
Over four hundred years before the age of houses,
in the 23rd century – the age of cities and
countries owned by corporations – a woman
reached for the stars...

Initiation

Day 1 of 5114

The phone next to her pillow suddenly springs to life. The monotonous sound of the alarm echoes through the small chamber that you could barely call a bedroom. Head still buried under the pillow her hand clumsily seeks where she recalls putting her phone down.

After a few seconds of blind search her fingers finally touch the familiarly cold device.

A press on the power button and the room becomes quiet. An after-image of the obnoxious ringing in her ears slowly fades. A dim blue light illuminates the room, one she is used to – every morning it springs on at the same time in the early hours to wake most of her neighbors.

Inhabitants of this array of coffins advertised as affordable housing work low jobs in the high city. They are expected to get up before everyone else, to clean and to sweep, to stock and to tidy the city before the real inhabitants wake up.

Regardless everyone around here looks thankful for the life they are allowed to live here... the alternatives being much worse.

And in between all of this regular misery, the least regular resident just slept in. She is already always the last to leave in the morning, but this morning her destination is even more unusual. While everyone else is already returning from their work and going back to sleep, only to be awoken in the evening for the same routine, she is just getting ready for the rest of her life.

A daughter from a prestigious family on their last leg of wealth, spending it on her to finish a degree that they hope will help her repay her families debts. Every cent of these last billions was gambled on her education, the curriculum was hard and her

situation dire. Money could buy the tuition but not “living befitting her class” as her classmates would sometimes remark. She could not afford to make friends anyway, she had to make due.

But after years of hardship it paid off. Today her first day at her new job starts, her opportunity to pay back the money her parents invested into her.

With sleep still in her eyes she grabs a water bottle to wash her face. The little chamber has drain holes on the side to ease cleaning so spilling water in here is no big deal, she only has to keep her pillow dry.

After a short rinse she pulls out a little pocket mirror and inspects her eyes, hoping she got enough sleep so that her exhaustion isn't showing. She never really got used to sleeping here, always missed her childhood bed with those big fluffy pillows and the spring loaded mattress that in hindsight felt like sleeping on clouds.

Her backpack to her feet was already packed the day prior with the finest suit she was able to afford after working extra hours at the universities research facility, a privilege her father got arranged but her high grades had to justify.

The blue light suddenly turns off, darkness... this won't be missed. With the flashlight of her phone she navigates to the door to her feet and her backpack. Turning around in this tiny chamber wasn't easy but she refuses to sleep with her head to the door – it's insulated poorly and the cold air leaking in always woke her up.

With a tiny prayer she presses in the handle, hoping the door didn't break overnight again.

It thankfully slides out, allowing her to unseal the door. The first sunrays of a days new dawn suddenly flood the “room”. She

hastily protects her eyes with her phone until they had time to adjusted.

With a sigh of relief she climbs out.

Feet finally on the ground she stands up straight and stretches her limbs. The exhaustion falls from her eyes as the sun begins to warm her joints, an enthusiastic smile grows on her face... today's the day.

After a short trip to the communal bathroom she starts getting ready for work. She drops her bag on the floor and carefully takes out her suit, so it doesn't touch the nasty ground. The room doesn't afford much privacy so she just starts changing then and there, none of her neighbors is awake anyway.

It is generally rare for her to run into a neighbor, it only really happened once. One morning on the way to university she saw a young woman a few doors over was stuck in her chamber as the door handle broke. She called the local overseer for help freeing the woman but it took hours until it arrived.

She remembers the look on that womans face when she finally got out. She did not seem relieved, more like she wished that coffin would have become her final resting place.

Being trapped for hours caused her to be late for work, and that most definitely will have made her loose it and that was all that was on her mind. Without this job she would have to move back to a lower part of the city, a place she likely tried to escape for decades.

And now all of that was for nothing, and there is nothing neither the woman or her could do. All for a little broken doorhandle. The city does not allow any mistakes no matter who's fault it is.

She closes the topmost button on her shirt and pulls it straight. She carefully puts on the claustrophobic suit-jacket and starts examining herself in the dimly lit bathroom mirror.

