

The Rude Awakening

The alarm comes unexpectedly while I'm skimming through some catalogs. It's a type 4 one, something I don't remember in my still short career, and it surprises me because I don't recognize the distinctive howling of the siren. After hastily gathering the equipment, I run to the elevator, where Duguay is already waiting while pressing the button to hold the doors, and we stop for Laurent, who was caught off guard in the bathroom. He arrives stumbling and cursing, while buckling his belt.

We go up to the heliport. The system has already chosen a ship at random, and on the loading pylons, robotic arms are finishing installing various equipment adapted to the type of emergency. There's medical equipment, extrication, and firefighting. Semi-rigid hoses finish filling the water and foam tanks and immediately unhook and collect autonomously. The platform lights have already changed to green while my colleagues and I finish the last checks before going up and sitting down. Laurent's in front of me, rear facing, looking at me. I grab one of the onboard computers, hanging in a mesh bag on the wall, and place it in one of the pivoting supports after deploying it from its hole. I identify myself, load the emergency data, and drag its location to the destination box for the aircraft's AI. After confirming, the gates close and we take off softly, all smooth. Laurent grabs another computer and snoops the information; Archangel Two are also going and we'll meet there. Type 4s are very infrequent, citizens' lives are almost never at risk in our magnificent utopia. While the world sleeps, we are its guardians.

I peek out the windows. I've done this many times, but I never tire of looking at the landscape that the great empty city represents, I don't get used to it and I don't think I ever will. It's giant, almost endless, but with hardly any movement or signs of life in its shiny metal structures. The sun shines

low, dimly but unopposed in a controlled and perfect climate. We're in winter, but only in name now. One of my hobbies during my free time is to go to the Peripheral Fields, where rain's still allowed, and feel the drops hitting my skin, laughing like a child. The cities have at most some isolated cloud, but never precipitations that could deteriorate the flamboyant buildings. It's all colossal but cold and dead, like the old cathedrals or the tombs of the pharaohs. A testimony to the insignificance of the human being.

Six minutes later we approach the destination. It's just another hive sector, a building with unimpressive ornaments and windows like any of those that surround it for many miles around. They're so tall that the "streets" below are plunged into a quasi-permanent darkness. By its generic appearance, it would be impossible to distinguish it from the rest were it not for the thick column of smoke that sprouts from one of its facades, where a swarm of drones tries to keep the situation under control until the arrival of intervention teams like us. In addition, its beacons flash insistently. Everything's illuminated, and it's a great spectacle.

We land on its roof, where the other ship rests still hot. They were somewhat closer than us. We throw the equipment over our shoulder and leave the "raven" on standby next to theirs; for safety all buildings have supplies and outlets that we can use and for the moment it's not necessary that we spend our meager reserves of liquid. There are elevators, but out of routine we always use the stairs even though the possibility of one failing is remote. The boots resonate loudly on the metal and already in the landing before the floor we're hailed. It's Duchesne.

"Hello? Archangel One?"

"Here we are for the party," Duguay responds, rounding the corner.

"And dressed for the occasion," I add, behind him.

He greets us fervently and holds the emergency door for us to pass. In the hallway, we see Bernard and Forget. We're all here.

"What a mess," says the latter, "I don't understand how this could have happened... Apparently a transformer has overloaded and the differential didn't trip, it started to burn badly, and being an electrical panel area there are no sprinklers... In the end, the adjacent tank has burst and opened a good

hole, so the ‘hepta,’ which *did* be present, has been of no use. It emptied out a few minutes ago.”

The overpressure, like everything in this life, has sought the path of least resistance, which turned out to be the windows. Hence the column of smoke we saw from outside.

“How many people are here?” asks Duguay.

“Not many, to be exact...” Forget fiddles with the screen on his forearm. “Seventeen in the upper sector cameras, I don’t think it will affect the lower ones no matter how bad things get.”

The construction regulations for residential buildings require for safety to implement a system of isolated blocks, so that in the remote case of an accident the damage’s contained as much as possible. And no fire, no matter how powerful, will be able to overcome the sixteen feet of insulating zone that separate one from another. The ducts that connect them by stairs and elevators are also impregnable, or so theory says. As for the frame that serves as the skeleton of the building, it’ll be able to withstand up to several thousand degrees. But in this block, there can still be a big mess.

