting to go back to witness key events in history, like the signing of the Declaration of Independence. When they went back, records of the Declaration started to disappear. Go back to the Bronze Age though, and nothing here is affected. Scientists thought it had something to do with how advanced civilizations were. Messing around with the Indus Civilization in Asia didn’t change anything. Go back to watch the Colosseum being constructed and we might not have airplanes.

“Someone,” Bill said out loud again, “has broken the fiver.”

Chapter 5

Anna’s mother and brother were already sitting at the table when Anna came through the door. She hung up her jump suit and walked to the sink. The dust outside was dense today and she washed her hands. Her brother’s violin was on the coffee table, out of its case. He had been practicing. They had finally gotten new strings for the violin; the old ones had corroded too much to play. With her father gone, her mother’s brother had made sure that Sam could continue to learn to play, saying that someday he could join an orchestra although there weren’t any to join.

Anna’s uncle Al was in the military, which meant he worked in security at the Arch. He was coming over for dinner tonight and just then there was a knock on the door and Al walked in. He was carrying a bottle of wine, which he handed to Anna’s mother who stood up and walked over and hugged him.

“Hello,” he said and then turned to smile at Anna and Sam. “You’ve been practicing! Good!” he said picking up the violin. “I wish I’d kept playing,” he said, running his fingers lightly over the strings. “Al,” Anna’s mother said quietly, “do you think it’s a good idea to encourage him like this? I mean, who is he going to play with?” Al smiled and handed her a chip for the player. She inserted it and the opening notes of a symphony, Beethoven’s Pastoral symphony, started to play.

Dinner was spaghetti and meat sauce. The meat sauce was made from greenhouse soy. Lab-grown meat tasted better but it was more expensive and they only had it every other week or so.

After dinner, Bill played his violin and then hugged his mom and Al and went to bed. Al washed the dishes and handed them to Anna’s mother who put them away. They were sitting at the table again and Al drank from his wine glass.

“Did you ever think,” he said turning to look at his sister, “that there is something dialectical about our situation?”

“How so?” she said.

“Well, the Arch presents an obvious way to fix our problems, but we can’t go back too recently or we might mess everything up worse than it is.”

“OK. And?”

“Well, maybe there is a way after all,” he said. Anna sat quietly, swirling the wine around in her glass but not drinking it.

Chapter 6

Settlers went back in groups of five hundred. Each group included certain specialists: engineers, doctors, mechanics. People with unusual skills suddenly found themselves in demand: brewers, candlemakers, herbalists, mycologists. Others, like Wolfie, were just regular people. The organization of groups was based loosely on military principles, and military terminology was used. There was backup and redundancy. When something had obviously gone wrong with a group of Setters, that was a Charlie Foxtrot. Each group had leaders but once through the arches, people were under no obligation to stay with the group and groups could elect their own leaders.

It was assumed that groups would not make the same mistakes that had gotten the world into the situation it was in now but groups were free to do what they wanted. This was laissez faire time travel. Settlers had been seen on Settlers TV making crude iron instruments and copper kettles that might have been boilers or stills. Other groups seemed to be living in clusters of small huts made of an adobe material.

“The Romans basically had a better quality of life than we do,” Wolfie would often point out. “Heated floors, spas, plenty to eat. Clean air.”

The first group of Settlers went back to the Ordovician period, around 460 million years ago. The scientists wanted to send them as far back as possible to not affect our timeline. The Cambrian period, just before the Ordovician, did not seem as inviting. Land plants had not yet evolved and no one wanted to eat a trilobite, the dominant marine life form of that time. Fossil evidence indicated that by the Ordovician, however, the land was filled with plants and the climate was mild. Settlers would find themselves on a large supercontinent, Gondwana, near the South Pole. The arches allowed you to choose the time and place to which you would travel, and this is where they went. An abundance of cephalopods, snails and primitive fish ensured that there would be enough to eat.

Settlers had been going back now for two years and there was proof that children were being born at different times in the past. Images showed people holding babies and walking with babies in slings. An image from a group in the Permian period showed a Settler holding a dragonfly about the size of a dachshund that seemed to be wearing some type of collar, like a pet.

Some Settlers preferred to go back to a time when there was some human civilization. Because of the Fiver though, that meant going back to the early Bronze Age, when most historians believed civilization was just beginning. One group, about which there was much interest, went back to the Archaic Period of Egypt, 3000 BC, close to the most recent time you could go back to. Scholars watched for video from this time as it was an important time in the history of Egypt. King Menes was thought to have united the two kingdoms to become king of the first dynasty and historians closely watched for clues. Most Egyptians then were thought to have lived in small farming communities and this was confirmed by images from Settlers’ cameras. The dark, shadowy past was coming into sharp focus for these scholars.