“Not bad, not bad” a small smile grows on her. She strikes a pose, a half step back and finger guns at the mirror: “Hey, I’m Ami. How’s it going?”.

...

The smile breaks: “No that already didn’t work at uni”. She slumps over and sighs, putting her hands on the sink in front of her, looking down into the drain.

She looks up into the mirror and forces back a smile, she straightens her back and puts her hand to her side, making eye contact with the reflection for a few seconds.

A timid bow: “I am Ami Tian, your new coworker. I am looking forward to working with you”.

...

Her eyes rest on the floor. Her pose breaks and her back slumps. Hands back on the sink.

“I don’t know... maybe...”, another sigh.

...

“maybe a handshake? Do high class people do handshakes?”, her eyes loose light: “will they even see me as one...”.

...

She straightens her back again and looks at the mirror head on. She closes her eyes and takes in a deep breath.

She lets out the air and opens her eyes, they meet with her reflection and she can spot a timid smile: “I’m Ami, nice to meet you”.

The smile faintly grows: “Yeah... maybe”.

No more time to dwell on this, she has a train to catch.

As she hurries through the street the first rays of sunlight brighten the area, squeezing between the towering buildings every chance they get. The city is slowly waking up, shops are opening their doors and the first people traverse the streets.

Suddenly she spots two military overseers and slows down, lowers her head. She had bad run-ins with them in the past, dressed like her neighbors they thought she violated a work contract and she had to prove she was actually enrolled at a university. Even though she always had her papers on hand they kept inspecting her about it, so she started avoiding the main streets.

To her surprise they do not harass her today, but actually walk by with a formal smile. Taken by surprise she gives an awkward nod back before hurrying along. They must not have recognized her in this suit.

Walking through the street like this, without trouble or weird looks.. she isn't used to this anymore, to not being looked at or interrogated.

She catches her train and takes a seat to recite her instructions. She was told what buildings to go to, where to register, what department to go to to get her badge, where to head for initiation. She never had been there so she memorized a map of the campus she was given.

The ride wasn't long, but it was very empty once they approached the final stop. She reached the border of the inner city, a massive construction that protects the most wealthy inside. This is where the train line ends, the rich inside do not share space with anyone else on the outside.

After a short walk she reaches one of the outer gates, a checkpoint in the towering walls of the inner city.

The gate is guarded by a pair of large, heavily armed robots as well as a few soldiers.

She straightens her back and approaches the gate carefully with confident stride. When she gets close a few soldiers start to eye her skeptically, and the robots take notice. These large machines suddenly looking down on her are intimidating, they are the newest line of Fenrir Defenders advertised as being able to resolve any armed uprising withing minutes.

One soldier takes a step forward and raises his arm: “Halt. Ma’am, this is as close as you get”.

She stops and stiffens up, trying to remember protocol: “I... I have a work... a work certificate”. She takes her backpack from her shoulder and starts rummaging inside of it.

The soldier, arm still raised, puts his free hand on the gun of his belt: “Ma’am, this area is only–”.

“Found it!”, she quickly draws a tiny black box from her backpack and raises it towards the soldier.

The large Fenrir machines suddenly springs to life, targeting systems take aim and the automatic weapons start spinning in anticipation.

The soldiers are startled by this as much as her, she freezes up with her arm stretched out. Her hand clings onto a cryptographic identifier with a small inscription from her company.

As the initial moment of shock passed the soldier spots the familiar logo on the box. He lowers his arm and presses a few buttons on a wrist-mounted device.

He reaches his arm out and taps the box with it.

Agonizing milliseconds pass as little beeps fill the air alongside her shivering and the rotating chambers of the robot’s weapons.

A chime: “Identification validated. Ami Tian, research wing

of Aster Incorporated head quarter. Access rights to inner city confirmed”.

The soldier lets out a sigh and raises his hand, instructing the Fenrir contraptions to calm down. The weapons freeze up and the machines return to idle observation. The other soldiers in the back roll their eyes and return to their own idling.

