

# MEMORIES OF ATLAS

LOGGED UNIVERSE #2



NATHAN CHEN

UNTITLED FRONTIER

CC 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

## CONTENTS

### The Logged Universe

#### 1. Memories of Atlas

## THE LOGGED UNIVERSE

In 2021, humanity unearthed a strange artefact. Dated to a few millions years ago, it revealed countless logs of a future humanity that was recorded into software that resembled a modern day blockchain. Uncertain of whether the artefact was prophecy, technologists and writers have been decoding the stories hidden within.

These are the stories and artefacts of the Logged Universe.

Story: *Memories of Atlas.*

Logs Era: *Early & Middle.*

Locations: *Line City & Upload Site #206*

The Logs Interpreted & Told By: *Nathan Chen*

## MEMORIES OF ATLAS



Even in the simulation, the Captain never ignored a mission. Despite the lack of death, softer politics, paltry cash rewards, and fewer despots to overthrow, he continued. It was an old habit, one deeper than the tattoos on his skin.

The largest difference now, however, was the absence of his son and former partner: Atlas. In the real world, his son had been his regular companion on the missions. Even when the Captain made Atlas stay put for particularly dangerous ones, he would miss his son's presence—and not from any mawkishness. At twelve years old, the boy already had an eye for casting diversions, giving the Captain the space to move in rapidly and use his unfeeling hands.

In most of their adventures, they'd become separated and make their way home alone. It was an unspoken rule that whoever arrived first would turn on a light in every window, making sure the other had a beacon in the night. On this evening in the simulation, the Captain was walking briskly back at the verge of sunset, and he found himself wishing

against all odds that there would be a glow in the front window.

The Captain slowly entered the dark house and ambled straight to the kitchen. He poured a generous glass of whiskey, wiped away a couple aberrant drops on the counter, and sunk into his recliner. His eyes focused and unfocused upon the opposite wall, and a moment passed before he saw it.

His paintings were missing.

The wall was barren, and the gaze of the dying sun filled it with an empty, orange sea. He continued to stare. Already, he struggled to recall the face that he had once so assiduously captured, caressing the canvas with his paint brush. His eyes wrinkled and his chest began to expand, but he held himself still. The thief could still be inside. His training returned like an inching shadow.

He arose and traipsed down the hallway to his room. Every step felt like a year. The evening glow was now receding, and in its wake it seemed as if the walls and floors had grown ancient, far older than he was. The paint was chipping, and the wooden planks beneath him were warping and rotting. When he glanced out the hallway window, the pine tree that stood beside the house looked sickly, the bark peeling away and its needles a spiritless gray. He closed his eyes and imagined a distant future, the hallway now fully derelict and layered in dust, the tree bereft of needles, its branches sticking out like the rigid arms of a corpse. Yet when he saw himself in the hallway, his feet making a deep impression in the dust, he looked the exact same: an old, sun-burnt man with a scraggly beard.

Finding his room clear, he opened the closet and began feeling around the shelf above his head. Upon grasping a small tin box—its cold metal a welcome shock—he sat down and began to cry. He still had something that tied him to his son. Something he could hold through the coming years of simulation, or more frighteningly, centuries.

For the next several nights and mornings, the Captain was perched in his attic. His home lay atop a small hill, giving him a vantage point to watch the rows of houses below. Just before daybreak on the seventh day, he spotted his culprit. A figure pressed up against the back window of a house, pausing, before darting to the next. The Captain stood, but before he could make a move, the skulking silhouette disappeared behind another house. For a brief moment, under the dim moonlight of the simulation, he saw a small, boyish frame. The Captain saw his son.

#### SEVERAL, LONG DECADES AGO: THE CAPTAIN'S UPLOAD

The scientist walking alongside the Captain was dressed in a freshly starched lab coat that seemed too slim to accommodate any serious movement. *Probably a program director, years from any serious research*, the Captain thought. They turned left into a long hallway towards a growing chorus of voices and a set of blue swinging doors. They were close.

