

Glean

By

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Character is higher than intellect. A great soul will be strong to live as well as think.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Prologue

The young couple sat motionless, hands intertwined, admiring the antique mahogany writing desk adorned with intricate wood carvings of acanthus leaves in front. On the opposite side, a pretty woman with cropped blond hair adjusted her wire rimmed reading glasses, perusing the last of several lengthy forms scattered on the desk before setting down her tablet computer next to a gold nameplate with black letters that read: *E. Lindstrom, Senior Data Counselor*

“Who’s is it?” asked the wife, her delicate hand tightening around her husband’s thumb turning the blood starved appendage three shades of scarlet. She refused to make eye contact with the Counselor, focusing instead on the wall directly behind her inscribed with the Latin words *Ex uno disce omnes*. From one person, learn all people.

Argentum’s corporate motto.

“Someone from the coast,” said the Counselor, tucking a rogue strand of hair behind her ear. “Sigma Chora, I believe. I can look it up if you’d like.”

“That won’t be necessary,” said the husband, shifting nervously in his seat. “And this is the absolute best you can do? We were hoping for at least an S5 if not better.”

The Counselor removed her glasses and leaned back in her chair, running her hand up and down the bonded Italian leather. Her cold, expressionless eyes darted between the two people sitting across from her. “You realize a Rational Identity of 225 is nothing to sneeze at.

His test scores were off the charts. An S4 is extremely good, only 30 or so in all the Choras, but it does come at a price. I have three other families interested in this one so the sooner you can give me an answer the _”

“Money’s not an issue,” interrupted the husband. “It’s just that... what if it doesn't work? Will you refund our money?”

“Argentum guarantees 100% customer satisfaction. And that’s a promise from the Chairman himself. I’ve been with the company for 15 years and I’ve never had an unhappy client. But I get the sense you're still conflicted. Maybe you need more time? I can give you a day. Two at the most.”

“We don’t need more time,” said the wife through a clenched jaw. She shot her husband an angry look. “We’ll take it.”

“Excellent. Let’s get started.”

The Counselor stood up from behind the desk and straightened her black and pink tweed pencil skirt. “Would you like to watch?”

The couple nodded as they followed her to a large covered bay window on the back wall of her office. With the palm of her hand she hit a red button on the side of the window. Two metal panels opened automatically, giving the three of them an unobstructed view of a sterile, brightly lit laboratory filled people wearing light green surgical gowns, gloves and masks. In the center of the room were two identical hospital beds, separated by a machine with a computer keyboard and an intricate web of black and yellow wires. Two large monitors, each with a digital scan of a human brain, were attached to the machine.

The wife smiled and gently pressed her hand against the cold glass staring at the tiny occupant squirming on the bed on the left as a lab technician attached a set of electrodes to her chest and forehead connecting her to a heart monitor. Then a small metal cap was placed on her head and screwed into the sides of her temples with two bolts.

The wife followed the black and yellow wires connecting the baby to the occupant of the second bed. He was eerily still with his eyes closed but she could tell he was handsome and young. *Probably not much older than 20*, she thought. He was naked except for a thin white sheet draped across the middle of his body and strapped to the bed with thick leather bands around his wrists and ankles. A large metal contraption resembling half of a bicycle tire was secured to his forehead by several thin steel rods and an identical set of electrodes were attached to the same places on his body as the baby.

Etched on the inside of his left forearm was *S4225*.

The wife winced. "Will it hurt her?" she said glancing quickly at her husband who was staring at the floor.

"Not at all. Attaching the transfer cap is the worst part. She may have a little bruising from the screws." the Counselor said.

The technician stood at the machine in between the beds and began typing on the keyboard. When he was finished he turned to face the window, nodding his head once. The Counselor nodded back then faced her clients. "They're ready." She flipped the intercom switch to the on position and spoke into it. Her voice carried through the office and filled the laboratory.

"Commence with gleaning. Subject S4225."

