

Keirin //

It was hard to tell the time in the Icarus Station because there were no windows, and Keirin took the liberty to take away some of the clocks. He wanted to know if he would become disoriented by its absence more than its presence. The transition between work, play, and sleep (not that Keirin himself was a big sleeper anyway due to some psychic restlessness) were not as defined here, nor was the dichotomy between night and day, and even more so the cleft division between work and home.

So far, Keirin was especially pleased with the absence of time. He had become reacquainted with some of the social theorists he had not paid enough attention to. They had never left his mind and came to the forefront when he proposed papers of critical design and sociological framework, but it was important to sharpen his wits. After Cecilia, Esme, and Howard left to begin their tests on the fragment, he, Roderick, and Agatha disappeared into their private studies. Keirin was pretty sure Roderick fixed himself a sandwich and spent the first three hours of the afternoon in the basketball court.

They had agreed to commit to their studies on the promise that the hard scientists would inevitably figure out the secret to the isotopes. Until then, they would wait for their meters and test tubes. Keirin was reading in a stiff chair that verged on antique. There were two libraries in the Icarus Station, each filled with a vast reservoir of knowledge. This library suited Keirin well. The ceilings were drafted high with equally scaling bookcases. A loft divided the room into floors, circulating the entire first floor with deep mahogany railings. A ladder provided access from the first floor to the second, where another door on the second floor led to depths in the station that would be explored with time. Keirin realized that only a few drops of coffee remained at the bottom of the cup and set it down on a side table. As he retracted his arm he was hit with a sudden and brief rumbling, deep below the floor. It shook the standing lamps and rattled the bookcases, pushing the smaller volumes onto the ground like flightless birds. Keirin gripped the arm of the chair, but this too was shaking. He glanced at a picture of Einstein and Oppenheim flanking the door on the second floor, watching the frames tilt only slightly to the pulse.

Howard found him twenty minutes later picking up fallen books. Keirin stared at him from across the library, balancing several texts in the crook of his arm. Howard's face was red and puffy. He held his chest, inhaling, exhaling deeply, as he steadied himself on the threshold. Pebbles of sweat dropped from his brows. A faint smile permeated underneath the fatigue.

"You've got to see this," he panted.

A miasma of sulfur and bleach hung in the space of the laboratory like a lingering fart. It was a clinical place, not one that Keirin was comfortable with. He did not like the orderly nature of it; the transparent vials designed to be filled with something colorful, the hard-geometric surfaces traveling up to the ceiling where rods of yellow lit the room. There was a sterile aura about these rooms, something that either invited participation or rejected it. Keirin was of the former, preferring instead the laboratory of public spaces and cityscapes.

He was the last to arrive, and by then the shards of glass were already pushed to the side, collected in miniature glistening mounds. He was instructed to wear a lab coat, a feeling on his naked wrists that he detested, and given goggles that pinched the sides of his brows. Esme handed him a mug of fresh coffee, winking as she did so. Keirin wondered exactly how he had become so late to whatever gathering rumbled the depths of the Icarus Station. He looked for a place to sit and found nothing.

While Keirin himself did not know much about the design of sterile laboratories, he did know that barricade of upturned lockers, stools, and benches at the end of the room was most definitely an ad-hoc intervention. The stack rose to five feet and beyond he could see the top of Cecilia's head, her black bangs clipped behind an equally pinching pair of safety goggles. The array of furniture created an alley that cordoned the back corner of the lab, connecting only to the desterilization shower, of which the curtain provided some semblance of an entirely separate room.

"Keirin, we've been waiting!" Cecilia said. She popped out from behind the curtain. She wore her hazmat suit with a pair of oven mitts and was wrapped in an extra-large lab coat.

"I was picking up books," he said.

Howard beamed. He said, "The blast impacted the upper floors!"

“You all might want to stand back,” Cecilia said. She waited until Esme retreated to the middle of the room, beckoning the others to follow. Once they were far away, Cecilia put on the helmet and said in a muffled voice, “Hold onto something.”

She disappeared behind the barrier. The rectangular helmet bobbed behind the gaps of stacked chairs and folding tables. She raised her arm above her head, holding a glinting purple stone. She stretched her arm back and released with a heavy windup and a quick flick of the wrist.

An explosion of orange, green, and blue exploded from the other end of the wall. White pulses swept along the sides of the laboratory with a blossom of humid sulfur laden air. The cabinets still fastened rattled in their hinges, others closer to the blast exploded into a thousand fragments of wood and glass. Keirin felt himself losing purchase on the floor, and he steadied himself on the edge of a black granite counter. A sudden warmth enveloped him, swirling around him with some invigorating electricity. The light was mighty, forcing Keirin to wince and shield his face. In his peripheries, he saw the coffee gorge to the ceiling, where it levitated in an inky mass just below the lights. Keirin knew, at that moment, that all his life had been leading up to this very moment.