“Do a lot of folks get cold feet?” the Captain asked.

“So many,” the scientist said, grinning. “We had to start strapping them into the pods so they wouldn’t leave.”

The Captain laughed and decided to go along with the gallows humor. “Might as well knock them unconscious once they step inside.” He felt a tug on his arm and saw Atlas with an annoyed frown on his face. The weight of the journey had laid heavily on the boy, and the Captain regretted speaking so carelessly. Saying goodbye to friends and familiar sights was not a foreign feeling; they had always been a nomadic pair. However, the prospect of Upload was more serious, and had pervaded nearly every conversation in the weeks leading up to the trip. Atlas, normally a bright, active boy, had begun to sulk and developed a habit of staring wistfully into the distance. The Captain knew his son didn’t care about a simulated vastness—the real world still had a lot to offer.

“I’m just joking,” the Captain quickly said to Atlas. The boy pursed his lips and looked as if he was going to respond, but they reached the doors and entered into a room the size of a small gymnasium. Several lines of pods stood row by row, and a small crowd of people were milling about.

Looking at his son, the Captain made the rare decision to only speak earnestly for the rest of the day. He knew Atlas was letting himself be roped into the simulation because the Captain had pulled with every last pound of his paternal authority. He had told Atlas that the upside of infinity was too great—and the downside of missing it too terrible—to be delayed. Atlas had been quick to remark that this was rubbish coming from a man who risked his life for printed paper.

The Captain believed there was truth to what he told Atlas, but he was withholding the genuine reason for their



hurry. The boy's frustration was as palpable to the Captain as the hard lump he could feel lurking under the skin of his neck. Fortunately, while it had grown over the weeks, it was still hidden under his beard. The Captain didn't want Atlas to panic; more importantly, he didn't want him to know that their coupled Upload was largely selfish. While the Captain could have uploaded first, time in the simulation passed at a much faster rate than reality. He could not bear the thought of living in the simulation for possibly decades before seeing Atlas again.

There was also guilt from knowing that Atlas would not merely be losing time in the real world. In order for uploaded minds to function normally, simulated bodies had to remain at their biological age—a significant consequence of embodied cognition. Atlas would be stuck at twelve for eternity. While children were not barred from Upload, it was generally regarded that waiting until adulthood was the better choice. Adults would have ostensibly matured and developed a theory of living that would better suit the abundance of time given to them. The Captain felt awful for infringing on Atlas's autonomy, but knew there was no way he could upload without him.

“You two are pods seven and eight. Get strapped in now and I'll be back,” the scientist gestured before walking away.

As they reached their pods, the final good-byes were breaking out around the father and son. Crying, assurances, and judging from the low tone of some, confessions; all spilled out as if the group stood beside coffins. The Captain noticed some individuals walking to the exit and realized they had come to see others off. He couldn't imagine what it

would feel like to see someone upload and not do it yourself, knowing that the other had just gained eternity while the sand in your own hourglass continued to fall. A different type of grief.

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Atlas said quietly.

“Atlas, I need you to listen,” the Captain said, turning to face his son. Without thinking, his hand lifted to stroke Atlas’s chin. “This is the best thing for us. We’re going to spend hundreds of years together. We’re going to explore the world.”

“I know, I know,” Atlas said, relenting. “I’m just... scared. I wish this wasn’t happening so fast.”

“I wish it didn’t have to either,” the Captain said. At that moment, he noticed the scientist hastily running by and shoving past the entrance, leaving behind an air of concern. The crowd around him began murmuring, and from his tested instincts the Captain knew something was wrong. Atlas stared at the swinging doors the scientist left behind.

“Look,” the Captain said, taking hold of Atlas’s shoulder. He pulled from his pocket a small obsidian arrowhead, its glassy surface a deep, mesmerizing black. Atlas’s eyes widened and he looked at the Captain, who felt a surge of warmth. The Captain took Atlas’s hand and pressed the arrowhead gently into his palm, avoiding any pressure around the point.

