

The Astraea

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The clamor had ceased with the deafening roar of the engines. Millions of spectators silenced with the scream of the *Astraea's* turbines blazing and rumbling the Earth with a tremor that could rouse the dead. From inside the *Astraea's* hull, Mr. Midas looked down upon the observers with a silent disdain and a sense of relief of what he had to endure for these last few months. There were hundreds of beggars and pleaders, wanderers and invalids; each serf wishing to continue their insignificant lives on another planet.

The exhaust began with an intense and violent screech and the engines began to rumble. In awe, François Angelus and his family, along with the totality of the crowd, ceased their infernal cries as they watched the rocket lay an orange tint across the land. For a brief moment, the *Astraea* became their second sun. Soon, the silver hull was piercing the sky like a bullet as they watched in silent, dead-sky reveries for minutes until the last orange glow departed from their sight. Their crying lifted like sounds from hell as François took his wife and child by the hand, leading them through the maelstrom.

It had been some months ago, that Mr. Midas' team of scientific and political giants had begun their search for another planet. As soon as Earth's destruction

became known and imminent, construction began on the *Astraea*. For months, the *Astraea* had been under immense and elaborate assembly within the eyes of those doomed to withstand the fury of the months to come. Desperately, many acted out of violence and dismay towards the hull of the massive craft, frantically trying to doom those leaving to the same fate that awaited themselves, but without result. With every failed attempt, so too did hope diminish among those condemned to suffer. They all glanced at its metallic shell, which shone like the sun off of the once blue ocean, which has since been plagued opaque and dead. But all could have been avoided; the carelessness of a thousand years had run its course. The wrath of Earth's dying days had become impossible to overthrow as those leaving, and those who stayed, witnessed the effects of the pestilence they had given to their own home.

François and his family had returned to their bunker on the outskirts of town. It was a ragged, and in the face of true disaster; useless contraption. It served as a mental safety net for François and his family as he sat in his usual seat in the corner of the room; head in hands wondering what he could possibly do to alter this seemingly unalterable course. There was a stagnant smell within the room that reeked of death and decay stemming from the animals freshly killed by François outside of his home. His daughter began to cry as night fell outside. "Shh, shh, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay," he whispered to her ear. "It's okay, it's okay" the words

rumbled through his head as the mantra became one of pleading and hopelessness rather than reassurance. His eyes met those of his wife as he broke down into her lap. After some time, he had resumed his hopeful inducements, setting an example of endurance to his family as thoughts swirled through his head like a Midwestern tornado. Thoughts he had, but without avail, for there was nothing that could suspend, or change his course; the irrevocable force of nature was one no man could change. He wondered, day by day, how it would look. Soon the horror became melted into his subconscious as he rather wished for his wildest and most terrifying dreams to become reality. Each day melted into the next as the Persistence of Memory began to diminish as a collective whole. His attitude was met with those of many others, who wished that the petty pace that crept from day to day sped up its steps into the final dusty death.

The emptiness of space was one of triumph for the *Astraea* crew, a delightful time at last! “Fantastic,” eager and awe-struck members of the crew often spurted out of pure joy and exhilaration as they finally had shaken the remainder of the Earth’s gravitational pull. The blackness they had seen for years as children had now become reality; they now dwelt intermixed with the stars that so flooded their childhood dreams. The eyes of Mr. Midas remained fixated on the coordinates of their destination as the ship hurdled through space. He slowly raised his eyes out of one of the small windows of the

Astraea. From where he stood, a dying glimpse of Earth could be seen in the distance – a sight which he relished within his mind. “To escape,” he thought, “in the eyes of such ungodly terror.” His countenance gleamed with a sense of uncontainable pride as he gazed fiercely upon the planet with utter indignation and repulsion. Earth was but the size of a marble from his perception as he jokingly held out his hand to hold the shrinking image within his palm. The scene within the window began to take the form of gold as he raised his hand, and immediately, all he touched turned into gilded brilliance. The light from his fingers radiated feverously as his visage was all but blinded from the intense light that burned like a star scorching through space. “Such unequivocal power I do but possess” he thought; “at my mere fingertips!” The Earth shone like a massive sphere of fire as his eyes glowed with satisfaction. What Midas beheld seemed to last for an eternity though he had been standing there for only a moment as the vision ceased, and the dead of space was once again within his view. For the remainder of the night, Midas gloated of the success of his intentions and the fruitful prospects before them all, and wished them all “good night, and many wondrous dreams” as he retired to his quarters, and dreamt dreams of triumph.

