

~ TENET I | TERNION III ~

CONNECTED II

Tuesday, June 27, 1995

The Garden of the Votaries of San Accia at Ambler Haven

Ambler, Arizona

1:25 pm

It took nearly two and a half hours of walking, but Silas made his way back across the city. Along with the numerous other hardware stores Henry had mentioned, Silas also passed several pizza shops and fast-food eateries and had to fight back the desire to stop to fill his stomach. It had been months since he had a decent meal but splurging on empty calories hardly seemed like the best way to remedy that.

And that's not what your money is for, he had to remind himself. Instead, he spotted a sign for a community garden, one that, like the shelter he was staying at, was funded by the Votaries of San Accia. Silas crossed the street, making a somewhat cautious approach, and spotted a wide spread of greenery growing within the high fences. He had passed by on several occasions and had not paid it much mind, but he figured this time it was simply his stomach that had led him to visit. He glanced through the bars of the fence, spotted a few people milling around, tending to the plants.

You could just sneak in there, grab a few tomatoes, and be out before anyone noticed, a voice from deep within offered.

Thievery isn't really my thing. He had resigned himself to quietly passing by despite the ache in his stomach, when a voice rose up.

"Hey!" a woman's voice called. He glanced briefly, figuring they were calling to someone else, but the woman gave a friendly wave and started moving toward him. She was tall and thin, wearing a pair of shorts and a lightweight, long-sleeved flannel shirt to keep the sun off her bronze skin. Her hair was tucked up under a dark tan fedora with a wide brim, which she tipped toward him as she joined him at the gates. She looked like she would have been right at home on an archaeological dig in the mountains up north, except that they were surrounded by green plants. None of that changed the fact that Silas was disappointed to have to strike up yet another conversation today.

Isn't talking to one person a day enough? he lamented.

"Hi?" Silas offered.

"You look familiar," she said, her heavy accent rounding out the consonants so that the word came out 'fah-mil-ya'. Silas gave her a strange look as his brain tried to decipher the words through her pronunciation. "You're staying at the Ambler Haven, yeah?"

"Um... yes?" Silas was unwilling to commit to the answer. He had intentionally kept his head down to avoid getting noticed, mostly because that's just how he wanted to live his life these days, but also to steer clear of just these kinds of interactions.

"I thought so. You're that bloke that's been fixing things, right?"

"Trying to." Silas offered a fake, sheepish smile.

"Well, good on ya." She beamed, holding out her hand. "I'm Nicolette."

"Silas," he said, shaking the offered hand, but still giving her a strange look. "You're not from around here, right?"

"Straya." She smirked. "Even Aussies fall on hard times, yeah?"

“Oh.”

“Wanna help a Sheila pick some veggies for tonight’s meal?” Nicolette questioned, gesturing to the garden behind her.

“I was, uh, heading back to fix something,” he fumbled through the excuse.

That sink isn’t going to fix itself, Silas’ mind reminded him. *Or those doors.*

“No worries, mate,” Nicolette said, pretending to shrug it off even if she looked a bit deflated. Silas was ready to walk away when Nicolette decided to try a different tactic. “Well, maybe a quick tour around the garden, at least?”

“I mean—” he started, but a noise caught Nicolette’s attention. Silas followed her gaze and spotted someone at the other end of the fenced-in garden.

“Oy, Paedago!” she called, waving her hand at an older woman. “That one’s been wanting to meet you.” Nicolette said, looking back at him and offering her hand. “C’mon,” she smiled warmly, and Silas felt a sudden pull of gravity, as if the Earth had transferred its essence into the woman standing before him, drawing him towards her. He felt his hand lift from the pocket of his worn hoodie, ready to reach for her, but his feet stayed locked in place, and their sudden disobedience set off warning sirens throughout his body and mind.

No. The word filled him with sudden dread, and he felt the door to his heart slam shut. *I can’t do this again.*

“I...” Silas started, but the switch was flipped, his body in full flight mode. “I just can’t.” He stepped back, slowly with the first step, then more quickly on the second.

“Can’t...?” Nicolette started, her smile turning to confusion.

“Sorry,” he muttered, then turned and walked away.

The temptation to outright run away was hard to push down, but he managed to keep his pace to an aggressive speed walk. It

was only after he had passed the buildings along the block and turned the corner that the tidal wave of guilt came crashing down on him. Silas stumbled, both emotionally and physically, and put a hand on a brick wall beside him for support. He considered staying there, but realized he was still too close to the garden, and didn't want Nicolette—or anyone, really—to notice he was in the midst of a panic attack.

"Maybe it's time to move on from this place," he considered. "Leave Phoenix, leave Arizona..."

And go where, exactly? You've got forty-seven dollars in your wallet, and a backpack of stuff to your name. Get it together, dumbass.

"Shit..." He pushed himself off the wall and took a few unsteady steps down the street. He glanced up at the blue sky, felt the heat radiating off the pavement even in the shade, and pushed himself onward.

Five minutes later, Silas turned onto the now-familiar street, spotting the giant Aleppo pine tree towering above the three-story buildings around it. The building he was looking for, the Ambler Haven of San Accia, stood directly behind the pine tree, nestled between several other brick buildings. The one to the left was currently housing a pet store, and the other on the right was a video rental place. The irony that a video store had gone in right beside the Ambler Haven was not lost on him, as his current home had once been the Ambler Theatre. The rise of home video rentals meant more people didn't go out anymore, and that was probably one of the reasons the building had come available for the Votaries of San Accia to purchase it.