“I’ve kept this,” the Captain started to say. He cleared his throat, which had suddenly become constricted. “I’ve kept this since our first mission together. We’ll upload now, and...” “ at this he stopped again, hot tears filling up in his eyes and the words inside him threatening to break the dam. Atlas’s

face began to contort and the Captain knew he had to hold himself together. He took a deep breath. His son needed him.

“Hold onto this,” the Captain spoke with fresh resolve. “We’ll be going on a new adventure soon. The first of many for us.”

“You won’t go on any more trips alone?” Atlas said. “We’ll go together to the Congo?”

The Captain chuckled and several tears broke through the barrier, trailing down his face. He had recently regaled Atlas with stories about his deployment there. He had omitted the frenzied raids into insurgent camps, but described with a dreamy enchantment the elephants he had watched bathe, the flaring nostrils of angry gorillas, and the slow stalk of the cheetah.

“Of course,” the Captain said. He noticed more rapid movement to the entrance and shouting in the distance. “I’ll take you anywhere in the simulation. Anything you want, we’ll find.”

“Will my mom be there?” Atlas asked.

The Captain looked at Atlas. The entrance door slammed open and both of them turned to see the scientist running through with a loudspeaker in hand, visibly concerned.

“Everyone into the pods immediately!” he announced through the speaker after catching a quick breath. “Strap in and shut the pod door. It’ll automatically start. Don’t wait for me!” He raced back out, and as the door swung behind him, the *pop* of gunfire echoed into the room. People immediately began running to their pods. As the covers were hastily closing around the pair, the Captain gripped Atlas

and ushered him into his pod. The gunshots had thrown the Captain's mind into high gear, and he quickly pieced things together.

Once the Upload began and it became clear it worked, governments and religions tried to block the passage alike; the authorities having lost their labor, and the churches their eschatology. In a stunning divorce, a wave of academic and research institutions renounced their ties to the state. Upload was facilitated at discrete sites, and the ensuing pilgrimages made in stealth. However, the ordained from both the holy and unholy cathedral sought to shut the sites down. All potential Uploaders knew that only one of those sides was lenient.

The Captain tried fumbling with Atlas's harness, but Atlas quickly grabbed the buckles and began adjusting them himself. Just as he was able to click himself in, the lights in the room flickered and dimmed. Amid the clamor, the Captain watched a man in a white robe emerge from the dark entrance hallway. The man wore a full, golden mask that had intricate flowers carved throughout its surface, reminding the Captain of the fissures of a volcano. The man's eyes were hidden in the shadows. The remaining pods began to slam shut around the father and son with the same violence as the recent gunfire. No one could wait any longer.

"I'll see you there," the Captain said before throwing himself into the pod next to Atlas. He had heard how certain sects were attempting to break the encryption on the simulation, likely to develop worlds of endless worship—a veritable heaven. He had no intention of spending the rest of eternity on his knees. The masked man began walking

towards him and this resolve became the sole purpose of the Captain's remaining minutes.

In the Congo, the Captain had once been hunted by an insurgent sniper. Bullets had pierced through the vegetation around him, each one following a loud *crack*. Unable to discern the location of his hunter, he had dropped prostrate and begun furiously clawing at the forest floor, pressing his face deep into the soil and fallen leaves in a desperate attempt to flee. He had now the same realization that nobody would be saving him, that no amount of guile or courage would get him out. He smelled the jungle.

"Go NOW!" the Captain shouted at Atlas, putting on his own harness. He heard Atlas cry out and turned to see the boy's arm stretching for the pod door, unable to reach it. The Captain tried to pull his harness off to help and realized the harnesses were locked in place. He remembered his earlier conversation with the scientist. Gripping the nylon, he pulled apart with such intensity his callouses tore away, but the harness remained fastened. The Captain heard a terrible sawing noise coming from Atlas's pod and realized that Atlas was trying to cut his harness with the arrowhead. There was no way to do that without gripping the arrowhead's sharp edges. The Captain howled at the thought and his body twisted against its confinement.