In the dying hours of dusk, François left his family in his usual routine to find materials for burning in the night. He stepped out from his dusty shack and began to walk down what used to be Main Street. On

either side of him there were men, women, and children of all ages lying huddled and still on the disease ridden road, where each of his steps were met with the eyes of some seemingly decayed corpse; but not dead, surely not dead were those intermingled bodies slowly watching his doomed steps. He walked further down the way and observed the eyes, the ridges of the forehead, the frail bony hands and the dry cracked lips of those who surrounded him. “Is this but a mirror?” François thought to himself as he raised his hands to touch his own face. It had not rained in some time, and he had not seen his own reflection in what seemed like years.

He felt his deep, sunken eyes, which reminded him of those two black, and dead oceans that surrounded him, and ran his fingers across the ridges at his skull, and he seemed to be touching the bottom of the Earth’s dry valleys that had since been lifeless and uninhabitable. He had never stopped walking as he ran his tongue across his dry, cracked lips that felt like fragments of the desert ground, while he continued to walk upon the Earth that so felt like his withered frame. Never did he realize how thin he had become! He had entirely wrapped his fingers around his forearm as if he had never seen his own body before. Yet, in those dead, sunken eyes, it didn’t matter. He stepped into the dusk further and walked to the end of the street where he found the books and papers collected for burning. Little by little, the pile had diminished but he never knew why. “Why burn these books?” he thought. “Why burn them when the future is

known?” Somewhere in his mind, as he lifted the books into a small crate of his, François still held onto the hope that sheltered itself from the cruel outside world. No matter what was told to him, François still believed somewhere in his heart that “it was going to be okay.” “How foolish,” he thought day by day. But he was not alone. Those huddled on the street, dying, felt such small hope emanating in their cores, burning like the small fire François was looking to cultivate. So he kept coming to gather paper to burn, to keep his small fire burning within his soul that somehow allowed him exist in such obvious dismay and hopelessness. The same fire that has burned since the beginning of time.

Their day had finally come. The *Astraea* crew gleamed with anticipation as the announcement that they had been so desperately waiting for echoed throughout the metallic hull. “Please fasten your harnesses, we shall be entering the atmosphere in t-10 minutes.” They had now come within radar range of their target, which currently looked like a small green marble in this distance. From his small window, Mr. Midas grinned with an inexhaustible pride that seemed to spread like contagion throughout all of the passengers. Its small image slowly came into view from the same window in which Earth slowly died away from some time ago. What seemed to be hours were only mere minutes as they approached the planet which looked not so dissimilar to that of Earth. Its image increased as the radar beeped more intensely with every sweep of the

sensor that circled the small digital screen. Mr. Midas seemed to grow prouder at every intensified beep as suddenly, the cadence had been broken by some unknown, discordant sound. Mr. Midas' eyes grew furious and distorted as he turned his glance to the small screen as he observed with an utter sense of intense curiosity, a much smaller dot upon the radar. He drew his eyes closer and closer, as to assure himself of what he was gazing upon.

A bewildered and unorganized chatter began to commence as a look of perplexed anxiety overcame the entirety of the crew. Mr. Midas demanded answers aggressively and assertively, but the crew had no response, until, within his small window, Mr. Midas beheld a small metallic object in the distance. He grew silent as he could not believe what his eyes were so clearly seeing. As it grew closer, Mr. Midas grew intensely troubled and concerned. "What's this?" he thought immediately, as star-struck members of the *Astraea's* crew all fixated their eyes on the same object which has so grabbed their captain's attention. "A satellite," Mr. Midas spoke between deep and troubled breaths.

At first, he knew not what to do as its image became more discernable from the blackness that surrounded it, but, eventually directed his bewildered countenance to that of the *Astraea's* pilot, and said, in a hushed, and dark tone; "cease the engines; no one is to move." With slight hesitation, the *Astraea's* engines

ceased as it stopped before what seemed to be an artificial satellite. It was adorned with small rectangular panels that stretched across its two rectangular wings, and a predominant, metallic section which looked to the casual observer to be that of a command center. “But how?” Midas thought intensely as he headed towards the shuttle bay alone and unattended.