Silas had first heard of the Ambler Heaven by sheer accident. He had been meandering aimless along the streets near downtown Phoenix when he overheard a conversation. When the Votaries of San Accia had first moved into the city, maybe some ten years

back, their actions had raised the hackles of more than one Phoenician. And that was *before* they had built their temple up in the mountains northeast of the city or started buying up property. Given their uneasy terms with the locals, Silas was far from surprised to hear the continued gripes of the good people of Phoenix when the Votaries started opening homeless shelters.

“First they buy our mountain top, now they’re snatching up cheap real estate... are they trying to buy the whole damn city?” the first of the two men he was walking behind had bemoaned.

“And for what? To house some vagrants?” the second man had grumbled. The conversation had turned dour, but it had been enough to pique Silas’ interest, and when they got to the point about the Votaries buying the old Ambler Theatre, he had made a note to head that way.

Admittedly, when he first arrived he was surprised that of all the buildings they might have chosen to turn into a shelter they had picked an old movie theater. Not that Silas had a great understanding of the value of real estate, but in his mind an old apartment complex or even a single-family dwelling with multiple rooms would have made more sense. And yet, the moment he walked through the doors he began to understand the building’s true value.

Through the twin set of doors, the Ambler Theatre opened up into a main lobby that provided a large, communal space for the temporary residents to intermingle and relax, with a large enough space to set up tables for their nightly meal together. The building also came equipped with two large bathrooms that required only minor updating—like the sink hose in his pack—to meet the needs of the many ‘guests.’ But perhaps the most important feature was inside the actual theater, where they had only needed to remove a few rows of seats to install temporary walls, creating in-

dividual 'rooms' while leaving a few seats as permanent places to relax. Although he had never been for art, even the giant mural on the wall spoke to him. It had been painted on the old movie screen by one of the more creative former residents and featured multiple concentric circles, each with their own landscapes encapsulated within. One was filled with a forest of trees, another the tall spires of a sprawling city, a third was of the ocean and its many inhabitants, a fourth of the desert with a river running through it. In all there were some twenty-three different rings, each with a unique landscape within.

Beautiful, he thought, if not slightly dizzying.

But that was sort of the vibe of the whole place, he realized. Maybe the Ambler Haven wasn't suited to everyone—he had been around long enough to know that some people craved isolation and would not want to share this much open space—but the Votaries seemed to be going for something different. And the longer he stayed there, the more he saw it: from the inviting spaces to the communal meals, the Votaries were trying to build something more in this place.

I just hope they let me stick around long enough to figure out what it is, his thoughts whispered.

With the promise of cool air conditioning only across the street, he recognized that he wanted nothing more than to relax in one of the old seats and gaze up at the mural, hoping to determine what it was trying to represent. But first he had a job to do. Relaxation and art appreciation would have to come later. Stepping onto the sidewalk, he had to duck under a low-hanging branch of the Aleppo tree before continuing on toward the door, but even as his hand touched the door handle, he paused and looked back at the tree branch.

If I have to duck, probably everyone else does, too, he considered, looking at the curving branch. It was really only a smaller shoot from the underside of one of the thicker branches that was getting in the way. *I'll need the stepstool and maybe a knife or a pair of pruners*, he considered, adding the job to his mental to-do-list. When he had first arrived, he noticed a few things that needed taking care of and, after a day or two when no one else had completed the tasks, he took it upon himself to get it done. For Silas it was both a way to pass the time and, he hoped, a way to pay back the shelter for letting him stay there.

"Or so I hope." Other people had noticed him doing things—like the Australian woman, Nicolette—and he just had to hope it was enough to keep him from getting kicked out. It wasn't that he was in love with the place, but it had been nice to have a single place to call home for a change. If doing little things kept him in someone's good graces, and that meant they would let him stay a bit longer, then as far as Silas was concerned it was well worth the trouble. With the tree branch pruning project now listed somewhere in the recesses of his brain, he turned and entered through the front door of the Haven, stepping into the lobby.

The space that had become the communal area of the Ambler Haven had a large, vaulted ceiling with walls that were still mostly covered in red drapes, hanging between gold-painted columns. Even with a bit of decay, it was still a welcoming and impressive space, but anything else that would have made it look like a movie theater—like the ticket booth—had been removed. There were still some ancient posters up in display cases from when the theater was still running, including some classics like *Ghostbusters* and *The Last Starfighter*, along with other arthouse films he didn't recognize. Where candy should have been stored in the glass refreshment cases, someone had put some other memorabilia they had found in storage, like old movie ticket stubs and random Phoenix

tchotchkes. But all the decorations in the world could not keep the place from showing its age. The old marble-tiled floor was scuffed from the rubber tips on the folding metal chairs, and a third—or fourth-hand sofa rested up against one of the walls, partially blocking some of the tattered drapes. Silas was doing his best to keep the essentials running but restoring the place back to something like in its heyday was a task for someone else.