The masked man stepped upon them, so close that the Captain could now see the dilated pupils of his eyes. He reached out with a gloved hand to the Captain's pod cover. The Captain turned to see Atlas make one last lunge, the arrowhead falling to the floor and his fingers barely wrapping around the cover's inner handle. That was enough

for the Captain. He gripped his own cover and pulled it close. It locked in place instantly and the glass panel swiftly froze over as the temperature dropped to a cryogenic range. With his last moments, the Captain strained to look outside of the panel, but could not see past the intricate crystals that now covered the glass—infinite patterns that seemed to him a barren tundra.

\* \* \*

THE CAPTAIN AWOKE. It felt as if he had overslept for a vast length of time; unlike him. He was still in the pod. The cover extended outward without him moving, and he covered his eyes against a light shining into his face. An unfamiliar voice was saying something but he ignored it. Realizing there was no longer a harness holding him, he gingerly grabbed hold of the pod's side to pull himself out. The pod alongside his was empty. *Where's Atlas? Did he make it?*

Throughout the next few days, others tried to console him. They told him that the precise time of upload could vary, and it was possible Atlas had already arrived and wandered into the world. The Captain knew they hadn't seen the final moments of himself and his son, so their conjecture was close to useless. Even then, what little hope he had shrunk once he learned from an uploaded researcher that even if Atlas had made it through, there would still be a wide river to cross.

The researcher explained that simulated minds were created by scanning the body and brain, replicating them through code. Given the influx of experiences and sensory

data across years in the simulation, much more than the century of lifespan that human brains could barely accommodate, memories decayed at a faster rate. Pre-upload memories were more robust than simulated ones, having roots in neurons and synapses, but nothing was fully shielded. Memory had always been fallible and unreliable, but in the simulation, it was especially fleeting. Something to do immediately, the researcher recommended, was to capture your memories of loved ones, lest they be forgotten. You might not recognize them when you meet.

Both inspired and worried, the Captain began painting. Although he had never painted before, he found it was a common hobby for many other simulated minds given its recollective value. By watching those around him he quickly learned what materials to procure and how to employ simple techniques. With a brush in hand, he would muster his focus to remember how Atlas's face looked when he was happy, trying to capture every line and curve on the canvas. It was a stressful endeavor. If he lost focus, the face in his mind's eye threatened to break into the last look of terror he had glimpsed before the upload.

Even as the Captain walked this mental tightrope, he knew from seeing other paintings that hung from walls—and those stuffed into trash bins—that he was one of the lucky ones. Many others could not fully visualize what they sought to see again, often from letting too much time pass in the simulation. Their paintings were apparitions; each one a blend of features that resembled a lost spirit calling out from another universe.

As he continued painting, the Captain thought about how to use other tools for his memory. Thinking about a practice he had once seen on a mission, he cut some wood from a maple tree and began carving. Although he hadn't set out to carve anything particular, as he continued to whittle it down, he saw the shape of an arrowhead emerge. However, upon finishing, he could not bear having it in his sight. Unlike his paintings, the wooden arrowhead represented something he did not want to remember. He placed it into a small tin box and packed it away on a shelf. For several years the Captain traveled across the simulated lands in search of his son, but found no trace. Gradually, the wooden arrowhead slipped from his mind, and all knew was that inside this tin box was something he could never forget.