Soon, one of the *Astraea*'s small ports opened and Mr. Midas departed from the *Astraea* in a small craft. His vessel intercepted the satellite and Mr. Midas boarded the ominous, foreign object. Its halls dimensions and breadth were suitable for that of any human to pass through. Symbols resembling ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics spanned the halls metallic surface. He stepped further down the dim hall as he turned closer to the large centerpiece of the vessel. “Where did this come from?” he thought as his heart fell like an anchor in his chest. Shock and wonder overcame his senses as his mind looked for answers. “Who created this, why is this here?”

A thousand questions without answers ravaged his mind inexorably with each confused and uncertain step. He turned down the final section of the tunnel and looked upon a vast array of computers and technology which seemed to be taken straight from the *Astraea* itself. The advanced, yet long since abandoned and *ancient* technology spanned around him in every direction. As he approached its controls, a center, massive console drew his attention. He knew not why he

was drawn to its controls, but as he placed his hands upon its surface, suddenly the entire ship lit up with an intensity that he had never seen before. His eyes grew wide and overwhelmed, as before him, massive screens turned on at his mere touch. Fixated upon the screen were coordinates which seemed vaguely familiar and horrifying. Along with these coordinates, small images of a planet orbiting a yellow sun were centered upon the screen. The horror filled his core as his heart raced within his chest. “Can this be?” he asked himself. With every glance seemed to behold a scene which he had seen before.

His mind struggled desperately to relinquish such a thought, but its reality, its agonizing reality had already crept into every inhabitable crevice within his thoughts. Mr. Midas drew back from where he stood in shock as he frantically moved his eyes from the room around him to the illuminated screen as he let out a groan of wonder and terror. “How could it be?” He spoke aloud in a tone of anguish and despair. The unfathomable realization crept into his mind immediately as the word materialized in his head. The coordinates, the all-too-human technology had all been pointed into a single destination—Earth. As he regained himself, Mr. Midas marched towards the exit of the satellite, unwilling to search any further into its details as he returned to his craft. When he entered back into the *Astraea*, the glances of every individual turned their bewildered gazes upon him, in search of an answer. Without hesitation, or a mere

tremor in his voice, Mr. Midas spoke aloud: “It is nothing.” Mr. Midas stepped up to the command bridge as he spoke assertively to the piloting crew, “Destroy it.” His eyes seemed to breathe fire as the order was commenced. As it was destroyed, so too did the memory begin to decay in the mind of Mr. Midas.

Their day had finally come. Francois sat departed, crouched and still against the wall of his home. He stared blankly and dimly at the wall across from where he sat, which like his stale and blank mind, offered no words or thoughts; for nothing was to be said. His eyes, half-vacantly, seemed to pass right through the wall and into the world that surrounded him, where not a voice could be heard. It was a stagnant and soundless day, where the streets were silenced and lay settled. Every soul laid motionless – like those frozen in Pompeii under Vesuvius. The dim and dusty streets were quieted with the absence of a single wanderer. Sound and fury had relinquished like a great beast that had drawn and held its final breath. The world seemed to stop, and for a moment, peace reigned. What wonder it beheld, for after the chaos of millennia all had been as it should, in eternal serenity. For in that long slumber which would soon overtake them, all knew, for a brief moment, how insignificant their every word and action truly was.

Not a soul struggled or pleaded as the Wall of Darkness began to be seen in the distance. There was no moan among those wishing to retain what life they had left, and no crying from those who silently wished it had

all turned out differently. There was a solemn surrender, as the sun seemed to be blotted out by a thick and black pitch from hell. The Darkness came over like a deep, black veil that smothered all within its arms. The wall towered high above the Earth and then descended, and so came eternal sleep. The clamor had ceased.

Following the destruction of the satellite, the *Astraea* and its crew proceeded on their course to conclude their journey to the New World. They began their life anew, at first relying on the resources and technology of the *Astraea*, but soon began to develop and utilize primitive tools to cultivate the land as their ancestors had done millennia before them. The new inhabitants began to grow in population as civilization slowly redeveloped and reconvened, all the while under the scrutinizing and weary eye of Mr. Midas. The source of Mr. Midas' need for perfection was not wholly understood by his contemporaries, and to an extent, not even understood by Mr. Midas himself. For deep within his ever-suppressed conscience, the repressed image beheld within the artificial satellite slowly crept into his ailing mind, as a constant reminder of his repressed fear. For he knew, under the ground they cultivated and under the ground in which he tread wearily, the remnants of that ailment that plagued his mind lay buried far below. "To escape...in the sight of such ungodly terror. Gilded tombs do worms enfold! The Prodigal Son returns." And so humanity blossomed once more, with winter close behind.

For once, then something ...