
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

Road to Hell – Pavement and Good Intentions

The phone next to her pillow suddenly springs to life. The monotonous sound of her alarm echoes through the small chamber that you could barely call a bedroom, let alone an apartment. Her head still buried under her pillow her hand clumsily seeks the environment roughly where she recalls putting her phone down, after a few attempts her hand finally makes contact. A press on the power button, the room becomes quiet, only the afterthought of it's noise ringing in her ears slowly fading. A dim blue light illuminates the room, but she is used to it as it has been going on in the early hours to wake up most of her neighbors ever since she moved in. It's function is to wake most inhabitants in this array of coffins advertised as affordable living, as most of it work low jobs in the high city and should finish cleaning and sweeping and stocking the city before the *real* inhabitants wake up, lest they have to run into those who cannot afford a real apartment here. Regardless everyone around here is very thankful for the life they get to live, for they could have it much much worse. But not her, she is the last to leave in the morning, when most have already returned from their work and gone back to sleep to be awoken in the evening for the same routine. She just finished her degree, a high honor that cost her parents their last billion. It was a gamble, the curriculum was hard and the situation dire, money could pay the tuition but not living befitting her class, so she had to made due. But after all those years, after all the struggles, it paid off. Her first day at her new job is about to start, and with it she can finally start earning back all the money her parents invested into her and get into a *real*

apartment, finally, after all those years.

Sleep still in her eyes she grabs the water bottle she bought yesterday, 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 anyway, she only has to keep her pillow from getting wet. After a short rinse of her face she pulls out her little pocket mirror and opens it up. She 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. But this chapter of her life is about to finally be over. Her backpack to her feet was already packed by her 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... she will not miss this. She turned on the flashlight on her phone to find the door at her feet. Turning around in this tiny tiny room wasn't too easy but she refuses to sleep with her head to the door, it's insulated poorly and the cold air leaking in always waked her up. Her hand presses in the little handle with a tiny prayer that it did not break over night like it did before for some of her neighbors, and it slides out, allowing her to unseal the door. The first sunrays of a days new dawn suddenly flood her "room", she protects her eyes with her phone until they adjusted to the sudden, natural light. She leaves out a sigh of relieve and starts climbing out. As she finally gets to stand up straight she stretches her limbs, the exhaustion falling from her face replaced with an enthusiastic smile... today's it the day. Finally.

In the communal bathroom she drops her bag onto the floor and takes out her new suit, carefully avoiding it touching the nasty floor. She starts changing in the middle of the room, no privacy is afforded here apart from the door on the room itself, but at this time no one of her neighbors is awake anyway. She only once ran into one when she was on the way to university. A young woman a few doors over was stuck in her chamber because its handle had broken and she had to be freed by the local overseer of the apartment array, and it took so long that she ran into her. She remembers the look on her face when she finally got out, no relieve, almost like she wished that coffin would have become her final resting place. Because of this, the woman was not at work on time and was gonna lose her job. Without this job, she was going to have to go back to the lower areas where she grew up in and spend all her youth trying to get out off, it was all for nothing because of a little broken doorhandle. Closing the final button on her shirt and putting on her jacket, she examines herself in the dimly lit mirror.

“Not bad not bad” a small but hopeful smile, a little pose, finger guns at the mirror: “Hello, I’m Ami your new coworker, how’s it going?”

...

Her smile breaks: “No that already didn’t work at university”, she slumps over and sighs. A short look up at the mirror, the smile comes back, straightens her back, hands to the side.

A small bow: “I am Ami Tian, your new coworker, looking forward to working with you”... Her eyes rest a moment longer on the floor

.. Her pose breaks

“I don’t know.. maybe”, another sigh

“.. maybe a handshake? Do high class people do handshakes? ... will they even see me as one...”, her smile slips once more. Yet another sigh

She walks up to the mirror, stands up straight, a small but honest smile: “I’m Ami, nice to meet you”, her smile faintly grows: “yea, maybe”

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

Traversing the street, the first full beams of sunlight are illuminating the area, shining between the towering buildings every chance they get. The city is slowly waking up, shops are opening and the first higher class people are starting to traverse the streets. She shudders walking by some military overseers, she had bad run ins in the past with them, dressed like her neighbors they thought she was violating her work contract and had to first be convinced of her university enrollment, but they always kept looking out for her so she started avoiding the main streets. Not today though, in her new suit one of them even smiled at her passing by and she gave him an awkward nod back. She isn’t used to this anymore, walking past everyone, like she belongs.. again. This is what she worked for, and it’s only going up from here, a smile comes over her face. Sitting in the train she recites her initial instructions in her head, what building to go to, what department to call in to get her badge, where to head to next for initiation. The ride was not long, she reached the border of the

inner city, the massive construction protecting the most wealthy inside. No trains from here on out, the people living in there are too rich to share space with anyone else.