#### SIMULATION

The Captain watched patiently for another week before the thief returned to his neighborhood. This time, he was ready. He had placed several small speakers in a pattern around nearby houses, creating an invisible path to a corner where he'd lie in wait. This tactic was inspired by Atlas himself, one that the Captain had planned with him so often that it was muscle memory. Once triggered, the speakers would play pre-recorded sounds at timed intervals, giving the perception of coordinated activity. During an infiltration, they could deceive a guard into thinking there was movement in a certain direction; in a pursuit, the target would run from the speakers, believing the sounds were those of pursuers, and fall predictably into a trap. If the thief



was Atlas there was a chance that he'd catch on, but the Captain knew that the strategy was difficult for anyone to discern in the heat of the chase.

From his attic, the Captain watched the thief stealthily creep in range. He initiated the first speaker.

"Hey, stay where you are!" he heard the voice call out from the speaker. The thief sprinted in the opposite direction, and with a grin the Captain made his way downstairs and to his hiding spot. He wistfully recalled that when he and Atlas deployed the strategy, they'd tell each other to meet at the "finish line." Various recorded sounds of himself running, coughing, and jumping on metal boards emanated throughout the neighborhood. The Captain positioned himself behind a hidden corner. He began to gleefully imagine how irritated Atlas would be if he was caught with one of his own signature tricks. Light footsteps came closer and the Captain crouched in preparation.

A figure emerged, and the Captain swiftly tackled him to the ground, twisting in midair to let his own body bear the brunt of the impact. Instinctively, he pinned one of the arms to the ground, and was about to pin the other when he saw the thief's face.

It wasn't Atlas.

The thief, a boy of about the same age but with dark, olive skin and fierce green eyes, was beginning to shake himself from the daze of the takedown.

"Get off of me," the thief moaned. The Captain felt disappointment rise from within his lungs and into his head, and felt himself begin to crush the much smaller wrist in his hand.

“What do you want?” the thief suddenly exclaimed upon feeling the vise-like grip. The sound of fear had crept into his voice.

The Captain leaned close and did not release his hold. “Where are my paintings?” the Captain said in a low tone.

The boy squinted at him, then glanced at something to the side. “She’ll tell you.”

The Captain stiffened and followed the glance, having not expected an accomplice. There was no one there. The boy’s free arm swung from the other side, clocking a piercing blow beneath his eye. The Captain instinctively grabbed at his eye, and a fistful of dirt flew into the other and up his nose. He stumbled back, coughing. A foot caught him in the stomach, knocking the air out of his body, and through his tears the Captain saw the boy spin around and take off. The Captain held still for several moments to recover. He caught his breath and charged it into a bloodlust.

Accelerating after him, the Captain found the boy was already half a block away. They hurdled over fences and dashed through backyards until the boy slipped into Line City. The neighborhood lay on the outer edge of a unique metropolis, one that contained the only bridge from the simulation back to the real world. Despite the chaos of the early Upload era, simulated minds and humans had eventually agreed on—and determined the means of—a form of return. This was formalized into a pact that gave those in the simulation the right to return to Earth with a new, nano-sized body; these “anchored” minds were also given a city to spend the scarcity of time they had recovered.

Line City contained the only way back. It was full of various hawkers and performers, all of them serving a clientele that looked to squeeze the last drops of juice from the fruit of eternity. As the Captain rushed past exotic food carts and street artists setting up their wares, he could see the fabled line for the city's central gates in the distance; those who had found a reason to go back to reality.

At this sight he felt his legs become weary, and he was glad to see the boy slow down to jog up the grand staircase of a large restaurant. A diner walked out and kept the door open for the boy, unaware of the scoundrel he had just invited in. Only moments behind, the Captain spent the last of his energy to burst up the stairs and into the restaurant, almost tearing open the door with his speed. He collided with a well-dressed couple, apologized, and spun around to see he had the attention of an entire ballroom of gastronomic guests. The boy was slipping into the kitchen on the other side of the room.