A monotone computer generated voice filled the lab. "*COMMENCING GLEANING PROCESS. SUBJECT S4225 IN FIVE...FOUR...THREE...TWO...ONE...*"

The room fell silent except for a stream of steady beeps from the heart monitor. Then a low humming noise flooded the lab, becoming louder and more defined with each passing second. The baby whimpered and squirmed harder when suddenly the occupant next to her let out a piercing scream. His eyes snapped open as his head craned backwards exposing a large, bulging vein on the side of his neck. Instantly the digital scan on the left monitor lit up like a Christmas tree, each section of the baby's brain alive with color.

The wife gasped and grabbed for her husband's hand as the baby started to wail uncontrollably. She buried her head in her husband's chest. "You said it wouldn't hurt!" he sputtered trying to calm his wife. "Can't you do something?"

"I said it wouldn't hurt *her*," the Counselor said insouciantly. "And in order for the transfer to be successful, both subjects must be awake and completely alert throughout the entire procedure. Don't worry. It's almost over."

The young man screamed louder, violently thrashing from side to side like a writhing snake, his handsome face contorted and ashen. Both of his eardrums burst as blood trickled down the sides of his face resting in a dark red pool at the base of his skull. His mouth released a foamy, white substance which covered his lips and dribbled down his chin as his eyes rolled back in his head until only the whites were visible.

Then the humming stopped and he was still again. There was no brain activity on the monitor above him.

The computer generated voice echoed throughout room and bounced off the walls.

“GLEANING COMPLETE. TRANSFER SUCCESSFUL. SUBJECT S4225 TERMINATED.”

The wife lifted her head from her husband’s chest as the technician turned off the machine and removed the electrodes from both patients. She laughed when she saw her baby sitting up in bed playing with the wires. A second lab tech in a long white coat draped the sheet over the young man then picked up the baby and brought her to the window, holding her hand up to wave to her parents through the glass.

The Counselor turned to the wife and smiled. “She’s beautiful. What did you decide to name her?”

“Zahra,” said the wife, waving back to her daughter. “It means brilliant.”

One

S7351

Anika sat on the edge of her bed running her index finger over the raised five digit code engraved on the inside of her left forearm. She glanced at the clock on her nightstand. 3:57 P.M. In three minutes, the day's Interstice will be over and it would be safe to go outside again. She felt like a caged animal, confined to the house for six hours straight day after day with no one to talk to except Newton, her orange striped Tabby.

She did a quick scan of her room and located her silver cooling jacket wadded up in the corner. She hated the way she looked in it. It was bulky and way too big for her petite frame but she wore it anyway, a precaution in case the sun's rays were stronger than usual. Newton was curled up in a fetal position inside the hood _ his favorite place to sleep during the Interstice.

He'd become increasingly distrustful and antisocial since a farming accident claimed his tail four years ago.

Anika tried to steady her trembling hands as she opened the half empty jar of skin putty, a silicon dermal adhesive that looked and felt just like real skin. It was only available through one seller on the black market, and usually for a very steep price. She took a heaping scoop and applied it liberally to her forearm, completely covering the numbers until there was only the illusion of bare skin.

She hardly noticed her Rational Identity anymore. She's had it ever since she was a baby when Argentum forced residents in all the Choras to register their newborns with the Global Rational Identity Database, or G.R.I.D. It was a serious crime to cover up your R.I., usually punishable by public floggings or in some cases, executions at the hands of Argentum Extermination Squads.

She tried to ignore the knot in the pit of her stomach which felt more like giant angry bats, not fluttering butterflies. Tomorrow was her seventeenth birthday. Turning seventeen in the Choras was a particularly dangerous milestone especially with an R.I. like hers but she covered it up anyway.

She touched her forearm to see if the putty was dry. *Perfect*, she thought admiring her handy work. Not a single trace of the code anywhere. Newton hissed disapprovingly as she picked him up and tossed him on the bed. She un-wadded the cooling jacket, slipping it on over her t-shirt and jeans then took a final look in the full length mirror. She wrinkled her nose at her reflection. She wasn't unattractive, just not pretty like most of the other girls in Theta. Her straight jet black hair was pulled back tightly in pony tail and her pale skin looked even more

washed out against the jacket's shiny silver. If only they made skin putty for the face, she thought as she closed her bedroom door behind her then flew down the stairs and outside into the brightness of the mid-January afternoon.

