

Time meant nothing anymore.

It had long ago given up measuring time's passage. Not that It wasn't aware of the years, decades, millennia. It could sense the changes all around It.

Sense the changes in the soil and rock.

Sense the changes in the water above the Earth's crust.

Sense the changes in the air above the water.

Sense the changes in the population wandering around the surface.

Everything had slowly gotten dirtier...

Chapter Four

The late evening sun gave Cans' belongings a Halloween glow, the color fluctuating as he pushed his cart in and out of the shadows cast by the trees in Bay Park. He was on his way to his bench for his nightly meditation.

The park was quite crowded tonight. It was every night, but it felt more so this particular eve. He could feel the accumulation of people, though always keeping his eyes glued to the ground directly in front of his shopping cart. He did this partly because he'd hit one too many errant rocks, had his cart tip over one too many times not to learn his lesson. If he'd known his mother, he's certain she wouldn't have raised a fool. The other reason he kept his gaze down was he knew what he would see if he took in his surroundings.

No matter where he went in the city, it was the same. Couples and women giving him a comedically wide berth, even crossing the street. Men instinctively touching the pocket

containing their cash. Noses turned up or scrunched in offense. Joggers and power walkers dramatically coughing, as if they'd just taken a face-full of taxi exhaust.

As filthy as he was—and he knew he was—it was nothing compared to the nastiness of the rest of the world.

That's why he came to Bay Park every night. He loved his bench. Needed his bench. It was his haven, his sanctum sanctorum, his Shangri-La. After a day of dealing with the Rats and the perpetual motion machine they called Life, he needed someplace too decompress. With its gorgeous view of the bay and the way the city glowed as the sun set behind it, his bench was the perfect introspective meditation spot.

Someone was sitting in his spot, but it was nothing he hadn't dealt with previously. After the first time, he moved one of the garbage cans to just behind the left corner. He casually parked his cart at a distance from his bench he called, in his mind, "annoyingly irritating." He, then, proceeded to rummage through the can, taking his odoriferous time. It never took long for the intruder to relinquish their position, and this particular older woman was gone within a minute.

Yep, he was definitely aware he was filthy.

Cans pushed his cart up to his bench and sat, hooking his left foot around the front wheel bar. Enough of the seedier of his homeless brethren had attempted to abscond with his possessions, he wasn't about to give them an opportunity during his meditations. See, Ma? No fool!

He stared out at the bay. There was a fairly constant strong breeze, not cool, not warm. It played through the trees, the leaves rustling and whistling their natural tune. It rippled the water, making the waning sunlight glisten and sparkle, and the reflection of the city waver dreamlike.

Cans let his gaze relax, gradually followed by every muscle in his body. Serenity began to flow like heavy syrup from heaven, starting at the very tippy-top of his head and eventually reaching his feet, causing shivers and goosebumps along its journey. His breathing deepened and slowed, every molecule of air felt by every atom they touched from nostril to lung and back.

The world went out of focus, staying that way until well after the sun had disappeared.

When the world sharpened, he blinked several times to unstickify his eyes. He rolled his head a couple times and then made his way to his favorite eatery.

Bruno saw Cans getting up from his bench and began to fix the homeless man's usual: a footlong, only relish. Despite his situation, Cans was one of Bruno's most regular customers. Because of his situation, Bruno never charged Cans, even gave to him by saving any empties he found during the day. Yet, despite his situation, Cans usually dropped a few coins into the tip jar, which was more than could be said about the majority of the Downtown Types who frequented the park, especially during the lunch hour. Those assholes were the worst tippers.

"Good meditation today, Cans?"

Bruno always asked this, and Cans always replied, "Enlightening. Truly enlightening."

Cans took the offered hot dog and gave it a slow sniff down its length, as if appraising a fine cigar. He let the scents linger within the nooks of his olfactories before finally biting into that meat tube of mana.

"Mmmmm. Superb. I don't know what your secret is but keep up the good work."

Bruno made a comedic display of checking the surroundings, then leaned in and stage whispered, "I'll tell you. I haven't changed the water for a decade." The vendor threw his head

back and let loose with a hearty and jovial guffaw. It was infectious, and Cans found himself swept up in the man's humor, laughing just as loud and strong.

Chapter Five

Michel Barnier stood on the cargo ship's deck, looking out over the moonlit ocean. It was a relatively calm night, a relief after two days of tempests. In the days since they left Portugal, he had found this to be the perfect time of night. Not only were most of the crew below deck, either asleep or playing cards, but it was chilly enough to justify wearing his jacket, the one with the extra-large pockets. He had just begun to reach into one of them, when he heard footfalls coming from his left.

“Oy, Oscar!” the approaching Australian called out. “Got a ciggy fer yer ol’ pal?”

Old pal was a stretch, since he’d only known Sam for as long as they’d been at sea and the man, along with every other crew member, didn’t know Michel’s real name. He was glad to have the burly giant think of him as a pal, though. It kept a lot of eyeballs off him when people were frightened of running afoul of the company you kept. He changed the trajectory of his hand

and slipped it into the other inside pocket on that side, removing a pack of Gitanes Brunes. “As a matter of fact, I was just about to light up, myself.”

Michel held out the open pack. Sam effortlessly grabbed three, pocketing two for later. Michel smiled as he stuck one between his lips. He spun the wheel on his lighter and, knowing he probably didn't have even a match upon his person, held it up for Sam. Even with Michel's arm at its full-length stretch, the Aussie still had to lean down to touch tip to flame. After he lit his own, the two men spent a few puffs in silence, leaning on the railing and watching the black-blue waves, broken occasionally by tiny whitecaps.

Sam let out a long exhale of smoke and sigh. “Beautiful night, eh?”

Michel replied with a simple, “Mmm hmm.”

Sam took another long drag, and another long exhale. “I tell ya, Oscar. I've been all 'round this planet, and I gotta say you French have some of the best smokes. Betta' than most countries I ben to.”

“Well, if there's something we're most proud of, it's giving the world high quality lung cancer. And alcoholism, too.”

The large man laughed through his nose. “True. Never was much fer wine, m'self. Give me a good lager, any day.”

The duo lapsed back into a comfortable silence. Michel glanced at his companion and realized he honestly didn't mind the burly Australian. There was always that one person he felt bad lying to, and Sam was this time's. His humor and good cheer were utterly infectious. He'd even maintained that sunny worldview during the recent stormy weather, when the entire crew,

including Sam, were bent over toilets and buckets and anything else that would sufficiently contain their stomach contents.

He wished he could say something to his friend, his new “ol’ pal,” let him in on what was truly happening aboard this ship, but Michel knew the danger inherent in such a revelation. Sam was much safer in the dark. He would make sure it mattered once they were in port.

The gentle giant flicked the filter out into the oceanic void. Sam was the only man Michel had ever met who could smoke a cigarette all the way down until it charred the very edge of the filter. He had once wondered if it was possible for the Australian to smoke unfiltered. “Well, m’friend,” Sam clapped Michel on the shoulder with the mass of meat and bone he called a hand, “time for me to get some shut eye. See you in the daylight!”

“Bonne nuit, Sam.”

Once he was certain he was finally alone, Michel reached into the pocket he was initially going for when Sam interrupted. He removed a satphone, flipped up the antenna and powered it on. Once service connection was made, he pressed and held the 3, the next number in the countdown sequence he’d been performing every night. It had been incredibly difficult to send during the storms, but he somehow, to even his own amazement, had succeeded. The phone number connected, rang once, then disconnected.

He put the phone away, finished his cigarette and went to bed.