“Okay ma’am, you can pass. Please no sudden movements in front of these machines, they fire at any hallucinated threat regardless of who’s in the way”, he squints: “It’s highly unusual for people to pass through here... let alone on foot”

...

“... ma’am?”

...

A tear rolls down Amis face: “Im sorry it wont happen again im sorry”.

After a moment of reassurance from the annoyed guard she moves through the gate... very very slowly.

Past the checkpoint she takes a break, sitting down just a few meters after the wall on the floor to recover. She takes every breath deliberately, counting the seconds between them – something an old classmate taught her when she was scared of a particularly difficult exam.

As her nerves settle and the shivering slows she raises her head and starts looking around. This part of the city... this city inside of a city is completely different than anything Ami had seen in her life.

The huge walls hide to the outside the most wealthiest of the wealthy, the one permyriad, the one percent of the one percent lives here. The horizon isn’t covered in much sky high towers, the cityscape has not a single claustrophobic backalley. Instead

wide open areas are sprinkled with villas and mansions, merely ten to thirty stories in height with vast spaces decadently wasted for greenery and fancy ornaments.

Looking around is blinding, nowhere in the city is there so much free space to freely observe the sky and take in all of the sunlight. Everything is literally brighter and it takes her eyes time to adjust.

However the light doesn't feel natural, it is filtered by force fields above the inner city. These shields protect it from external forces as well as control the climate inside. Regardless the sun is the sun – its warm light fills Ami with energy, unfreezing her joints still locked up from shock.

She slowly gets back on her feet and takes a more targeted look around. In the distance she sees a few taller buildings with vast space between them. They must be far enough apart that even their shadows in the late evening don't reach each other. On one of them she finally spots the logo of her new employer.

It is quite a walk away, but Ami anticipated this already. These streets weren't built for walking, more for looking pretty from the inside of a car or helicopter, but that won't stop her doing it anyway. Sufficiently fired up from sunbathing she sets out on her long walk to her new workplace.

The air here is free of the pollution suffered in any other part of the city. The planet at times feels like there isn't enough oxygen for the billions inhabiting it. The emptiness is almost comforting – nothing hides in shadows or narrow alleys, all the greed and selfishness is out in the open.

A horizon of pavement can feel like heaven when all you know is the claustrophobic confinement of a buzzing street shaded by skyscrapers, where everyone fights every day to get to move somewhere else.

Ami arrives at the campus of her new employer, the plaza and smaller buildings surrounding the main Skyscraper she had spotted from afar. For the first time since her arrival the surrounding is lively, people walk and drive around between the buildings or have meetings out in the open – it reminds her of university.

The area is decorated with statues of people from the companies history, as well as smaller gardens with resting areas. Some buildings have huge glass fronts, while others look more industrial with large doors able to accommodate vehicles passing through. Most of this place is dedicated to research, Aster is a medical company that constantly innovates new cures and procedures.

While in the old world people governed themselves, today each city is a nation-state run by a corporation. Each corporation presiding over them legitimates its power through its unique selling point, for Aster Inc. this was medicine.

This headquarter is where the most advanced discoveries were taking place, a place that attracted rumors – whispers about universal cures, immense expansion in life expectancy, reviving the dead, and other fantasticals. Ami never cared much for these stories, but the company did make some impossible things possible in the past... if you could afford it.

Regardless this is now not a distant hypothetical, this is where she is going to spend the rest of her life. She is now property of the company, everything she will have ever discovered will be discovered here and owned by it. In exchange she receives a paycheck capable of restoring her families wealth, saving them from their impending fall from grace and repaying the debt of her education that made all of this possible.

It is time to head to the first location on her list: the Administration. After following a few signs Ami arrives at her destination. It's a smaller building nestled in between two more imposing structures with a featureless exterior and a large revolving door.

She steps through it, concentrating not to get stuck on it and ruin her first impression. In front of her opens up a large lobby with monotone lighting and cold white tiles on the floor and ceiling. The walls are empty besides a few "motivational" posters from the company boasting vague values of superiority and loyalty. In the center of the room is a desk with a man sitting at a computer that isn't paying any attention to her yet.