With quiet footsteps, Silas moved across the lobby. At this time of the day most everyone was out and about, looking for work or gathering supplies, so he usually had the place to himself. He crossed through the porthole-adorned, double-hinged door and stepped into the theater area, navigating around the makeshift walls and small piles of items outside people's "rooms" as he made his way to his own space. There hadn't been a lot of open rooms when he got here, but when the choice came for a spot to call his own—however temporary it might be—he found the smallest one. After all, he didn't have much: a pack full of clothes, toiletries, and a few mementos from a former life. He had gotten peeks of other people's rooms as he passed by, spotting the few scattered mementos and pictures of their lives from before they came to the Ambler Haven, or maybe an advertisement that doubled as a life lesson.

For Silas, he kept his walls blank and his collection of things small. Beyond the aging backpack he had added a small, plastic fishing tackle box he had found and turned into a toolbox, storing a set of screwdrivers, two pliers, and a few spare parts he had cobbled together. He quickly checked that the lid was snapped shut—a mistake he had made more than a few times since he added it to his collection—then took the tan plastic box and headed back to the lobby. He didn't hear any voices as moved back through the theater, and the common area was still empty, but as he arrived at the doorway to the women's restroom, he made sure to call inside three times to ensure it was empty. When no one responded,

he slid the orange rubber street cone he had “borrowed” from a worksite in front of the threshold.

He flopped down cross-legged on the floor in front of the second sink, setting his plastic toolbox at his side, and slipping the pack off his back to retrieve the rubber hose. A few moments of tinkering later, he was busily tightening the new water line to the sink when his ears perked up to the sound of the door squeaking open behind him.

Need to get some grease for the hinges, he thought, adding yet another note to his mental checklist.

“Just a moment,” he called out. “Almost have this done.”

“Which is exactly what I wanted to talk to you about,” a woman replied.

Talk about? The hairs on the back of Silas’ neck stood up. But he wasn’t going to let on that he was worried, so he lifted the wrench he had just pulled from his tackle box to continue tightening the line.

“I understand you’re the young man who has been fixing things around here?” It was phrased like a question, though it definitely landed in the statement column. He could nearly feel her eyes peering over his shoulder at the sink he was working on.

“I...” He froze, hand and wrench coming to a full stop. “Um...”

“Yes, you’re very clearly the young man,” she continued.

It was a nice place to stay while it lasted, his thoughts forewarned him. He tried to shrug off the doubt in his mind as he slid out from under the sink, turning to meet her eyes.

“That’s me?” Silas offered, unsure where this was going. He studied her face, trying to place her, but admitted that he had never seen this woman before. She was older, maybe in her forties if he had to guess, with an olive complexion and dark brown hair that she had braided back in a tail. Between her stance and her outfit—black boots, navy blue dress slacks, and a white dress shirt

that she had rolled the sleeves up to her elbow—she gave off the look of a business executive. The fact that she had her arms crossed only seemed to amplify her demeanor. And, of course, all that played into his realization that between her looks, her line of questioning, and the likelihood she wasn't staying at the Ambler Haven like he was, that she was someone important.

Oh, she's totally here to kick me out.

"While I appreciate people taking initiative, maybe you can explain to me why you're doing so?" she asked, an eyebrow raised above the serious look on her face.

"Sorry, I was just..." he hesitated, considering his words. Here he was, sitting on the floor of the women's restroom, and trying to explain away his existence to this powerful woman. "I don't really have any money, so I, well... I can fix things. I know that's not really payment for staying here, but... I was hoping it might be enough, y'know, for a little while?"

"For a little while," she repeated the words, and though he knew she was just echoing what he said, he thought he heard a different tone to her words, which only further deepened the creases of concern on his face.

"I can..." he began, fidgeting for a brief moment before he felt his body collapse under the weight of his acceptance. He sighed and dropped his head in disappointment.

I guess Henry was right.

"I understand," he said, pushing himself out from under the sink, setting the wrench in his toolbox, then stood up. As he rose he realized that she was nearly the same height, maybe an inch or so shorter, but he still felt like she was looking down on him. "I'll get my things and be gone before supper." In his mind he was already packing his spartan space, but he realized that she was just standing there stoically with her arms still crossed.

"And why do you think I want you to leave?" the woman asked, her brows furrowing.

“Well, because I can’t pay you. I get that it takes money to run a place like this. I just don’t have much...” he rambled.

“And yet, you offered what you do have,” the woman continued, her posture softening only the slightest bit. “I’ve been shown many of the things you’ve taken it upon yourself to fix in the time you’ve been staying here. Leaky shower heads, bad light fixtures, even repairing that ancient popcorn machine in storage. You don’t think that’s payment?”

“It’s not money.” He shrugged. “And, eventually, I’ll run out of things to fix.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” She finally showed emotion and gave him a smirk. “Your name is Silas, yes?”

He nodded, desperately wanting to feel relieved, but knowing that the other shoe had yet to drop.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Silas.” The woman bowed her head. “I’m called Paedago Ramina Ausyn.”

“It’s good to meet you, too, um, Paa-deh-go,” he replied, butchering the word.

“You haven’t spent much time with the Votaries of San Accia, have you?” The Paedago cocked her head at him.

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Well, we have strange words for everything.” She acknowledged. “But one we share is ‘welcome.’ And that’s what I want you to feel as you are here.”

“So, you don’t want me to leave?”