“Stop!” the Captain cried. He needled his way through linen-covered tables and carts full of steaming goods. As he entered the kitchen, he immediately jumped back, as the boy had waited there to upturn a large cauldron of curry, evidently the restaurant's specialty. The whiff of braised beef and potatoes called out to the Captain's stomach. The boy ran down a spiral staircase to the side and the Captain followed, spending more time in the air than the actual steps. In the near darkness at the bottom, the boy hesitated, and in that moment the Captain pounced on him like a starving tiger. This time he allowed the entirety of his weight to drive into the youth and against the floor, their skin

scraping against the gritty ridges of the brick surface. The boy was weeping now and clearly done, but the Captain watched his hands move towards the boy's neck.

“STOP!” a woman's deep voice commanded, and her echo came back to reinforce this from every direction. Its totality made the Captain's body pause from carrying out its subliminal orders, enough time for the Captain to regain control and stare, devastated, at the boy beneath him. He got up and immediately staggered back, for at his side was a large, burly woman. She had been at least sixty when she uploaded. A long, aquiline nose protruded from her face and seemed ready to peck at him. Her face was surprisingly masculine, with a fierce square chin that would put most bodybuilders to shame. In stark contrast to this were her golden hoop earrings and braided ponytails full of blonde hair. She put two fingers into her mouth and whistled.

A swarm of small footsteps pattered about, surrounding him. Daring to turn around, he was shocked to find himself surrounded by a ring of children dressed in tatters. He had avoided children ever since he had uploaded, and it was now as if all of them had gathered to corner him in this restaurant's basement. As his eyes adjusted, he realized the room was huge and cavernous, with wide brick arches watching over barrels of wine and shelves of kitchen goods.

“You disgust me!” the burly woman spat out.

“Look,” the Captain said, reclaiming his breath and raising his hands. “I'm sorry. I just want my paintings back.”

“Ha!” she shrilled. “You think you are the only one? The only father pining after pictures of their forgotten children,

while their offspring are left to wander the simulation alone?” Her arms spread out to the children around them. “I am Sashenka, the matriarch of the detached. When the simulation robs children of their parents, I provide the well for their thirst.”

The Captain looked around him again.

“What did you say?” he asked. “Where are the parents?”

Sashenka rolled her eyes, clearly annoyed at the question. “The parents left them. Every family uploads together, but most of them break. They break when the father decides they must spend the next century partying and that the son must find someone else to play games with. They break when the mother is tired of holding hands to walk across the street and decides the daughter must stay at home.”

The Captain lowered his hands and narrowed his gaze.

“The parents just abandon the kids? Surely not every situation is like that?” he said. Sashenka drew in closer, and he could now see a wart on her chin and a missing front tooth. Her eyes lit up.

“But they are,” she said. “The first decade here is the same for everybody. Maybe the next twenty too. But at some point you decide that eternity cannot be burdened with child-rearing, and cast yourself off from your ancestral duty.”

The Captain found himself shaking his head. “Can’t you admit there are other reasons?” he asked.

“And what good reason could a parent have for abandoning their child?” the matriarch returned.

“There are several, but perhaps all unforgivable,” the Captain blankly stated.

“Yes, you reprobate,” she declared. “And yours?”

The Captain was suddenly tired of talking. “You’ve got the wrong person,” he said. “I made a mistake, but it was a long time ago. The simulation and my life here have nothing to do with it. Now, hand over my paintings.” He thought about the combined strength of the children around him and noticed Sashenka was staring at him oddly.

“When was the last time you saw your child?” she asked.

“My son... and not. Anytime. Here,” the Captain said, gritting his teeth and judging the lunging distance between himself and Sashenka. However, at this Sashenka began laughing, a terrible, insolent music, and she looked at the Captain again with eyes full of dancing flames.

“Of course. You’re Atlas’s father,” she said.

It was as if the simulation had suddenly paused for the Captain. “What?” he said, his voice trembling.

“We found him several years ago pickpocketing the city’s line,” Sashenka said. “He spent time with us.”

“He made it? You... you know where he is?” the Captain said.

