

Book 1

"3. They were offered the choice between becoming kings or the couriers of kings. The way children would, they all wanted to be couriers. Therefore there are only couriers who hurry about the world, shouting to each other - since there are no kings - messages that have become meaningless. They would like to put an end to this miserable life of theirs but they dare not because of their oaths of service."

-Kafka, *Three Parables*

Prologue
21 June, 94 P.C.E.

"You've given me a lot to think about," he says, toothpick bobbing up and down in his mouth as he speaks. Grabbing the protruding end, he digs at the soft spaces between his teeth with a practiced twist before dropping it onto the desk. Betsey watches it lying there, damp and inert, while he puts his hands behind his head and leans back. The interview is over. She stands, thinks about reaching her hand out to shake his, thinks better of it. She nods slightly instead and he replies by widening his smile.

Outside, she waits for the taxi that will transport her back to her small rented room at the edge of the sprawling city. The curb where she waits is rotten, composed of cracked cement knit together by sweet-smelling weeds. She pokes her shoe into an especially large crack, half-expecting an animal, maybe a snake or a mole, to come rushing out. But all is still.

She pops her sunglasses on and slips her hands into a pair of well-worn gloves, a size too big. She pulls her dull grey scarf tightly around her face. Secure in her cover, she waits.

The building behind her is squat and ruddy, the alcoholic uncle of its sleek neighbors. On the side of the building that faces the curb, a pair of doors leads into a large, completely empty and shabbily lit room. After waiting a seemingly interminable period of time, which Betsey assumes was meant to see if she'd give up and leave, an unsmiling person had emerged and led her through another set of doors into a much smaller room. This room contained two couches with their stuffing poking out and a small table offering up a dish of dusty candies.

She'd then been led through yet another door, up a staircase, and into a long dark room reflecting the same dismal fatalism as the building's exterior. The room was filled with rows of desks separated by low padded walls, onto which occupants from a distant era had pinned calendars and photographs. A cat hanging from a branch. A child in an inflatable pool. A wall calendar opened to November's photo: a mossy-shelled tortoise lit by marble streaks of sunlight refracted through cobalt-blue water.

The office had been impossibly quiet, enlivened only by the monotonous buzzing of overhead lights. On the far side of the room is a row of yet more doors, each of which opened to an office with a view of the neighboring building, a slick, reflective glass affair that mirrored the old brick building back at itself.

After waiting in this room for long enough one of those doors had opened, and she had been called inside by a calm, cheerful voice. It had sounded out of place in the dreary stillness. He'd been absolutely inscrutable, asked her disjointed questions that made her start to question her wisdom in agreeing to the meeting. He had seemed to enjoy the process immensely, chewing on his toothpick for effect.

Betsey is considering whether to make another call to the taxi service when a small black vehicle finally appears. The door pops open, and the driver peers out at her with an angry squint. She drops into the passenger seat and pulls the door shut. The interior of the car is cool and dark, seats upholstered with smooth leather. Not at all what she'd been expecting. She pulls off her gloves and scarf, pushes her glasses to the top of her head. The driver, a small man of indeterminate age, gives her a glance and nods affirmatively.

"Rob," he says, holding out a bony hand. She tamps down the nausea this triggers, puts her hand in his.

"I'm - "

"Betsey," he interjects, "Betsey Reed."

"What?"

"You were here for the interview, weren't you?"

She stumbles over her reply. Whatever eventually comes out is incoherent.

"Well, you passed," he says, as expressionless as if informing the new busboy that he'd be clearing dirty plates from restaurant tables that evening. He doesn't seem to have any opinion on the matter.

Her mouth opens. No sound comes out.

He sighs, impatient. "Well, what is it? Yes or no?"

"Um. Yes. Of course." What else could she say?

"Good. I thought as much. Your belongings are in the trunk."

What? She couldn't remember giving permission for anyone to access her room.

"We'll go directly there, if you have no objections. No time to waste. Anyone you need to call before we go?"

Her mind flashes to a reclining chair in a dark room. Windows frozen shut. The smell of sour tobacco. Then to a smiling young man, her age, teeth gleaming and bare neck exposed as he tosses his head back to laugh. She squashes the images as quickly as they appear.

"No."

"Excellent. We've made the right choice, then. Welcome to the team."

Knowledge

18 August, 98 P.C.E.

Dr. Shah stepped up to the podium, cleared his throat and began to speak.

“It’s a well-known fact that what we see is shaped by what we expect to see. The corollary, of course, is that we can’t know for sure what it is we don’t see, because we have no way of knowing what it is we’re not expecting. Think back to when you were young and learned a new word – suddenly it was everywhere, suffused into the air itself. How did the world appear, you tried to remember, without this word?”

He paused for a moment, peering out into the harsh stage lights.

“That’s how it is with everything, all of the time. Imagine all of the things we don’t know we don’t know.”