On one outer gate of these towering walls a large pair of robot units and a few military soldiers are guarding one of the few choke points of the higher city. She approaches carefully, straight back. A few of the soldiers eye her skeptically, and the robots look down on her, intimidating her. They are the newest line of Fenrir Military Co. Defenders™, capable of resolving any uprising within minutes with maximum human casualties.

One soldier steps forward, stopping her in her track: “This is as close as you get ma’am”

“.. I.. I have a work certificate”, Ami starts nervously rummaging in her backpack

The soldier raises an eyebrow, one hand slowly reaching towards the gun on his belt: “Ma’am.. this area is only..”

“Ah! Found it”, quickly she draws out a tiny box from her backpack

This rapid movements alerts the defensive systems of the Fenrir machinery, it suddenly takes aim at her

Ami stands still, frozen up by shock, one arm fully stretched out clamping a tiny cryptographic identifier box like her life depends on it, because it does

The soldier examines her and the box for a second, and starts relaxing slightly. He presses a button on his arm, and reaches it out towards her. A small beep illuminates the chilling aura of the situation, followed by a confirmation of her credentials: “Identification validated. Access permissions for inner city – Aster Incorporated – Research Wing”

The soldier holds up his hand, the Fenrir contraptions stop their targeting system and returns to idle observation, like nothing ever happened. The other soldiers that have been watching this mildly concerning spiel relax and sigh, seemingly mocking Amis behavior up until now

“Okay ma’am, you can pass. Next time please, no sudden movements, People don’t usually pass through here... from the outside... on foot...”

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... ..

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“..... I’m sorry sir” a single tear leaves her eye, she is still standing there, stiff from shock

After a passed checkpoint she takes a short break on the floor, breathing slowly to calm herself. After a moment, maybe a while longer than that, she raises her head and starts observing the new environment she sits in.

This part of the city is completely different from everything Ami knows. The huge walls and choke points hide to the outside what the richest of the rich, the one permyriad, the one percent of one percent, are living in. Barely any sky high towers, no claustrophobic backalleys. Wide open areas and fancy villas and mansions, merely ten to twenty five stories in height and vast spaces decadently wasted for greenery and fancy ornaments. As she is looking around she feels slightly blinded by the sun.. nowhere else in the city is there so much free space that you can observe so much of the sky uninterrupted, this place feels so much brighter than everything else. However the sunlight here doesn't feel fully natural, it is filtered by the various force fields above, shielding the inner city from any external forces. Regardless it's a warm light filling Ami with energy and unfreezing her stiff joints still locked up from what she just went through. She raises up and looks around, in the distance she sees a few towering buildings and vast space between them – enough that their shadow does not cast onto any neighboring building, intentionally so as to not disturb residents. On one of them she spots the logo of her new employer large and wide: "Aster Inc."... this is going to be quite the walk. But Ami already anticipated this, these streets were not build for walking, just for looking pretty from the inside of a car or a helicopter looking out. Energized by her new environment she once more sets out, on her long walk to her new workplace, her spirit reaching towards her new future.

After a long journey with a few little breaks in between Ami is finally close to her destination. The walk was very uneventful, unlike the streets she just came from this place is very empty. Nobody walks anywhere here, everything flies past above her, so what is left on the ground looks pretty, but ultimately shallow. Regardless, the air she gets to breath here alone extends her lifetime by a year in comparison to the rest of the city. Filled with pollution and people the city at times feels like there is barely enough oxygen for the billions inhabiting this planet, so in a way this vast empty field is somewhat comforting, if only for a brief period of time. 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.