“Of course I want that.” She said, matter-of-factly. “But only on your terms and when you have somewhere safe to go. The Votaries of San Accia are here to uplift and benefit everyone. It would go against every single one of our tenets to deny someone when they are in need.”

“Oh.” This was far from the direction he had expected the conversation to go.

"I'd like to continue this conversation, but perhaps not in the middle of the women's restroom?" Paedago Ausyn said. "I believe you said you were nearly finished?"

"Um, yeah. Let me make sure that the new waterline is tight and doesn't leak when I turn the valve back on."

"I'll be in the common area." She turned soundlessly in her black boots and left.

What in the world would she want to talk to me about? he wondered, his eyes fixed on the door she had left through. Some part of his mind recalled the moment earlier when he had run away from the nice woman in the hat at the garden, and her saying that someone had wanted to meet him. He supposed this was likely the same person, but it still begged the same question.

"And I'm not gonna find out standing around in here." He forced himself to turn back to the sink, retrieving the wrench from his tackle box as he sat back down on the floor and tested both ends of the connection. Content, he spun the valve, letting the water flow through the new hose, and waited a few moments to ensure there were no leaks and that water flowed freely from the faucet. When that was done, he packed up his things and headed for the restroom exit.

Stepping back into the lobby, Silas picked up his borrowed street cone and spotted Paedago Ausyn waiting for him near the old counter, leaning against the glass case filled with Phoenix memorabilia. He made his way over to her, his steps cautious but his curiosity piqued.

"All done with the sink?" she asked as he approached.

"Good as new." He said, setting down his toolbox on the floor and putting the cone atop it.

"Excellent." She smiled. "This is actually only my second time at this Haven, and my first being in charge of it, so I was hoping

you might accompany me on a brief tour. I'd like to see it through both of our eyes, if you understand what I mean."

"Um, sure. What do you mean you're 'in charge' of this Haven?"

"I guess we'll also make it a teaching session." She gave a short laugh, turning to a door Silas had never seen open and produced a set of keys from her pocket. Silas followed her into a small stairwell. As they climbed the thirteen steps to the floor above, she began to explain. "I'm a Paedago with the VoSA." She pronounced the abbreviation 'voh-sah.' "We have many assignments throughout the organization, from overseeing our various facilities—like the many Havens scattered around the globe—to implementing programs aimed at bettering the world and training the next generation of Votaries of San Accia."

"You said the, um, VoSA," he tried out the pronunciation, "have weird words for everything. So what does Paedago mean?" Silas questioned as they paused at the top of the steps for her to open the door with another key.

"In its simplest form, it means 'Guide,'" she explained, opening the door. "It is both my purpose and my profession." They stepped forward into a narrow and dark room that came to be illuminated just a moment later.

As his eyes adjusted, Silas realized he was standing in the old projection booth, including a wall with tinted windows to minimize the light shining down into the theater below. There was a single pedestal in the middle of the room near the glass but, like the rest of the room, it was empty. Likely, Silas figured, that's where the projector would have been, and his heart sank a bit to see that it was gone if only because it would've given the Haven residents something else to do with their downtime.

"Hmm..." Paedago Ausyn frowned. "I was hoping this would be a bit bigger. And those windows will definitely need to go."

"Bigger for what?"

"I know you can fix things, but how are your construction abilities?" She asked.

"Um, depends on what you're looking to do?"

"Deconstruction, for a start. Framing and drywall for sure. Probably some flooring," she said, then finally relented to answer his question. "I think we can turn this space into more rooms, or at least one bigger one for a family, if need be. But I'm not going to have someone up here staring out these giant windows and into the various rooms down there. Think that's something you'd be willing to work on?"

"I mean..." he paused, considering the small tote of tools he'd left in the lobby. "Some of it? I'm not really equipped for major renovations."

"Oh, we'd bring in the Togala—sorry, our construction crews—then get you set up to learn the various parts of the trade on the go with them as this project moves forward," she explained.

"Wait." Silas raised an eyebrow, his brain sending warnings through his system. "Are you offering me a job?"

"I am."

"I, uh..."

How do you get two job offers in one day? His mind reeled.

"I don't know if that's the best idea."

"From what I've seen, this is the next logical step for you."

Next logical step, the words echoed in his mind. And if he were any other person, Silas felt certain that would be true. But for him?

"The position will give you additional on-the-job training, which you could use to help you get a fulltime job and get you back on your feet."

"It's a very generous offer," Silas countered, "and I appreciate you making it, but I'm not really sure it's the right thing... for me."

"Oh," she said, switching gears. "Is there some other trade you'd rather learn?"

"It's not that at all." Silas shook his head. "I just... it's me. And I'm not ready for something like that."

"I see." Ausyn paused, her face contemplative before turning and walking to the far wall. Silas hadn't noticed it before, but there were a few other doors on this floor. Withdrawing her keys, the woman opened yet another door, then looked back at him. "I have one other thing to show you," she said, then stepped into the darkness of the door beyond.

Silas considered whether he should follow, but he also felt like it was a statement again, not a question. Dutifully, he walked to the doorway and stepped inside, finding himself at the base of another set of stairs. He heard the woman at the top, jingling the keys in the dim light, just a moment before the searing afternoon light burst out of the wall around her and momentarily blinded him. When he could see again, he saw that she was already outside, patiently waiting for him to follow. Hesitantly, he made his way up the creaky, wooden steps after her.