The pulse seceded as quickly as it blossomed, settling the broken glass. The globs of coffee fell at once, splashing the tops of the counters and slapping the middle of Keirin’s chest. He saw Cecilia’s armored body against the tiled wall of the sanitizing shower, hunched over like a tossed doll. He crossed the length of the laboratory and joined the others just as Agatha and Roderick propped Cecilia’s limp body by the crooks of her padded arms. Keirin twisted the helmet from her suit. A burst of laughter escaped from underneath, growing into a high-pitched cackle as Keirin unmasked her. Sweat clumped her dark hair into tendrils over her brows and her lips were cracked. Her eyes rattled with mania.

“It worked! Test number two!” She steadied herself on her own feet and slithered out of the hazmat suit like shed skin, revealing a buttoned cardigan splotchy with sweat.

“That was test two?” Roderick said, looking at the chaos.

Esme and Howard were prepared with the broom and dustpan. Howard started to sweep while Esme cleaned the counters.

Roderick watched them, “So you knew the coffee was going to fall down on us?”

Esme shrugged, “Right of passage.”

Keirin looked at the sterile walls of the laboratory. Within seconds the nature of their environment changed, transforming entirely into a new form. Like a dying light, the energy of the isotope particles faded into nothingness, the wispieness of a blown candle. The wreckage was formidable and a testament to the might of the isotope. The chaos which ensued was the direct result of an unchanneled, and admirably irresponsible display of power. The broken glass, the inversion of gravity...what if they could channel the fragments instead of just throwing it at a surface like a child with a firecracker? What if they dropped a fragment the size of a baseball? Of a bowling ball? Keirin shuddered with masochistic curiosity.

Someone handed Keirin a broom and he started to sweep the shards of broken glass at their feet. Agatha and Roderick procured a screwdriver and worked on repairing the hinges of the surviving shelves. Cecilia began to dismantle the blasted furniture used to barricade her. After twenty minutes, she left the laboratory and returned with two six packs of beer. They worked in silence, wrapped in their own euphoria, riding on the group energy independent of the isotope. It was a commonality, unity, and a bonding. They worked like a collective consciousness of twelve hands, passing brooms, containers of broken glass, another beer, without a word. Slowly, as the laboratory returned to a semblance of its former self, the scientists of the Icarus Station grew a smile on their faces. It was started out small via subtle curvature of their lips, then evolved into full toothed, confident grins. Even Keirin was smiling, unafraid for the first time in his life for the appearance of his crooked teeth, unafraid of the judgmental looks of others. An electric jubilation captured the six of them, and all the miles underneath the Arctic could not change their sudden transformation into balloons.

When they had finished, the laboratory looked the same, sans a few unsalvageable cabinets and stools. Howard opened another beer and rubbed the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. He raised his glass, “Well, I guess we did it.”

“Now what?” Esme said.

They looked at each other. Roderick rolled down his sleeve and looked at the back of his wrist, examining the hairs. “We’ve got another four years and fifty-one weeks.”

Howard furrowed his brows and said, “Yes. Yes, we do.”

They stood there in their exalted silence once more, fiddling with the labels of the beers, staring at the floor. The United States would not unlock the Icarus Station until the length of the project was over. Yet, it was not isolation which occupied their minds. With every fiber of his being, Keirin felt the jubilation return to infuse the stale, filtered air of their underground bunker. They were limitless, and it was more beautiful than the majestic Aurora Borealis dancing in the stars above.

Roderick //

Roderick snoozed the alarm clock with the palm of his hand. He burrowed his face in the pillow, suffocating himself before coming up for air to scratch crust from his eyes. He twisted his body, rambled to the shower. The water clumped his blond hair into spikes. He pulled down one of the golden strands to his lips and wondered if anyone here had some modicum of knowledge of the art of haircutting. He shaved with winced eyes, telling himself that this was the morning that he would change the lighting in his quarters. Agatha had been the first upon Keirin's suggestion, and most of them had followed suit except for Esme, who seemed to like the buttery glaze it cast over everything. Roderick wondered when the adrenaline of the project would plateau when the momentum of first impressions would taper off like a car without gas. After three weeks, he was still as invested in the awesome might of the isotopes, but he had since traded single minutes of extra sleep at the cost of planning the architecture of his hair, of ensuring no bristle went unplucked. Roderick knew himself enough to know this was a good transition.