Ami steps up to the desk with a straight back and a polite smile: "Hello, I was instructed to report here regarding my first day at the research facility".

The man sits slumped in his chair, Ami can now spot an open magazine on his desk that occupied all his attention. After seemingly finishing whatever paragraph he was reading his head mildly lifts up just enough for his and Ami's eyes to meet. He looks like he hasn't slept in days: "Name".

Ami tries to infuse energy into the situation: "It's Ami! Ami Tian! Nice to meet you, Mister..?".

The man sighs, lifts himself from his magazine and turns to the side to his keyboard. He starts clicking around and occasionally typing.

Ami watches as he operates his computer, keeping up her straight back and her smile as he puts stroke after stroke after stroke into the keyboard.

Mouse to the left.

Mouse to the right.

Mouse to the left again.

Click.

Stroke... stroke... click... to the left...

Click... click..... click...

Amis face starts hurting from the forced smile.

Slide, slide, click, type, type, pause..., slide, click, type, type, slide, click...

The man sets his hands on the keyboard, thinking to himself for a few agonizing seconds.

He sighs again: “hmmmmmmm how do you spell that”. He sits there frozen not even facing Ami, waiting for a reply?

Ami takes a moment processing, her head was stuck focusing on keeping her back straight: “uhh.. ‘A’, like in Aster!” she huffs enthusiastically, “‘M’ and then ‘I’--”.

“Ah... I wasn’t sure if it was a ‘Y’ or an ‘I’”, he starts typing.

“Yeah many people get confused there hehe... heh”, Ami forces her smile again.

Type, type, type.

Click, click, click.

Move, move, click.

Move, move, click.

The man leans back in his chair and squints his eyes at the monitor: “hmm.... Ami Tian”. He turns to his left and opens a drawer, pulls out a little card on a lanyard: “Let’s get you registered”.

He moves his mouse one more time, a single click: “Okay, the company knows that you arrived alive”.

Ami is invigorated by the progress: “I see, glad I did!”, she laughs.

The man turns to her for the first time in what feels like an hour: “Y’know, many don’t. Be thankful”.

Ami freezes like a deer in headlights: “.. yes of course”.

The moment lingers in the air for a few seconds before the man

exhales again: “Anyway”. He turns to his right to a little device under his desk. Ami hears him opening up some kind of drawer and he places the card with lanyard into it.

He reappears from under the desk and presses a key on his computer.

The sound of the machine springing to life fills the room. Belts moving, circuits energizing, occasionally clicks.

Click, click, click, click, click, click, click.

Zhuuuuuuuuuuuuu, click.

Silence.

He reaches under the desk again and pulls up the lanyard. Now at the end of it the card with an image of Ami on it and some text.

Ami reaches out her hand to accept it.

The man puts it down on the desk between Ami and him: “Take this, put in on you and never loose it, never ever loose it”.

Amis smile turns a slightly sour, but she picks it up without making any remarks.

The man makes eye contact one last time, his eyes somehow look even more tired now: “Report to your research wing supervisor according to introductory protocol, don’t be late”. He turns away, back to his magazine.

Ami examines the badge she was handed: It has the portrait on it she took on the 14th round of interviews for the company, her name, an employee number and the research center she is assigned to. She was told she would work at the highest and most secret facility in the corporation – she only now finds out its name: “LEPP - Life Essence Pilot Program”.

Ami looks up to the man, seeking to say goodbye... but he is completely emersed in his magazine.

She chooses not to disturb him and turns to leave, but puts on a smile just in case. Ami doesn’t know yet what “LEPP” really

means, but she remembers seeing the abbreviation on the signs earlier so she has a destination.

Navigating the campus once more Ami notices that all of the signs pointing towards facilities only contain vague acronyms. Besides LEPP there are a few others that do not have disclosed what they are, her badge is the only thing that contains the full name of her research wing in tiny letters.

Passing a number of mid-sized towers and skyscrapers she manages to pinpoint the building she was looking for. At first she wasn't sure she read the signs right, but it is indeed the LEPP facility according to signage. On the edge of the campus, a good 15 minute walk away from the main building, sits this single story short, featureless cube. She was told her facility is the most prestigious one, so she is surprised its so... indistinct. The outside has no windows and no indication of what it contains, only a big and heavy looking front gate with a small terminal next to it.