A moment later, they were on the roof. One side of the view was taken up by the large Aleppo tree growing from the concrete sidewalk below, but in all the other directions he could see Phoenix and its many municipalities sprawling under the afternoon sun.

"Earlier I said I was a Paedago—a guide," Ausyn said, resting up against the walled-edge of the roof under the shade of the pine tree. "Another of the roles of being a Paedago is getting to understand people, and to help them however I can."

"Like a therapist?"

"Or counselor, or whatever form it needs to take." Ausyn nodded. "The point is, I would be pretty bad at the job if I didn't recognize that something is holding you back."

"I'm not sure that I want to get into any of that."

“And I’m not asking you to. If you want to talk, I’m here to listen and to help where I can. But, at the end of the day, my job is ensuring you move forward. If it’s not helping in construction, or tending the garden like Nicolette does, then I need your help to figure out what you *are* interested in learning.”

That’s not ominous at all.

“Our interest—the interest of the Votaries of San Accia—is to help people become better versions of themselves, but we can’t do that without you working with us,” she continued.

“So, I *do* have to join up to stay here.” He felt like he should’ve seen that coming.

“Maybe I phrased that wrong,” the Paedago paused, reconsidering her words. “I need your help to understand how we can get you on a better path. That’s all I meant by ‘working with us’. You don’t *have* to join up if you don’t want to.”

“Good, because I’m not looking to join the church.” The words came out snappier than he intended, but they were out there so he continued. “I needed a place to stay and wanted to help out as a way to pay for my space here. That’s all.”

“We’re not a church, we’re a votary—a group of like-minded individuals who follow the Tenets as laid out by San Accia,” she explained.

“Kinda sounds like a church...” Silas said warily.

“Or a cult?” Ausyn lifted an eyebrow.

“Not the word I used,” Silas said defensively.

“No, but one many others have called us,” she said, then switched gears again. “In any case, no one is making you join our ranks, Silas, and you obviously don’t want to talk about why you don’t want our help. I just need you to know that the help is available to you, whenever you decide you want it.”

“And I appreciate you offering that help,” Silas squirmed, feeling guilty for snapping at her. “I just...” he sighed, a small part of

him wanting to open up to her, but he couldn't get past his own reservations. "I just don't know that I deserve it."

"I don't know who you were before this moment," Ausyn explained with an easy, practiced tone, "but I'm here to help whomever you are right now."

"Um... okay?"

That's a weird way to phrase it...

"For now, can I just be the guy that fixes the little things when they break?" he asked. She seemed to be considering his words, so he added, "And maybe in the future we can talk about all that other stuff?"

"I can live with that." She agreed, then added, "for now."

"Thank you."

For a long moment, he stood on the rooftop considering the course of the conversation. *I guess that could've gone a lot worse. At least I still have a place to sleep tonight.* He felt his stomach start to grumble, but thankfully it was silent. Still, it was a good reminder that he had work to do before supper. Henry had given him a good suggestion about tightening the hinge plate screws of the doors that wouldn't shut quite right, and he was hoping to give that a shot before everyone returned to the building for the evening. Paedago Ausyn had stayed quiet, her eyes considering the city around them, and he decided that it was the right time to head back down into the building.

"Before you go," she said as he began to move away. "Can I ask you a somewhat unrelated question?"

"Um, sure?"

"Not being a part of the VoSA, I'm curious what you actually think or know about the organization," she said, "and maybe why you decided to come here for a place to stay?"

"Honestly, I don't really know much about your group," Silas explained. "I mean, I know you're not a cult, of course." He smiled,

hoping to mend some fences. “I’ve been a bit down on my luck recently and was striking out at other places. That’s when I heard about this place, from some guys who were, um,” he paused, trying to find a polite way to paraphrase the two men, “not the biggest fans of your group setting up shop in Phoenix.” He said apologetically. “Anyway, it sounded like a safe place to check out, so I came here.”

“Interesting. I heard some of the locals were less than excited that we decided to build up in the mountains, but I didn’t know they were upset about us building in town, too.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it much. Phoenicians whine a lot, but they tend to let things go.”

“Fair enough. And, so, you came to the Ambler Haven and, what? Just decided to start fixing things on your own as a way of payment? No one asked you to do it?”

“I noticed some things were in need of repair. When they didn’t get fixed, I figured that those were skills I already had, so I put them to use,” Silas explained. “But no, no one *told* me to do it. I’d have offered to pay, but I wasn’t sure who actually worked here... and, well, I don’t really have any money.”

“As you said.”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because in offering what you have—your talents, your abilities—your actions fall in line with our tenets.”

“Okay.” He shrugged, not really knowing what to make of that.

“Maybe this isn’t the time or place, but I have one more question: do you know what any of our tenets are?” Ausyn asked, uncrossing one leg from the other and switching to redistribute her weight. The Aleppo tree over her head moved with a slight breeze, scattering rays of sunlight across her face.

“I’m not even sure I really know what the word ‘tenet’ means,” Silas said, a slight blush filling his cheeks.

“A tenet is just a belief or a principle,” she explained.

“So, like commandments?”

“Not for the VoSA, no. Our tenets are not rules. They won’t warn you right from wrong,” Ausyn clarified.

“Okay, so then what are they?”