Out in the darkened hall, a back straightened. A figure which had been lolling through the last few lectures became alert. Dr. Shah continued.

“Mathematicians have a way of quantifying this uncertainty about the world, of describing just how badly we have played our game of telephone with the universe. It’s called information theory, and it forms the basis of all of our statistical guesswork. It’s a sophisticated method for answering a very simple question: how sure are we that the patterns we observe are real, and not figments of our imagination?”

The figure in the audience leaned forward in her seat, waiting -

“How different the world would be if we could know. How much more real, more solid.”

The signal reached her completely undetected by anyone else in the hall. At the end of the talk, she would find Dr. Shah backstage, offer her scripted congratulations, and collect the information he’d brought. If everything went according to plan, neither of them would ever see the other again. Such was the nature of her business.

“The problem, of course, is that even the most sophisticated guess is still a guess. We don’t have a good way of knowing what kind of translation our brains are doing to obtain a coherent signal from the chaos of reality. So we wade through space and time, drowning in a sea of information, misinterpreting and ignoring, until finally our sloshing meat-brains wring out a story with a past, present, and future. We are pattern-junkies, cajoling coherence where there isn’t any. Making up *de novo* explanations for random coincidences and missing other, important things entirely.”

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At the Embassy just a few blocks to the southeast and completely oblivious to Dr. Shah’s presentation, Fran DeMillo was both seeing and not seeing. She was walking down the same hall she always walked down, moving with the swift assurance of someone familiar with the place. The doors of her chambers opened automatically for her as they always did. She was surrounded by assistants wielding clipboards,

interns competing to deliver their information briefings, security guards tailing the group as they always did.

She was envisioning the speech she would need to deliver later that day and the stack of bills that she would have to sign, send back for further clarification, or (if they were really unintelligible) veto entirely. She increased her pace. At least with the press conference out of the way she could focus on more important things.

* * *

In the darkened hall, Dr. Shah finished his speech.

“And so we are left with a paradox: how can we ever truly quantify the information we don’t know?”

The lights flickered as the projector reached the end of his presentation, and the audience clapped rather more enthusiastically than he'd expected. It wasn't often that his philosophical musings were so willingly entertained by other scientists. He gave a grateful smile and a self-conscious wave before retreating to the dark space behind the heavy black curtains.

A hand touched him on the shoulder.

"Dr. Shah."

He'd been expecting this, but he jumped anyway.

"Yes," he said, trying to sound more assured than he felt.

"I enjoyed your speech. I believe you have something for me, something that will make the world more solid. Am I correct?"

When his friend had asked him to help her with a secret project, he'd eagerly agreed. He had always wanted to be part of a covert operation, an agent like the ones he read about in books and plays delivering world-changing information to secret agents whose names he would never know. It had always seemed romantic. The reality was, he admitted to himself, more of a strange combination of hokey and terrifying.

"You are."

He led her further into the darkness. From behind a couch wedged into the far corner of the backstage that he could find only by touch, he produced a tattered backpack with a cube-shaped box inside. He passed the bag to her, and she wrapped her arms around it. It was heavy. She could feel its weight sink into her as the professor let it go.

She stood for a moment trying to decide what the thing was. Usually she just transported small magnetic drives, or paper documents if the clients were especially paranoid. Something that could easily fit into a pocket, or an envelope.

"An antique?" she guessed.

"Of sorts," he said. It was new, but based on a very old design, "You know where to take it?"

"I do."

She slipped the bag's straps over her shoulders.

She didn't want to linger. Dr. Shah showed her to the crew door just a few meters further along the dark back wall, and she slipped out into the humid early afternoon air, unnoticed.

* * *

At the embassy, Fran's security detail were seeing potential threats, gauging their immediacy. The reporter in the corner with a recording device, clearly lost on his way to some other lawmaker's office. The overhead lights which were not automatically changing in response to the presence of their asset as they should have been (a possible software failure that would need to be investigated). The spot in the hallway where they always got jumpy, ever since the incident six months ago when a visitor had attempted to stab their asset before being tackled by the full force of the security detail.

None of them had any reason to see, nor any way of seeing, the train rumbling along its crumbling rails away from the city. They couldn't see the crowd inside surrounding Betsey Reed as she clutched a heavily-patched backpack to her stomach. No one in the train took much notice of her, either.

A Typical Press Conference

18 August, 98 P.C.E.

"Ms. DeMillo, how do you feel about this election season?" asked the reporter in the front row with the gangly features of someone barely out of adolescence, "What do you think is your biggest obstacle to re-election?"

"Well, James, I'm reasonably confident that no one else wants this job, so I think you're probably stuck with me for at least one more term."

The reporters laughed as though this were a joke. It wasn't.