As if to validate this thought and Forget’s words, some threatening tentacles of smoke crawl along the ceiling at the end of the hallway, shortening the distance that separates us. It seems as if the fire’s extending its claws towards us, impatient. Whatever we are going to do, it has to be now, without delay. This imaginary countdown doesn’t pose any problem for me: I work better under pressure.

“The first thing is to get everyone out of here. Then we’ll think of something,” says Bernard, with his permanent rasp.

“Let’s wake them up and let these lazy people run a little,” nods Forget.

Humor abounds. My colleagues from Archangel Two have been working together for years, and it’s evident when you hear them exchange jokes in the middle of situations like this. Neither do my two colleagues lag far behind.

“I hope I don’t have to carry any fat dude. *Again*,” concludes Duguay.

We divide the task. Things are getting ugly by the moment and it doesn’t make sense to waste time going all together house by house. Forget,

who's the most veteran of those present and therefore has tactical command of the emergency, issues an order on his computer to initiate the awakening of all the tenants of this block immersed in a lethargy. Then, we divide and go down the hallway, each to a door. With our priority codes, we unlock them and access the interior—sterile and minimalist except for a few exceptions—to harvest the citizens who sprout from the simulation capsules like newborns: blinded, confused, and tearful.

My first client's a middle-aged woman. She kicks and gasps, and I hold her for a moment to prevent her from hurting herself until she calms down. She looks at me through rapid blinks of her tearful eyes as if she were seeing a ghost, which might be an accurate description of my current appearance. When she's calmer, I proceed to disconnect the intravenous line and the numerous sensors scattered over her body, barely covered by a hospital green bodysuit, as well as the probes for collecting biological waste. I remove the neural mesh from her head, revealing her flattened copper hair. As I help her to stand up, I see the hole in the woman's nape, which looks sinister, and I recognize one of the first-generation connection port models. She must've been one of the first to connect, before the development of the more modern and less invasive wireless sensor neural interface.

"I-I... Where..." she stammers, confused. She must've been disconnected for quite some time. Everyone now wants a perfect and ideal life, without pain or difficulties. There are few reasons to be outside, unless you're a weirdo like me.

"Stay calm," I respond with the kindest voice I can muster. "You've just been extracted from your dream. You're no longer in the simulation, I repeat, you're no longer inside. This is the real world"—it seems strange to say *this*.

She looks around, undecided. I know she must be living a nightmare, and I don't want to pressure or be rude, but I glance out of the corner of my eye at the door of the house waiting to see the cloud of smoke enter. We have to move fast and there's not much time to waste for her to restore the stiffened synapses of the neurons that process reality.

"There's an emergency, there's been a problem, a fire," I urge her, grabbing her by the wrists to get her attention. "We have to hurry, we're evacuating the area."

The woman nods, somewhat less agitated, but it's evident that she doesn't like the situation nor the absence of an alternative.

"We have to..."

"Go. Yes," I interrupt her, still kind but resolute.

With little skill, she tries to dismount from the capsule and put her feet on the ground. I help her as much as possible, but it's better that she gets the hang of it as soon as possible. The day can be difficult.

"Ouch!"

She stumbles. The life support system provides the host with certain anabolic substances included as part of the intravenous nutrition, as well as a program of daily electrical stimuli in their muscles that manage to avoid to some extent the weakening associated with permanent immobility. But they don't solve the lack of experience: the nervous system's not used to it and her movements are clumsy, like those of a baby learning to walk.

"Come on," I insist, passing her arm over my shoulders, "this way." Obedient, we head for the door. Maybe she's too tired to protest.

We go out into the hallway. Somewhat annoyed, I check that Duguay and Laurent have already taken their civilians outside and have gone in for the next ones. It may seem improper to have a "race" in a situation like this, but according to our own instructors taught us, competitiveness produces better results. With kindness and without losing manners, I help the woman to sit on the floor of the corridor, with her back against the wall, and after asking her not to move from there—she probably hasn't even considered it—I jump to the next door. I don't even want to waste time unlocking it: placing a foot solidly on the ground, I burst the lock with a sure kick with the reinforced sole boot. Okay, it may not have been strictly necessary, but I haven't done it in a while and it's a great feeling. I'm an opportunist, I know.

This apartment's identical to the previous one, except that the internal layout's a mirrored image of the other. I run to the room where the capsule's waiting, and I'm surprised to find its tenant already out of it, standing. She's

a girl, much younger than the previous one, but certainly sharper. She barely needs to lean on the table to stand upright. As I burst into the room, she startles and raises an arm as if wanting to protect herself from the unexpected.