He entered the kitchen. Agatha had taken to taking her morning meals separate and Cecilia preferred to work into the night at the other end of the station, either in the laboratory or her office. Roderick sat down and fixed himself a mug of coffee. Keirin and Howard were playing a game of chess and Esme was spreading jam on toast. They tried to make conversation with him, and Roderick was certain that his answers amounted to no more than ambiguous grunts behind the rim of a mug. He eyed Esme's toast and Esme caught him.

"Here," she said, sliding it in between his teeth. Savory blueberry coated his tongue. "I saw you drooling over Cecilia's breakfast yesterday. I'll make another."

"You need to eat real food," Howard said without looking up from the board.

"Toast is real food!" Esme pointed with the knife as if it were a wand.

"Not *just* toast," Keirin said.

"Thank you, Keirin," Howard said, "your move."

"Well, I wouldn't constitute coffee as a suitable breakfast either."

“That’s a strawman argument, Esme,” Keirin said. He looked across the board to Howard, “Checkmate.”

Roderick left before the conversation could progress. He wanted to join and defend Esme because, while Howard did harbor a kernel of truth, the toast was quite good. Chewing on these thoughts, Roderick walked deeper into the Station.

The metal shop started to feel more like Roderick’s office than his actual one. He was already keeping spare sweaters here, and an embarrassing cluster of mugs clung to the far wall like barnacles. He rolled up his sleeves, picked up his gloves where he had dropped them the night before in a fluster. He fastened the oil cover smock around his waist and neck and picked up the helmet which still smelled like sweat from the night before.

The conductor lay across the room on a blue tarp. It looked like an ailing heart, aching to breathe. Pipes and coils rest at its hardened base, little knobs and bulbs lay haphazardly from the door of the metal shop to the tarp like a trail of breadcrumbs. This was how Roderick enjoyed working and intended to continue. He liked the clutter because it transformed any workshop into *his* workshop, an environment of his own creation where he was the master. When Roderick pulled down the welder’s mask and gazed upon the many tools on the walls and the boxes containing millions of nuts, bolts, and screws, he felt as if he was going to battle.

Roderick picked up a wrench and a welding torch and knelt beside the conductor. He grasped the smooth edges with his gloved hands, embracing its form as if it were a sleeping artifact. Engineering was as great an art form as any other, but he had resigned to convincing others of this fact long ago. This resignation offered a certain calm to his crackling energy; a defiance against the status quo. Engineering was utility, a dominance of the creations of human hands and human spirits. Did the furnace not come from fire? Was fire not the first engineering feat of humanity? Roderick knew for truth to consider Prometheus as the first engineer, and it was his punishment that gave Roderick the fire within himself to build, manifest, and create.

The conductor was an idea of the Florilegium collective. They had mastered the activation of its infinite power and had even found that the grains which were scraped from the tips of its purple stalactites seemed to grow back to its original, yet surpassing state over the course of several days. They had all seen the technicolor show several times and had gotten used

to its energy pulse. Hardly any unreinforced glass in the laboratory possessed a single blemish. Now, it was time to harness this power and convert it, perhaps even store it. Technically, the mission of the Florilegium Project was to unlock the energy potential of the isotope. Technically, the United States Government grossly underestimated the abilities of six scientists who irresponsibly attempted kinetic action. Technically, the mission was completed and all they needed to do was coast and exist in the underground chambers of Antarctica before they are retrieved like packages and sent back home. Technically.

Roderick picked up a cable, examined it, felt his own warm breath occupy the empty space underneath his iron mask. They could do a lot in a little less than five years. Much more than anyone would anticipate. The conductor, it was decided, would be the next step in their scientific endeavors. Roderick would find a way to harness the raw power of the isotopes as Edison held lightning in a glass bulb.

Roderick tinkered, welded, and swore at himself for four hours. He stopped occasionally to sip his coffee or renew his mug. He gave himself a break to fix himself a ham sandwich and orange slices and returned to the metal shop. A vial of freshly shaved shards from Omega stood in a metal harness that he welded to the wall. Last week Agatha accidentally dropped a few specks on her way to her drawing-room and she spent two hours returning the room to its rightful place. Roderick made sure to not make a similar mistake and held the vial with two hands. He understood why the soldiers handled it with such caution. Perhaps they did not understand the consequences of its kinetic potential, but their collective need for preservation did not fail them.

He walked to the engine and tapped some of the dust into a funnel. The engine illuminated purple, as he had expected, before flashing orange and white. The exterior rocked and rattled, the pipes which laced in and out of the core like an artery tensed and wheezed. Roderick stepped back, placing a toolbox in front of him in some futile effort of protection. Scattered about the metal shop were the remnants of the last engine, and the one before that. He had only swept away the larger metals to sift for anything pieces he could scavenge. The melted nuts and warped bolts collected in the corner, a taunting reminder of his previous failures.