This was the problem with politics; everyone thought it was about something, when really it wasn't about anything. Whatever issues, or disagreements, or dissatisfaction the people had with their representatives, or that the representatives had with one another, none of it really meant anything. There was only one reason she was standing in front of the press, and it had nothing to do with the issues, or popularity, or even news coverage, despite these peoples' inflated sense of self-importance. She was simply better than anyone else at smiling through gritted teeth.

She looked at the enthusiastic young man sitting in the press chair with an expression that the viewers at home might call sympathy. He caught the look, and for a second she thought she could see a shiver pass through him as something important was silently communicated between them. But then he stretched and turned to his neighbor and they started laughing about something she couldn't hear. She was disappointed, but kept her face passive.

There were a few more questions about her competitor this year, Franklin Dwyer, who was already being characterized as too young and naïve for the job. It was the standard line, and would be readily accepted by the voters. A competent representative, but inexperienced. Wait until next election. The questions were standard, and she answered in an acceptably diplomatic manner. Then it was over. Relatively painless, as far as press interviews were concerned.

She didn't really mind dealing with reporters. In fact, she felt something of a kinship with them. They were simply playing their assigned role, just as she was. She wished she could be one of them, feel the safety of being part of an indistinguishable mass. She often wished she could be anywhere or anyone other than where and who she was. But that wasn't an option. Not until the next election cycle. She just had to hold on for one more term.

* * *

A few minutes later, Fran found herself hiding in the bathroom, waiting for the interns to finish their conversation and leave. A pair of them were apologizing to a third about some incident from the night before. Apparently the girl hadn't gotten an invitation and was thus excluded from a fourth someone's birthday festivities. This fourth party was conveniently absent from the restroom, leaving her friends to make her excuses for her. She hadn't meant it, it was a mistake, no, of course she still liked her. No one was addressing the obvious question, which was why no one had called the tear-streaked girl once they realized that she hadn't been invited. Even the girl, whose sniffles were finally growing quieter, knew better than to ask.

Fran was not reassured by the conversation. They sounded like snakes. She often found herself wondering whether anyone she worked with had any real moral convictions about anything. Sometimes it seemed that they might. But if they really cared about something they didn't last long here.

Finally it was quiet. She left the stall and went to wash her hands. The mirror in front of her glowed softly as the biosensors in the room picked up her unique chemical signature and adjusted the lighting to match her preferences. She watched the face reflected back at her change subtly from pale, with dark circles ringing sunken eyes, to a more natural flushed hue, the circles barely visible. This was an accommodation made for her that overrode everyone else's preferred settings. The system, so long as it actually worked, was designed to eliminate the waste of costly time preparing her face for presentation. Instead of forcing their representatives to make themselves 'presentable', the rooms they entered simply changed to accommodate them. Of course, this little trick had quickly become a silent show of power; if the lights changed as someone entered the room, you knew that this new arrival was more important than anyone already gathered.

Fran no longer had to worry about this particular subtlety. As the chair of the United Federation of Governors and therefore the undisputed leader of the free world, the lights always changed to suit her. There were people more powerful than her, but they either hid their status or did not make public appearances. The interns, for all of their conniving, rarely even got the chance to choose their own lighting preferences. The lights for them were always the factory standard, bright white glare. She enjoyed the knowledge that whenever they looked at themselves in the mirror they saw every single flaw stridently illuminated. She hoped they felt wildly insecure about it.

Fran felt constantly insecure. The endless, complex maneuvering of her job weighed her down, made it difficult to focus on anything except how much she wished she could talk to someone about it. This was the hardest part of her job – she was a puppet, and no one cared.

* * *

James Lebowitz of the Star Tribune followed the rest of the press corps out of the briefing room, still thinking about the look Fran DeMillo had shared with him. She had looked almost sorry for herself. He didn't doubt that no one else wanted her job. He already knew her competitor couldn't win, unless she did something to change the landscape between now and next fall. He wouldn't put it past her.

James no longer had to worry about the subtleties of the lights, but not because he was too powerful or reclusive. Instead he made use of a chemical exploit that bypassed the biosensors entirely. If left alone in a room for too long the lights would go out, not recognizing that anyone was there. The only person who knew he had this particular exploit was the person who'd gifted it to him seven years ago.

He wasn't normally part of the political press, but as he was currently between assignments his editor had suggested he take this beat until something interesting came up for him to research. He felt so anonymous as he walked among this gaggle of people, familiar to one another but strangers to him, that he thought he might not even exist. The conversations bypassed him entirely until the reporter he'd met during the press conference caught up and clapped him on the back. Recognized, he pulled back from his thoughts, smiled. Of course, he'd love to get drinks after he filed his story. Where? What time?

He went through the motions of socializing under the assumption that eventually it would start to feel natural. It didn't. After so many years working as a courier, he still looked at strangers with suspicion. It made him a good journalist; he never implicitly trusted his sources. Unfortunately it also left him

intractably lonely.