Ami approaches the front door and examines it for a moment. The machine next to it is a badge scanner, and the door itself looks like it could withstand a nuclear blast. She takes her badge and puts it towards the terminal, which immediately greets her with non-distinct chirps.

After a few beeps a green lamp lights up and the gate starts moving. Something inside of it rotates and disentangles for a few seconds, then the door itself loosens from the wall. It swings outwards a few millimeters before sliding to the side. It comes to a stop much sooner than Ami anticipated, it is barely open wide enough to fit a single lean human. The machine now makes low-hummed beeps every second, so this is presumably as far as it goes. Ami straightens her back, takes a deep breath, and steps through the gate.

Barely a step after the door it begins closing. The lights inside are even brighter than the outside sun, her eyes barely manage to adjust. As the veil of sterile white fluorescence lifts Ami gets the first look at her new workplace. Looking down Ami finds herself on a catwalk with railing in front of her, stairs to her left. Down through the mesh of her flooring she sees what was hidden on the outside: the facility extends deep into the ground.

In front of her is now this massive space, the ceiling is as she has seen outside but the floor must extend a dozen stories below the surface. Every few meters is a layer of catwalks and small platforms with people, wearing lab coats and tables, all running around with purpose. Ami spots a lot of devices she is familiar with, but even more she has never seen before. People are talking to each other, examining containers, writing on tables and computers, not a single person seems to rest. For the first time since arriving here she feels welcome, few places are as familiar to her as a lab, and this looks like the most well run lab she has ever seen.

At the center of the room she spots a mysterious structure. A slim cylindrical machine extends from the floor upwards, her eyes follow it all the way to the ceiling. It is mostly glass and contains... a golden glowing liquid. It's about a meter in diameter but spans the entire height of the facility, it must contain thousands of liters. The longer Ami looks at it, the more the faintly dazzling liquid inside starts to capture her.

She doesn't know why, but just observing it fills her with warmth. It reminds her of when she was little, huddled up in a blanket next to a radiator in the house reading whatever chemistry book she managed to snag from her father's library. She is reminded of the soft fabric of the blanket, the faint smell of wood kicked up by the book as she turns the pages, the noises

the cats made as their paws and claws clicked and clacked on the wooden floor of the room above. After leaving to study at the university the only places she felt at home were the labs she interned at. The affordable coffin she left today feels distant, a decade melting away as her fingertips rub against each other feeling the paper. Her mother would call for her while she was buried in science she barely understood. When she would find her, she'd compliment her pursuit of knowledge and scold her for not answering. Her mother would hug her, she'd feel the warmth of her breath, the gentle pressure of an adults arm on her back, as her mother sneakily take the book out of her hands thinking she wouldn't notice... How long has it been since she last spoke with her... it must have been a lifetime ago...

A hand tips Amis shoulder. She snaps back to reality and turns around. She is fairly dizzy from the whiplash, whatever spell the golden liquid cast on her was crudely interrupted. Her mind needs to adjust, plucked from that childhood memory.

As her eyes focus she spots the spellbreaker in front of her. A woman similar in height to her, maybe slightly taller? Around 1.75m potentially? Her hair is almost completely white, interrupted by dark strands of brown. Despite that she looks barely older, maybe late 30s. She is wearing a lab coat like everyone else around, but underneath she wears.. a track suit?! It is ruffled and full of folds, like she slept in it the night prior. Despite this make-up, or maybe because of it, she looks well rested.

After the confusion passed Ami finally makes eye contact with the patient woman. Her deep green eyes are almost distractingly beautiful, next to her unprofessional getup and her unusual hair color. The mysterious stranger tilts her head: "Getting lost on your first day already? You will not be a piece of work I hope?".