Sashenka grinned. “Not now, and even if I knew, that wouldn’t be for me to tell you,” she said. “You’re as guilty as the rest of them. A child who’s abandoned gets to decide if they’re reunited. If the parent has earned it. After all, why reconcile only to be deserted again later?” She motioned with her arms toward the children. “Many of us here are wanted, but not needed.”

The Captain decided all of this was too convenient to be true. Had he written Atlas’s name on the back of the paintings? His head pounded. Something inside him had

blistered at the accusations of forsaking his son. It was all wrong. He had thought Atlas was in position to upload. The masked man had been so close. It had been a matter of life and death; not some selfish, whimsical decision about his responsibilities in eternity.

“You’re a liar,” he said angrily, but he began weeping, and the tears could not be stopped. “And I didn’t abandon my son.”

With that the Captain began walking to the staircase. The ring of children broke to let him through, and he ascended back up into the sounds of bubbling pots and whirling whisks.

\* \* \*

THE CAPTAIN RETURNED HOME in a daze, his head continuing to pound. He tried pouring himself a whiskey, but could not keep his hand still enough to fill the glass. Resigning himself to failure, he left the bottle on its side. The rest of the life-giving nectar gurgled away to form a small lake on his countertop.

He laid on his bed without changing clothes. Sashenka’s words played over and over. *You’re as guilty as the rest of them.* He yearned painfully for his paintings, anything to bring Atlas back. A dim light began to shine in the attic of his mind, and he staggered into his closet. He reached up and took the tin box with the carefulness of a priest holding an ancient, holy book. His thumb slid under the metal cover and gently released it from its duty. As he saw beneath the cover he became overwhelmed, falling back against the closet wall

and sliding to the floor. His memory had failed him. Instead of the wooden arrowhead, there was a small, black card. He recognized the seal of his upload certificate, which had been assigned when he entered the simulation. The Captain knew the corresponding seal could only be produced by an individual's genuine, simulated touch. Below it were the words:

*Line City Storage*

It was a key.

\* \* \*

THE BUILDING WAS NESTLED DEEP in Line City, sitting next to the line's final stretch to the gates. From a distance, the storage facility seemed to shift and distort in the waves of simulated heat; up close, the Captain realized it was actually built from hundreds of cubes that were constantly being rearranged. Large vehicles moved to and from the building's loading docks, revealing the cubes as miniature shipping containers. Many uploaded minds had embraced a nomadic lifestyle, likely keeping the entirety of their belongings in these cubes.

There was no entrance to the building, only a series of kiosks distributed in front of the cubes that made up its sides. Observing others entering the cubes, the Captain walked up to a kiosk and inserted his card. The cube in front of him slid backwards smoothly and lowered beneath the ground, revealing an endless corridor of containers behind it. Minutes later, another cube took its place. Facing the cube, the Captain watched its wall retract into its side to reveal



another wall with a metal door. He opened the door and waited for the lights to flicker on before stepping inside.

There was nothing else in the room but several items splayed onto a large table. On the left side, he saw a few wooden, carved items: a dog figurine, a boomerang, a medallion with an engraved face, and his replica arrowhead. At the sight of the arrowhead he felt a wave of relief—so it *was* real. He picked up the medallion next to it and ran his thumb over the etches. Like a spark of electricity, something ran up from the indentations and into his fingertips. These were all memories recreated from adventures with Atlas—before the upload. On the other side of the table the objects were not carved, but actual items, and these seemed foreign to him. A pair of dice, a broken handheld mirror, and gold coins that were inscribed with a strange language. As his eyes traveled from one trinket to the next, something stirred in the depths of his submerged memory, spiraling upwards from within, and it entered into the rooms of his mind and filled them with a horrible comprehension.

At some point, Atlas had been with him in the simulation. The Captain had let himself forget.