“The Tenets of San Accia are just a different way of looking at the world,” Paedago Ausyn stated, her voice slipping into the calming tones of a teacher. “They are an acknowledgment of who we can strive to be, shared so that others can hear them and perhaps change their own outlooks,” she continued. “They help us to look inward, to see and acknowledge our true selves. They also invite us to gaze upon the person we share with the rest of humanity, and to see how we are part of a larger community within not only the human race, but with every other living being on the planet.”

“This all sounds very philosophical.”

“Well, the Tenets serve to help us understand the fundamental nature of knowledge, existence and reality. In that sense, they really are a type of philosophy, yes.”

“So, the tenets deal with morals then?”

“Actually, the tenets are devoid of morals.”

“Wait,” Silas said, trying to piece that together. “How does that work?”

“Morals can be ambiguous. They lean too far, ascribing good or bad to situations that don’t necessarily need to be one or the other.”

“I’m not sure that I follow,” Silas said.

“There’s a classic example I like to use to explain this, if you’ll allow it?” Ausyn asked.

“Sure. You’ve got me curious.”

“Part of the job.” She said playfully. “So, in reality as you know it, if I were to kill a cockroach, would you consider that a heroic action?”

“I’m not sure if heroic is the right term, but yes, I would think that was a good thing to do.”

“Fair enough,” she acknowledged. “And, conversely, if I killed a butterfly, would you think I was a villain?”

“I...” he hesitated, knowing she was leading him somewhere, but he had no clue where this was headed. “That *seems* right?”

“So, yes, that’s where most people fall on this discussion. After all, butterflies are beautiful pollinators, ensuring we have pretty flowers and new plants year after year, so they must certainly be good,” she explained. “Cockroaches, on the other hand, only appear in dark places, scaring people when the lights come on by running away. They must, therefore, be evil?”

“I don’t know about evil, but I hear they can bite you.”

“They actually don’t.”

“They don’t?” Silas raised an eyebrow.

“Nope.” Ausyn smiled. “In fact, cockroaches are essential to the world, just like butterflies are. They’re both bugs that fill very specific roles. Cockroaches help to break down garbage and dead things, turning them to useful, healthy soil. In fact, were it not for cockroaches, those beautiful plants might have neither a place to grow nor pollinators like butterflies to help them spread. Both insects are beneficial in their own ways. Killing either should be bad.”

“Huh,” Silas said, the lesson sinking in.

“I think I see your point.”

“Do you?” She cocked her head to one side.

“I mean, I think so. Something about acknowledging what everyone brings to the table and not judging them on appearances or preconceived notions?”

“I mean, that’s valid, too, but my actual point was that morals are problematic because they have intrinsic, aesthetic criteria.”

“What?”

“Life has grey areas. Not everything pretty is useful; not everything ugly is worthless. We need to get past these generalizing ‘morals’ and acknowledge that everything—and *everyone*—has a

purpose and a right to existence. In doing so, we can focus on the bigger picture.”

“So, you’re saying the Votaries of San Accia don’t have morals?” he questioned, the confused look still on his face.

“We have tenets—*absolutes*—that we accept as being true and that guide us on a path,” Ausyn continued. “Morals can be good, in a general sense. Morals keep people on a path that’s useful to authority figures and can be vaguely beneficial to society. But our tenets are designed to push us beyond that.” She paused, and Silas figured the expression on his face still showed he was confused.

“I admit, I’m curious, but I still don’t understand,” he said.

“Then, if you’re open to it, let’s stop beating around the butterfly bush and get right into it.”

“Aren’t we already?” Silas asked, but the Paedago was already speaking.

“Tenet One of the Votaries of San Accia states that we should be true to our own self, open with all humankind, and connected to nature,” Ausyn recited.

“Okay...”

“What do you think it means to be true to one’s self?” Ausyn quizzed him.

“I dunno. Being open about who you are?”

“In a way, yes. At its most basic, being ‘true’ to one’s self means accepting ourselves for who we are. To use our previous example, some days I may be a beautiful butterfly. Other days, I may be a cockroach, breaking down the shit around me,” Silas felt his eyes go wide in surprise, not expecting that she would swear, but the Paedago just kept going. “Each day we must reflect on who we were yesterday and the decisions and situations we faced to get us to today. ‘Who I am’ is who I am *in this moment*. To truly be me, I need to accept who I was and what I did, just as I need to welcome who I will be tomorrow,” she said. “Does that make sense?”

“Sure?”

“The things I’ve been through, the decisions I’ve made to get me to this moment in time—my time flying, and my time eating shit—that is who I am. If I regret a decision I made, if I deny some part of me because I’m ashamed of it, I’m not being ‘me’, and therefore I am not true to myself,” she explained.

“Okay,” he was still confused, but he nodded anyway.

Makes sense in a weird sorta way, his mind acknowledged.

“So being ‘true to myself’ is about accepting me for who I am?” Silas asked.

“Regardless of what mistakes, or prideful conceits, or regrets that you have, yes.”

“That sorta seems like a lot to live up to,” Silas considered.

“And that’s exactly why it’s the first of *all* of our tenets,” Ausyn beamed him a smile. “If we aren’t being true to ourselves, we can’t even begin to consider becoming something better.”

“And that’s the first tenet?”