Amis senses take a moment to take in those words, her head

slowly parses what she just heard. Suddenly she catches up and remembers where she is and what day it is. Her body reflexively snaps into form, arms to her side, back straight. She abruptly leans forward into an apologetic bow: “No of course ma’am, I was admiring the research you and your colleagues are conducting. I apologize for getting distracted. I will do my best to live up to your and everyone’s expectation and won’t be a burden, I promise”.

Once all the words left her mouth she bites her tongue. Her snap reaction wasn’t at all how she intended to introduce herself to her first colleague. All the practice this morning was for naught. She closes her eyes, silently praying the threat in front of her just passes by and won’t eat her alive.

All of a sudden Ami feels a hand on her cheek. Frozen in shock she observes it sliding down to her chin before slightly pulling her head back up. Ami opens her eyes and sees the eyes of the woman from before now much closer, slowly wandering over her face. The stranger examines her closely, tilts her head left and right, unbothered by the unconventional intrusion on her personal space: “I see”.

Amis joints lock up, her mind is split between embarrassment and curiosity: “uh... what do you see?”.

The woman lets her hand slide from Amis face and straightens her back, she puffs her chest and a smile grows on her face: “You most definitely are going to be a piece of work”.

A light goes out in Amis eyes, she wrestles with whatever she might have done wrong this time: “I swear I’m not that bad”.

The stranger starts laughing: “Do not worry, if I would not like a piece of work I should not be here”.

Hearing her laugh marginally loosens Amis nervousness and she mirrors a small smile. The gears in her head start spinning again and she remembers her earlier instructions, she wants to

use this opportunity to get a second start going: “If I might ask, I should report to my supervisor... can you tell me where I might find them?”.

The casual demeanor of the woman shatters like an accidentally dropped piece of glass on the floor. Her face is cold and her eyes overcast, her head moves slightly to the side as she looks past Ami: “You need to talk to *her*? I fear you are in for a bad time... I can see that you are already at least 30 seconds late”.

Ami quickly looks behind her at what she was eyeing and spots a clock on the wall. She arrived ten minutes early so she definitely could avoid being late on her first day, but all of that extra time just lapsed a few seconds ago. Ami snaps her head back and locks up, her head starts spinning: “I tried my best to be on time and got up really early and took the first train and walked a moderate pace through this city but I don’t have a car or something yet I just started here and I didn’t get a paycheck yet so I couldn’t afford a place close by yet and I’m sorry I’m just making excuses please is this bad? Can I make something to appease her? Make her not hate me on my first day or fire me immediately? I really really really really really need this job for my family and I spent all my adult life studying for--”.

“Ami, Ami!”, the woman’s facade breaks: “Ami stop, deep breaths”.

Ami stops in her tracks, she obeys the command and takes in a few deep breaths. It takes a moment for her to collect herself, as the woman once more patiently waits. When her head stops whirling, it fills with embarrassment: “sorry...”.

The woman puts a hand on her shoulder and smiles at her: “You really are going to be work, I already like you”. In her eyes is a soft glow, the light from the mysterious liquid behind Ami must be reflecting in it, it is faint but fills her with warmth just as

much. A grin grows on the strangers face: “Be careful, I cannot stop myself from playing with fun things like you~”.

Ami breaks eye contact, looking off to the side to hide her face turning red: “a.. an.. anyway, the supervisor...”, she grows smaller: “... where can I find...”.

The hand on Amis shoulder moves up to her head, it brushes over her hair carefully, reassuringly. Her face is as red as before but she can’t help but snap back and make eye contact again. She is greeted by a warm smile with mischievous eyes: “Ami, you are talking to her”, the smile grows into a fiendish grin.

The operating system in Amis mind crashes, she grows back to her normal size but her head is so full of question marks it feels empty. She is beyond fight of flight... wait a moment, but that means...?

Her eyes widen. She jumps into a deep bow, almost hitting the woman revealed supervisor in front of her: “I am so sorry ma’am for my behavior, Ami Tian reporting for work”.

After a second of silence she hears a sigh. Looking up she sees her boss, hand still hovering where her head used to be moments ago, previous grin soured into a modest smile, eyes more concerned – but glow still present: “... Anyway, I am Cecillia – Cecillia Rose, Head of Research at LEPP”.