Approaching the main building of her new employer, the surroundings get livelier. Besides the towering main building there is a bunch of smaller buildings close to it where people walk and drive between. Some statues in the surrounding depict important figures in the history of the company, some elaborate gardens have places to rest, some buildings have huge doors for vehicles to pass through and transport things. A lot of the buildings and people here are dedicated to research, Aster Inc. after all is a medical company foremost. Megacorporations do handle pretty much everything governments of old had done, but each of them has an origin, something they excel at, their unique selling point, and for Aster Inc. that was medicine. This headquarter is focused on researching new cutting edge products and procedures, with rumors around the city they are uncovering ways to cure every disease present and future, extend rich peoples lifespan or even work on reviving the dead. Ami was always skeptical about many of these rumors, but it is true that the company made some very impossible things possible in the past.. *if* you can pay for it. Regardless, she is now part of this place, she is owned by this place, everything she sees or does will from now on be confined to this campus for the rest of her life, in exchange for a hefty sum that will restore her families net worth and save them from their impending fall from grace.

Looking around, reading the signs, Ami finally finds the way to the building she was said to report to first: The administration. It is smaller and nestled in between more imposing constructions. As she steps through the sliding door she sees a desk in front of her, with a man sitting at a computer seemingly very bored. She approaches the desk with a straight back and a mild polite smile on her face: "Hello, I was instructed to report to here regarding

my first day at the Research facility..?”. The man who up until now was bend over at his desk, resting his head on his arm resting on the table, reading some sort of magazine, slightly lifts his head and makes eye contact with Ami: “Name”... He sounds monotone, borderline asleep. “Ami Tian!” maybe an enthusiastic reply will wake him. The man sighs and lifts himself up from the table, turns to the side and starts typing and clicking on his computer. Ami watches him operate his machine, trying to keep her friendly pose and her smile as he puts stroke after stroke into his keyboard, mouse to the left, to the right, a click, stroke stroke stroke stroke stroke, click, mouse to the left. Amis smile melts as she is forced to watch him operate this contraption. Move, slide, slide, click, type, type, type, type, pause..., slide, click, type, type, type.... “hmmmmmmm how do you spell that” he asks, clearly trying to keep his eyes from falling shut.. or maybe irritated by the fluorescent light in the room mildly flickering... “A, like in Aster!” she says proudly, “M and then I”. “Ah... I thought it was spelled with a ‘y’”, his remark seemed slightly more awake, but only slightly. “Yeah many people say that to me..” Ami tries again to smile politely. Type, type, type, click, move, move, click, move, move. “Hmm... ah yes, Ami Tian..... Let me register you quickly”, he moves his mouse – a single click: “Okay, the company now knows that you arrived here alive” – “Ah I see, glad I did!” Ami laughs a little as you do politely when a coworker tells you a joke. “You know, many people don’t...” he explains a little more irritated. Amis smile fades: “oh.. yes of course, I didn’t mean it like that...”. The man exhales, again, “Anyway” he turns around to some sort of office device and opens a drawer, pulls out a blank badge and puts it on top of it. He turns his upper body around to his computer and leans over his chair, his one hand barely reaching the keyboard while keeping his balance – he presses a key

and turns around again. The machine in front of him makes some noises, like belts moving and circuits springing to live. Click click click click click zhuuuuuuuuu click. He picks up the badge from the top of the device, turns around and puts it on his desk right in front of Ami: “here, take this, put it on you and never lose it, never ever loose it. Report to your research wings supervisor”. Ami picks up the badge from the table and examines her new purpose. It has an image of her on it that she remembers taking a while back when accepting this job, her name, some string of numbers that’s seemingly her employee number and the name of her Research Wing, “LEPP - Life Essence Pilot Program” – this is the first time she gets to see what research she is assigned to. However apart from “Pilot Program” she has no idea what this means. Ami looks up and gives the man a smile, but he is already back at reading his magazine, so she takes her leave.

Once more following the signs around the campus she slowly navigates her way towards her research facility. Everything only says “LEPP” without going into details on the acronym – but none of the signs do; All acronyms and no details. As she finally pinpoints the building she notices that it is a lot less tall, not small but less tall than the others... is the facility she is going to work at this insignificant? It’s still very wide but it looks like it’s just a single story in height, which is unusual in comparison to the other buildings all around. Ami approaches the front door, a big and heavy looking gate that looks like it was designed to withstand an entire military invasion – and next to it a badge scanner. She pulls the badge off of her belt and towards the machine. A few beeping noises and it lights up, it springs to life, a big lock rotating and disentangling itself, the door itself loosening from the wall slightly, first towards Ami and then