“It’s one part of the ternion, yes.”

“The what now?” Silas raised an eyebrow.

“Our Tenets consist of ternions—three distinct ideas, each resonating with aspects of our individual journeys, yet are interconnected to form a unified truth to which we abide,” she explained, receiving only a blank stare in response.

“Y’all have a lot of weird words and concepts.” Silas gave her a dubious look.

“‘Ternion’ is actually Latin, not a Votaries term, though I doubt that provides you much consolation.” She laughed, appearing more at ease with Silas’ dry humor. “Anyway, we dug a lot deeper into all this than I intended,” she apologized. “I’m happy to share this with you at your pace and don’t mean to rush you into anything.”

“I mean, my brain already hurts but, I admit, I am interested in hearing more.”

“Well, we’re not going to delve into *all* of the Tenets, but I’m happy to round out the first Tenet for you. If nothing else, it will give you something to think about while you’re going about your daily routine.”

“I think I’d like that.”

“Good,” she replied. “So, the second ternion of Tenet One builds upon the first. In being true to ourselves, we are better able to be open with others. If I accept me for who I am—for all my successes, and all my flaws—I am better able to open myself to the people around me. When we deny ourselves, we close up, we hide pieces away.”

“We’re damaged,” Silas offered.

“Exactly. And when we are damaged—when we’re wounded by the shame of our faults, or blinded by the medallions of our success—we lose sight of who we truly are. Finding the balance is key, and in doing so, we can more freely open up to others.”

“So, the second ter-nee-whatever is being ‘Open with Others’?”

“Open with All, yes,” she lightly corrected him. “For the followers of San Accia, being open with all is how we acknowledge every single person around us. In the same way that we need to accept ourselves for who we truly are, we need to accept others for who they truly are. You can see how ternion one directly connects to ternion two—being open to all is the process of breaking down the walls we hide behind to let others see who we are, and it’s essential to our own growth as individuals and as a society.”

“Okay,” he breathed out, putting the pieces together in his mind. “So, I need to accept myself for who I am and be open to and accepting of other people. What was the third part?”

“Connected to Nature.”

“What, like, hugging a tree or something?”

“There’s a bit more to it than that,” she said seriously, though smiled enough to let him know she appreciated his playfulness. “Nature is a powerful word, and it means many different things to

many different people. For the Votaries, nature is more a recognition of the *entire* world around us. Our world is unique to us, and we should strive to keep it as such.”

“So this is about tree hugging.”

“It’s more about making conscientious choices,” Ausyn countered. “There are many opportunities available to each of us, but the Tenets would have us consider that we are just one small part of the world we inhabit. We are individuals with unique flaws, strengths and perspectives, and we acknowledge that in the first ternion. Our individuality should be shared with all and without judgment, as we acknowledge in the second ternion. And we are connected to something larger than just ourselves and our community, and that is acknowledged in the third ternion. When we take all three of these ternions together as a whole, we come to understand that the person we are, the things we do, and the decisions we make, all must be done in considerate regard for our fellow humans, and in harmony with the nature of our reality.”

What you do matters. How you do it matters. Why you do it matters.

“Oh,” Silas said, the implications of her words hitting a little harder than he had expected that they would.

“Oh,” she echoed, then grinned at him. “The first Tenet of San Accia. Your thoughts?”

“Hmm...” He paused to give himself time to think. “Different from what I was expecting.”

“In what way?”

“Well, I guess, it seems a bit more straightforward than I thought it would be,” he said. “I get that it’s deeper than just the surface level interpretation, but compared to *other* religions, I guess it’s less complicated than I expected,” he said before adding, “so far.”

“Well, in large part, that’s because we’re *not* a religion,” she said with a knowing smile.

“Then what are you?” Silas asked.

“We’re just a group of people following a set of ideals, trying to make the world a better place.”

“And no ulterior motives?” Silas furrowed his brow.

“Not that I’m aware of. But I’m also not on the Council, so what do I know?”

“The Council?”

“Another time.” She waved him off. “Suffice it to say they’re the people at the top making all the decisions and, so far as I know, they follow the Tenets and therefore have your best interest at heart—whether you believe that or not.”

“Right,” Silas said, his tone half-heartedly sarcastic.

“Anyway, it’s a lot to take in all at once, and you weren’t looking to join up, as I recall.” Ausyn said playfully, pushing herself away from the wall. “But I encourage you to take some time and think about it all.” She stretched her back after standing still for too long. “In the meantime, we should head back downstairs.”

“I, um, appreciate you sharing all that with me,” Silas stammered, knowing there was something else he needed to ask while they were alone. “I just want to make sure that you aren’t going to kick me out of here if I don’t sign up?”

“No,” she said, holding onto the word to let him know there was a ‘but’ coming, “but don’t expect me to give up without another conversation or two.”

Dodged a bullet this time.

“That seems reasonable, I suppose.”

“Good. Now, I’m new here and there are other people I should probably be talking with, paperwork that needs filling out, and all that,” she rambled off the list as she opened the door leading back down the stairs. He made his way down the first set of steps while she followed behind, closing and locking the door behind them. Silas paused on the second floor where the movie projector had been and resisted the urge to look out the tinted windows at the people milling about below. Supper would be served soon,

his stomach told him, and that's usually when folks returned from whatever they had been doing during the day. From what Ausyn had offered him in this room earlier that afternoon, it seemed many of them were doing work for the Votaries of San Accia.