“Calm down. I’m here to help.”

She doesn’t hesitate as much as the previous one. She just makes a questioning gesture, as if urging me to expand on my explanations that she found insufficient.

“There’s an emergency, a fire. We’re evacuating the building,” I repeat the litany.

She processes the information right away. She’s sharp, that’s clear.

“You’re firefighters, right? From SDIS.”

Like all those others connected, once a year she participates in mandatory citizen education classes that try to prevent her complete disconnection from the physical world. Among the subjects taught is the emergency and rescue system that we’re part of.

“Exactly. And I’m sorry, but we have to...”

“Leave, yes,” she cuts me off. “Is there no other option? Everything’s supposed to be fire-resistant and all that...”

The truth is that these homes are designed for what they are, a minimal risk, and although the building itself has insulations and bunkered sections, neither these partitions nor the door I just forced provide much security against a good fire. It doesn’t make sense for the Administration to spend many resources on something that’s supposed to never happen, or to adorn homes that are not gonna be really used to make a life. It’s logical. But maybe it would be too hurtful if I’m honest with the girl like this, although I have the curious feeling that she’s tougher than the rest.

“I’m afraid that won’t be enough. As a precaution, we have to take you to a safe place while we take care of it.”

She doesn’t think twice.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Her first steps are unsure, but she rejects all help. We go out into the hallway, which is gradually getting noisier as more and more frightened civilians populate it, getting used to the new sensations, each at their own pace.

The worst one will be the smell, of course. I guide the girl to my first rescued, and I ask her name. Somewhat embarrassed, I realize that I didn't do it with the previous one. It may have something to do with her youth and her beautiful face.

"Yvette," she responds.

As if trying to fix it, I also ask the woman, who says with a reedy voice "Chloé." I ask Yvette to please stay with her, taking care of each other, although it's obvious that the girl doesn't need it.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it," she says almost disdainfully.

The girl's eighteen years old, so she must've been connected for a short time. The law requires being of age to do so, but that limit drops to sixteen with the consent of parents or guardians, although never exceeding 50% of their daily life. Maybe that's why she handles herself more deftly. She hasn't been able to forget yet. Paradoxically, adults are the ones who are most lost and helpless, since they're the ones who've spent the most time in suspension. Their years of experiences in the real world are far behind.

With this reflection, I look around for any door still not open, there are few left. My colleagues are going at a frantic pace. I run to the nearest one, kick and down with it. I find its inhabitant on the floor, next to the capsule, crying. He's an older man, he might be over sixty. My heart jumps because I know it's gonna be hard with this one.

"The end... It's the end," he sobs. I come to his side and take his hand in mine in a gesture of comfort. I try to convey confidence.

"Don't worry. We're from the emergency services, we've come to help. Nothing's gonna happen to you."

Upon hearing this, a peculiar transformation takes place. The man stops crying, manages to control his emotions, and looks at me with serene and lively eyes. I don't believe it's because of my words. I'm not that good of a psychologist.

"You're right, I'm sorry. It wasn't that long ago that..."

"How long have you been?"

"Not much, a little less than a year. Since..."

He looks down, somewhat dejected.

“Since I lost my wife.”

“I’m sorry.”

He looks up again, and smiles at me. I feel him squeeze my hand.

“It’s okay. It’s just that... I... Well, I felt lonely. You know? That’s why I went in. Nowadays, it’s so hard to make friends out here... At least there’s always someone there. Always.”

He pauses as he catches his breath. He looks tired, although it may be more mental than anything else. What he said earlier reassured me: he hasn’t been in simulation for long, so despite his age, he doesn’t seem to be a problem. So much the better.

“We’re all together there.”

I disagree, knowing what I’ve seen in other interventions. Even with all of humanity united in one place, I don’t think there’s a lonelier place than that. But I choose not to say anything. What matters is that the man draws strength from wherever he can. I hear voices in the hallway, and it seems we’re the last ones. And I’m smelling smoke.

“Come on, I’ll help you. What’s your name?”

“Jean-Claude. Jean-Claude Patrice Baptiste Guillaumont.”

I assist him to stand up, and almost in the air I take him outside. My colleagues are taking a count, the civilians in a line on one side of the hallway. We have people of all ages and conditions. Their faces are the mirror of the soul, which in this case has seen better times. But between the six of us and those who manage best, we’ll manage to shepherd the rest of the frightened citizens. Before the end of the day, hopefully, they’ll be returning to their simulations, and they’ll end up forgetting.