\* \* \*

THE CAPTAIN FOUND Sashenka telling the children a story when he returned. Her juvenile gang was seated in front of her. He looked at the children as they turned around. Their faces lacked the creases and wrinkles of his own battle-worn visage, but he could see now that etched upon them was the same search for answers.

“You were right,” he said before Sashenka could break into another tirade. “He was here. We traveled together, accomplished things.” His voice had faded into a whisper. He gently squeezed the wooden arrowhead in his pocket and it felt warm between his fingers.

“Can I help?” he asked. “You and the children here. Your burden.”

A mirthless smile broke out on Sashenka’s face. She began to circle around him, a threatening shape in the hazy light of the basement.

“Help?” she said. “Like the other parents that have come before you? All of them, looking for redemption.” As quickly as she had started pacing, Sashenka stopped and stood still. “None of them has ever recovered what they lost. An eternity of begging may be all that you deserve once you find him.”

“I’m not going to search for Atlas. I know that won’t change anything,” the Captain said, looking at the group. “He needs to find me himself.” At this there was an eruption of angry muttering.

“He doesn’t need to do anything for you, you deadbeat!” a familiar voice cried out to an echo of agreement. Searching through the faces, the Captain recognized the glaring countenance of the boy he had tackled. The Captain could sense how deep the roots of their grudges had grown, the links wrapped around fragments of memories and intertwined with one another, reinforcing the group against anyone that pulled against them. The cold hand of doubt suddenly gripped him. There was nothing he could do. The children would forever languish in this dark basement,

where their grievances could be preserved alongside the barrels of wine.

Sashenka held up a hand to quiet the crowd, peering at him curiously.

The Captain spoke quickly so the silence could not strangle him. "My son's no longer with me because of the future I chose. If I pursue him, it's just doing the very thing that tore us apart. I'm done venturing from home. I have one last mission before I join the line and leave the simulation." He gathered himself, taking in a deep breath. "To help others make that jump before me."

Sashenka shook her head, but the Captain caught her glance briefly at her younger companions. "This is ridiculous," she said.

"I'm going to start a place of rest near the gateway. A new home." The Captain gestured at the children. "I can give them somewhere nice to stay, where the world won't forget about them. They deserve more than this." He paused to let this register. "They'll be surrounded by those preparing to move on. They may learn to forgive again. And if they decide to leave the simulation, I'll be there to help them."

"You don't know how much they carry," Sashenka said, beginning to tremble. "How they've been wronged. I've found children that have spent more years weeping than they were alive."

"They'll never grow here," the Captain said softly.

"We can't do it," Sashenka said, adamant. "There's nothing out there for us."

An idea fluttered through the Captain's mind, and he caught and held onto it gingerly, even as he wanted to let it

go. He slowly approached Sashenka. Reaching out, he took her wrinkled hand and raised it upwards. Removing the wooden arrowhead from his pocket, he placed it on her palm.

“This represents one of my greatest joys with my son, as well as my greatest failure,” he said. “Since you took my paintings, this is all I have left of him. If I succeed and Atlas finds me, I won’t need this anymore.”

He closed her fingers lightly above the arrowhead.

“Something to remember me by.”

\* \* \*

THE HOTEL HAD COST MOST of the Captain’s savings from completed contracts, but he had never felt more prosperous. He had even procured searchlights for the rooftop. These would turn on every night, making the building a beacon in the darkness, marking it as a home for others to return to before their final journey. They were a tremendous effort to set up, but luckily he had the help of a few small, nimble hands.

The Captain now stood in front of the hotel as he usually did in the afternoons, gazing at the line to the real world that waited less than ten meters away. He wondered if, one day, he would see Atlas’s face among the crowd. He became aware of giggling behind him, sweeping away thoughts of his lost son. Sashenka stood grinning near the entrance, and one of the orphans—a young girl in a blue dress—was running toward him.

“Cap!” the girl said. “Cappy!”

His face lighting up, the Captain knelt to give her a hug.