She fumbled around in her pocket producing an object about the size of a small lighter _ a heat sensitive gauge designed by her father, Dr. Oren Hansen. He was a professor of Biochemical Engineering at the university in old Minnesota when such places like that existed. Before the planet became too warm. Before the Reordering and permanent five digit codes were imprinted on forearms.

Before Argentum decided who lived and who didn't.

He created the gauge to read the daily temperature as well as measure harmful ionizing atmospheric radiation emitting from the all-but-depleted ozone. *Be thankful we live so far north,* he always says. *The people of the Wastelands are dying of radiation poisoning, skin cancer, dehydration...*

Anika drew in a long breath, puffing up her cheeks as she stepped out from under the protective shade of the front porch. She glanced down at the tiny instrument in her hand. Two sets of digital numbers flashed across the screen: 98°F, and below it, +50 IARL, a moderate radiation level. It was safe to go outside but not for too long.

She tucked the gauge back in her pocket and pulled the hood of her jacket over her head. She took another deep breath then sprinted down the deserted gravel road kicking up dirt and tiny rocks with her tennis shoes. She ran as fast as she could for a 1/4 mile straight, passing row after row of lanky, brittle corn stalks. Corn made up about 3/4 of their farm which was one of the

biggest in Theta Chora. T.C. was small, only 200 or so residents, and tucked away in the northern most part of the new corn belt.

Anika stopped abruptly in front of an old, dilapidated barn with peeling red paint and boarded up windows. Breathless, she leaned forward placing both hands on her knees trying to take in as much oxygen as possible but her lungs felt heavy, like someone just dropped a 100 pound slab of concrete on her chest. Despite the intense heat she was shivering _ the combination of nerves and the cooling jacket regulating her body's temperature.

She could hear the steady whir of a motor coming from inside the barn as she stood in front of the heavy wood door willing her fluttering stomach to cease and desist. The Professor had a tendency to be extremely overprotective, bordering on tyrannical, especially when it came to her social life.

Correction. Her virtually non-existent excuse for a social life.

The worst he can do is say no, she said then stood upright and pried open the door.

Inside the barn, the air was stifling despite the giant ceiling fan and several smaller electric ones making Anika thankful she wore her cooling jacket. She lowered her hood and saw her father with his back turned, hunched over a rusted out green and yellow John Deere tractor with the hood propped open.

“Hi, Dad,” she said but he couldn't hear her over the tractor's engine. “Dad?” she said again. “PROFESSOR!”

Oren lifted his head and reached over the steering wheel turning off the engine. He grabbed a dirty rag from his back pocket and wiped his grease stained hands taking extra care to clean the dirt from underneath his fingernails. “Did you finish your studies?” he said still facing

in the opposite direction. She'd grown accustomed to his lukewarm demeanor and genuine lack of interest in anything other than her school work. She'd be surprised if he remembered her birthday at all.

"Two hours ago," she said. "Wave-particle duality and a little Ancient Greek. I know you're busy but do you have a minute? I need to ask you something, it's kind of important."

"I always have time for Quantum Mechanics, Ani."

"Actually, it's of a non-physics nature." Ani paused, gazing at her father who was now facing her with his arms crossed and a puzzled look on his face. "Well," she continued. "Um, you see there's this thing tonight and I was wondering if _"

"No," The Professor said flatly.

"You don't even know what I'm going to ask you yet." she said.. Her fingertips felt prickly as her temperature started to rise beneath the cooling jacket.

The Professor raised his eyebrows gesturing with his hand for her to continue.

"As I said, there's a social gathering in town tonight. A bunch of kids are going _" But before she could finish a familiar voice shouted from outside the barn.

"Hello... Professor? You in there?" Standing in the doorway was a fragile, emaciated old man with sunken cheekbones and the trademark weathered skin of a career farmer. He had on denim overalls with a dingy white sleeveless t-shirt underneath. His weak, twig-like arms held up a cardboard box overflowing with used machine parts which he was about to drop at any moment.