Should I be doing that, too? He considered, looking at the room, trying to picture how it could be turned from a dusty, strange room into something more fit for a family. *No, there has to be a catch. One good sales pitch isn't enough to make me think otherwise.*

"Think it will work?" Ausyn's voice caught him daydreaming.

"What?"

"Making this into a room for a family," she said.

"Maybe. Is there any other roof access? If there was an issue up there and no other way to get there, having to ask people to let you through could be awkward."

"Fair point. That's something to consider."

"But yes, I think it could work. And more usable space is always a good thing."

"Agreed." She looked over the space one more time before turning back to him. "I know we talked more than probably either of us intended, so it's only fair to ask if you have additional questions."

"My brain is fried enough, I think."

"Fair," she laughed. "Well, take some time and consider not only the first Tenet, but also the opportunity to learn and grow here. Assuming you decide to stay a while, I'll check up on you in the near future."

"Thanks for letting me stay," he said.

"Thank you for taking the initiative to do something for this place. Not many people would have even considered it, let alone just doing it. I want you to know that it means a lot to me that you did so of your own accord."

"You're welcome." She smiled once more, then motioned him to the door to head back to the main floor.

Silas had collected his cone and tackle box and returned them to their respective homes within the Ambler Haven, the cone living in the utility closet behind where the snack counter had been, and the toolbox back in his small room in the theater. It was true that he had other things to attend to—like the doors and their hinges that weren't working properly—but his internal clock was alerting him that the dinner bell for evening meal was soon going to sound, so he opted to stay put in the common area and help set up the last of the folding chairs. But neither the chairs nor his Pavlovian response to food were doing much to quiet the words of Paedago Ausyn replaying in his mind.

The truth was, Silas had never been a spiritual person. He had always sort of just skirted along doing his own thing, an outsider probably since the day he was born. Organized religion might be good for some people, but it had never been something that interested him. In his mind, he had lumped the Votaries of San Accia in with them because, well, that's what he assumed they were. But now that he had a little bit more information about them, it made him reconsider his feelings about them.

When the bell finally chimed, Silas simply followed the motions, from collecting his portions of the food, to sitting in his unassigned-but-favorite seat, to absent-mindedly eating his food. His life seemed to be playing out in slow motion to the backdrop of Paedago Ausyn's words as he considered the day and the years that had preceded it. In his own recollection, his was a life of regret and bad luck and yet, today had been fortuitous. He could have been turned away by Henry for not taking the man up on the job offer, but the old man had been kind and patient with him, and they worked out a deal. And Paedago Ausyn could have quite easily kicked him back into the harsh world, but instead she not only asked for his opinion, she shared time and knowledge with him.

And the more he thought about it, maybe she shared something even more profound: purpose. And yet, he couldn't help but wonder if something as important as 'purpose' was warranted on some like him.

Do I deserve a second chance? he wondered as he stabbed at some freshly cut carrots with a fork. Somehow, despite a lifetime of poor choices and pain, this day had gifted him two job offers and two lengthy conversations—both longer than any he had had in months.

"Each day we must reflect on who we were yesterday and the decisions and situations we faced to get us to today. 'Who I am' is who I am in this moment. To truly be me, I need to accept who I was and what I did, just as I need to welcome who I will be tomorrow," Paedago Ausyn had explained to him.

"So being 'true to myself' is about accepting me for who I am?" Silas had asked.

"Regardless of what mistakes, or prideful conceits, or regrets that you have, yes," she had explained. It sounded so simple when you said it out loud, but the prospect of forgiving himself for... everything?

She's offering me a chance for renewed purpose. It was scary. Even unnerving. And, at the same time, it gave him hope. His plate was still half full, his one meal of the day barely eaten, but he felt nourished in a way he couldn't remember feeling in a very long time. Paedago Ausyn's words had struck a chord with him. A lifetime had shown him the cruelty of his fellow human beings—himself included. He couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this organization beyond just their idyllic claims to be there to benefit everyone. But, despite all the inhumanity he had seen in the world during his time, he believed that Ausyn believed the words she said.

"The person we are, the things we do, and the decisions we make, all must be done in considerate regard for our fellow humans, and in harmony with the nature of our reality." her words echoed in his mind.

If she believes it, is it so hard for me to believe it, too? He was being naive, of course, and he knew it.

Organizations like this are just in it to get more members who will donate more money, a voice from the deep growled. And Silas knew that was true—humans were just human, after all. But, at the same time, Ausyn’s message seemed to ring with a truth he couldn’t dismiss as easily as he wanted.

True to Self. Open with All. Connected to Nature, the words came to his mind. *Honest with myself, considerate of others, and in harmony with nature.*

Nothing more than the pipe dream of some crazy lady, the voice said with a scoff.

But maybe if more people heard that message, maybe they would stop and reconsider all the selfish things they do? His optimism tried to muscle its way into the conversation.

That’s even more crazy...

But is it? his optimism countered.

“Ugh.” He said softly under his breath, looking at the thirty other people seated at tables around him. Any one of them might be having the same argument in their own minds, he knew, but did that make it more or less true? “Enough philosophy for one night.” He pushed the thoughts down, then tucked into his salad.