sliding sideways, but only so much as to fit a single lean human through, before coming to a stop. Ami straightens her back and breaths in, gathering confidence, and steps through the gate. Just as she enters the room and her eyes start adjusting to the light inside, the door behind her already closed shut again – only the faint noise of the lock entangling itself can be heard. The light is a sterile white and blinding compared to the filtered sun outside, but as her eyes start to adjust she can make out the environment. Ami looks around her, she stands in the middle of a catwalk with a railing and stairs to her side. In front of her begins a vast room, starting from the ceiling she could make out from the outside, but as she starts letting her eyes wander down, she sees that it extends far below the surface, vastly expanding the space in secret. Underneath her on various other catwalks are people, running around with a purpose, with equipment, writing on tablets, examining containers and devices, talking to others. In the center of the room, bottom to top, is a slim cylindrical machine...? container? Mostly glass with a faintly golden glowing liquid inside. Looking at it is captivating, but she doesn't know why... just observing whatever is in it fills Ami with a warmth... it reminds her of home... her real home... ... before she had to leave to study and live in that affordable coffin for a decade. As she stares at it she is reminded of her mother, how she hugged her when she was little. Looking at it is soothing...

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A hand tips from the side against Amis arm. The spell seemingly cast from that golden glowing liquid suddenly snaps and she finds herself back in this room again... almost like she was somewhere else. She looks to her side towards the spellbreaker, a woman similar to her in height... around 1.75m then? With hair almost completely white, interrupted by dark grown strands occasionally and dark green eyes... She is wearing a lab coat and underneath what looks like... a tracksuit that she had slept in the night prior...? The mysterious stranger tilts her head looking at Ami: "Got lost in here on your first day already? You won't be a piece of work I hope?". Ami recovering her senses starts parsing the words she just heard, suddenly remembering where she is and what she does she stutters shortly, springs into form, straightens her back, arms to her side, a small lean forward: "No of course ma'am, I was just admiring the research you and your colleagues are conducting here. I will do my best to live up to your and everyone's expectation and won't be a burden, I promise" – as those words leave Amis mouth she closes her eyes, she was taken by surprise and slightly regrets part of what she just said.. sounding like an eager first semester just having walked into a lecture five minutes late. She keeps her eyes shut and her body leaned over, as if she is hoping the threat in front of her is just passing by and won't eat her alive. Suddenly she feels a hand on her cheek, sliding down to her chin, slightly lifting up her head again. Surprised Ami opens her eyes, the woman from just now took a step towards her and is now much closer, her eyes wandering over Amis face, examining, head tilting left and right, unbothered by the unconventional intrusion: "Hmmm I see". Ami gets nervous: "uh... what do you see?". The woman lets her hand slide away from amis face and stands up straight herself now: "You definitely are going to be a piece of work", she smiles. Ami

feels like she has already done something wrong and lets out a sigh: “I swear I’m not that bad”. The woman starts laughing: “Don’t worry, if I wouldn’t like a piece of work I wouldn’t be here”. The joke lands with Ami and slightly reassures her, getting a small genuine smile out of her, even if it is still muddled by her nervousness and embarrassment. After a moment she finally remembers what she was supposed to do first here: “If I might ask, I should report to my supervisor, where can I find them?”. The woman suddenly stands up stiff, her smile fades and gives room for a cold and stoic expression, Amis fight or flight senses are running high immediately: “Oh, you need to talk to *her*... you are in for a bad time, I can see that you are at least 30 seconds late”. Ami is filled with fear: “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 more advanced transport yet I just started here and didn’t get a paycheck yet so I couldn’t afford a place close to here yet and I’m sorry I’m just making excuses please is it 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 spend all my adult life studying for–”, the woman’s facade breaks and she tries to interrupt her: “Ami, Ami.. Ami stop, deep breaths..”. Ami obeys the command and halts, breaths in deeply, and exhales: “Sorry”. “Yea you really are going to be a piece of work, I already like you”, she smiles, “be careful, I have too much fun playing with fun things like you~”. Ami blushes and tries to change the subjects: “a..an.. anyway, the supervisor...”, she goes quieter, becomes smaller: “... where can I find...”. The woman perks up “Ami, you are talking to *her*” – she smiles fiendishly. Amis anxiety passes and she grows back to normal size again, but her head fills with question marks, confusion,

fight or flight? Anxiety? Wait a moment, but that means... her eyes widen. She jumps into a deep bow, almost hitting the woman just now revealed to be her supervisor: "I'm sorry ma'am for my behavior, Ami Tian reporting for work". Ami hears a small sigh and slightly raises her head, to look at the woman in front of her once more. Her boss looks at her with a mildly amused, mildly concerned expression: ".. Anyway, I'm Cecillia.. Cecillia Rose, Head of Research at LEPP".