The conductor shook and tensed. The coils tightened and swelled. It reminded Roderick of a popcorn kernel ready to bloom. He hoped it was not the case, and if it were, the toolbox

would prove even more futile protection. He tossed it aside and stood with defiance against the beating heart, no longer afraid of failure but watching it struggle with intent to survive. No, not the intent, Roderick thought as he stood defenseless in the engine's potential blast perimeter. Victory.

A secondary wave of purple blanketed the room, transforming the tools and metal handles of the cabinets into prisms of lavender and orchid. The conductor withstood the isotope's raw introductory power and continued to contain its energy with the only marginal release. Eventually, Roderick aimed to make a conductor that held all its power with zero release, and this engine's ability gave him newfound confidence. The conductor roared but Roderick kept his footing, even as a third pulse sent ripples over his smock and lab coat. Roderick held his breath with some psychic reading of the conductor's stamina; the rumbling it produced had plateaued and the coils which screamed and swore had exhausted their energy doing so. The vibrations subsided slowly and steadily but at a confident and predictable rate. Roderick watched the beast fatigue itself and descend into a rage-exhausted slumber. A white plexiglass panel adopted a deep purple hue.

Roderick found himself on his rear, sitting next to the stagnant conductor with his elbows propped upon his knees. He tossed the mask next to the discarded toolbox. The temperature of the room hit Roderick's face with a cooling slap. He brushed his thumb over the purple bar and released a breath because he had forgotten that he was holding it. He sighed, discovered his glove on the tarp, and grazed the plexiglass with his bare fingers. This container held limitless energy, and Roderick Sinclair had made it with nothing but his wits, gallons of black coffee, and a stubborn amount of elbow grease.

When Roderick left the metal shop, he still felt weightless. He moved without the familiar weight of the rubber gloves closing upon his fingers or the weight of the welder's mask on his shoulders. He walked through the halls caked in dried oil and old sweat. He wanted to announce to the others over dinner with a childlike jubilation: *I did it!* The thought of him crossing a threshold with his hands frozen in the air exhausted him, and when he steadied himself on an oaken railing to the second floor, his legs had nearly given out at the first opportunity to relinquish weight. Cracks in the dried oil on his hands looked like ravines at the joints. They flaked from his body at every flexing finger or wrist. He passed a grandfather clock

and noticed that it was nearly the next morning. Roderick was not sure if knowing the time in a place with no windows was a strategy of productivity or insanity, but he was certain that the day's endeavor had lasted the better part of nineteen hours. Fatigue hit him with aggression, and he found himself looking at his grimy hands which had moved fervently and tirelessly. He needed a long shower, more so than any celebratory glass of beer or the exaltation of his colleagues.

Roderick passed Keirin on the way to his quarters. In his sunken eyes, Roderick found a certain joy, one which Keirin was not entirely successful in returning. He seemed unaffected by Roderick's haggard appearance and held a stack of books in one hand and a fresh cup of coffee in the other. Keirin stared him up and down, tracing the tar that crawled from his hands and splotted his shirt. Roderick managed a smile.

"You did it," Keirin said, his head tilted.

"Yes."

It had been three weeks, and no one could recall seeing Keirin smile since they blew up the laboratory. Roderick sometimes wondered if he knew how too. The result was a complex work of abstract expression. It was a crooked smile, sinister with sharpened canines. It was neither unsettling nor engaging, but an expression for the sake of being one. It possessed a gleaming quality of subtle satisfaction which threw at Roderick a congratulatory approval that he did not know he needed after a feat such as his. Roderick had accomplished something great, and Keirin recognized it through his willowed body that he had given all his essence and exhausted the trifecta of mind, body, and spirit to harness the power of the cosmos.

"There is more work to be done," Roderick said, dismissing Keirin's gaze.

"There is always work to be done," Keirin said, "but not tonight."

Roderick labored a chuckle. "Good night, Keirin."

"See you when you wake up."

The water fell upon Roderick's oiled brows, through the strands of his hair, over his naked body. It fell over the scars of his hands, etched like cartography, from the countless hours

tinkering with machines. Rivers of water cascaded down the warped, worming lines of his back. He collapsed in the bed before drying completely.

His first task in the morning was designed to check if any of the energy escaped the conductor like a punctured balloon, but this was merely a scientific precaution. Roderick was confident in his ability and was proud of himself. It was a conductor; unlike anything the world has experienced. A vessel to harness new energy placed at the end of a long row of the manifestations of creation and genius. The automobile engine stood behind, fearing for the inevitable dust of misuse. Before this, the light bulb shuddered. Before that, fire blossoming from the end of a wooden club held in the hands of Prometheus.