"Come on in, Ribs," said the Professor. "Just put the box on the bench."

Ani had known Ribs Whitebird all her life. His farm was directly adjacent to theirs, making him their closest neighbor, and a friend of the Professor's. Ribs had no family to speak of. His wife, Teresa, died of cancer when Ani was just a baby, right around the same time Ani's own mother died. She always suspected that was the reason why Ribs and her father became such good friends. Bonding over lost loves. In any case, Ribs treated Ani as if she were his own and in some ways she felt closer to him than her own father.

"Hi, Ani," Ribs said handing her a piece of Spearmint flavored gum from his front pocket. "How are things?"

She gritted her teeth and stared at her father. "*How are things?* Perfect, if you enjoy prison life."

Ribs eyes shifted from Anika to the Professor then back to Anika. "Ok, wha'd I'm miss?"

"Anika was in the middle of asking to go to a social gathering in town tonight and I was just telling her no," said the Professor. He walked over the bench and began sifting through the box of parts. "Ribs, I thought you said you had a crankshaft?"

"It's so unfair!" said Ani shaking her head. "No one should have to live like this. Ribs, tell him please!"

"Ah, Professor, let her go and enjoy herself," Ribs said with a smile. "She'll be with her friends. Besides, what's the worst that could happen?"

The Professor shot Ribs an angry look. "The answer's no," he said with clenched teeth. "It's not safe. Given who you are."

"What, a normal teenager?" Ani said.

“You are anything but *normal*, Anika, ” The Professor said. Anika stared at him incredulously, tears welling up in her eyes. “I..I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant you’re... special. It’s not safe out there, Ani. It’s for your own good.”

“I COVERED IT UP!” She rolled up her sleeve thrusting her left forearm in his face. The skin putty was still intact and none of the digits were visible. “See. No one will ever know.”

With a look of exasperation, The Professor handed Anika a sheet of paper with writing on it. “What’s this?” she said sniffing. She wiped her tear streaked face with her sleeve.

“Today’s anagram,” he said.

“You expect me to do an anagram? Now?” She never knew just how callous and uncaring her father was until this very moment.

“You can work on it tonight, after dinner. Now, I have work to do.”

Ani walked silently towards the door then stopped and turned around. “I’ll solve it now. But on one condition. You have to let me go tonight.”

“That’s hardly fair, ” The Professor scoffed. “You always solve my anagrams.”

“Yes but I’ll do this one in under two minutes,” she said. “Ribs can keep time. Deal?”

The Professor gave one of his furrowed, disapproving looks then handed her a pencil. On the piece of paper was a short nonsensical sentence:

Boneshaker deranges instruction.

She nodded at Ribs who was holding a stopwatch. “Go,” he said.

Ani began methodically deconstructing the anagram, crossing out letters then drawing lines to create a second sentence. “Fifteen seconds down,” Ribs said. She blocked out everything around her focusing all her attention on the words in front of her.

“Forty five seconds...one minute to go...”

She paused and leaned back staring at the words forming on the paper until finally realizing exactly what the anagram was - a quote. Then she began rewriting it, starting with the first word.

There.

Anika smiled victoriously as she wrote the second word.

Is.

She laughed and shook her head, writing the rest of the quote below the original sentence.

There is no darkness but ignorance.

She slammed the pencil down and glared at her father. “Shakespeare.” she said. “*Twelfth Night*. Time?”

“One minute thirty seconds,” Ribs beamed. Ani mouthed a quick *thank you* as she turned to leave stopping just short of the doorway. “I won’t be too late,” she said over her shoulder then left the barn.

The Professor crumpled up the sheet of paper and threw it in the corner. “She’s turning seventeen tomorrow, Ribs. If they find her _“

“She’s not a baby anymore, Oren,” said Ribs. “She can’t cover up those numbers forever. Eventually you’re going to have to tell her the truth.”

“She’s *my* baby,” said the Professor with sad eyes. “And the truth is what I’m afraid of.”