“Now, pay attention to me. As you can see there is a type 4 emergency, a fire. We are Emergency teams 381 and 382 and we’ve come to put order and make sure everyone is safe.”

While the “chief” explains the situation, Duchesne comes up to me and speaks to me in a low voice. He comes eager to tease.

“So the last one, what a shame... Do you think that’s passable? Despite being the youngest...”

“You were lucky. I’m sure yours came out without having to ask twice.”

“Sure, sure, and I’m confident you didn’t take your time with that girl... You’re such a wily bird,” he winks at me with intention, but I know him very well, him and his sarcasm, and he doesn’t fool anyone. Later he’ll have to pay for a few rounds.

“I don’t want to go on too long, so I’ll summarize,” Forget continues. “We have to evacuate this sector without wasting time. You’re going to have to do what we tell you, at all times. Is that clear? If you do, your lives are not in danger.”

If not..., we all think without saying it. We glance at the faces of the people lined up against the wall like a row of detainees. Some still hold out hope that it’s all a joke. But it’s starting to get hot. In the virtual world, one doesn’t sweat.

“Alright then. Let’s get moving. Two of us will go in front, two in the middle and two closing the group, to see that nothing happens to anyone.”

Forget goes first with Duguay. Halfway through the procession, Bernard and Laurent. I’m stuck with Duchesne. Being the newest, they must want a veteran to teach me the trade, or rather to watch me in case I mess up. It’s annoying to be treated like a helpless... And as I think this, I look at Jean-Claude, who has quietly approached me and gently puts his hand on my shoulder blade.

“I’m sorry I got like that before. It all caught me so off guard. It was so ridiculous, now that I think about it...” he tells me.

“It’s okay, it’s the most normal thing in the world. We’re in a dangerous situation, not even us are asked to be heroes.”

“Thank you very much, really,” he smiles calmly.

We’re already moving, but we’re advancing at a snail’s pace due to the stragglers who are still staggering, groping their way along the walls and barely supported by their lower bodies. There are seventeen very different lives that we now have in our charge.

“And what’s your name?” I hear one ask his “neighbor.”

“Jacques.”

“Me too!”

“Well, me too,” another voice emerges, at the other end.

“All three of you are Jacques?”

I don’t even feel like laughing. I look back and the fire has worsened, the end of the hallway’s now a vortex of flames. It looks like Dante’s hell mouth. And here, outside of training, there’s no “panic button” that will extinguish everything at once... I’m starting to have doubts about the quality of construction of these buildings.

“This one doesn’t go out peeing.” Duchesne, who has also turned around to look, makes the observation with his usual spark. It’s not his first time.

“No...”

“And on top of that, it spreads quickly. Through the ducts, for sure. Remind me never to buy one of these apartments.”

“How do you know?”

“Look,” he says, pointing with his index finger at a door we’ve left behind. His clinical eye hasn’t failed him. Looking closely, it’s possible to see through the lower gap of the door the smoke making a “breathing” effect. It’s macabre, like the panting of a malevolent and intelligent being. A very unpleasant surprise awaits on the other side. The access corresponds to a cleaning room, which ironically has an inviting photoluminescent sign with the word **EXTINGUISHER**.

“The sooner we get out of here, the better...”

There are things that are better not to say out loud, as fate seems to hear them and think of a reply. One of the rescued, in front of us, is starting to show signs of an anxiety attack. He steps aside breaking the line and starts to breathe laboriously, with his hands resting on his knees.

“This is not true. This is not true. I have... I have to get out of here!”

Sometimes, suffering a disconnection or a pause in service can be highly dangerous. Last year I attended the fatal outcome when a short circuit in a ventilation system forced the temporary disconnection of a twenty-two-year-old young man, while the hardware temperature dropped to safe levels. The sudden stop of the simulation and the absence of all stimuli, replaced by an oppressive darkness, led him to a panic attack that ended up causing him a cardiac arrest. His obese constitution didn’t help at all. And he wasn’t even a

full-time “sleeper.” Others, like the one we’re dealing with, don’t accept that they’ve been taken “out” and think everything is a joke or a game within virtuality, unable to distinguish between reality and fiction.

“Please, calm down. We’re taking you outside, we’re almost there. Get back in line,” Bernard requires him, taking him by the arm and returning him to his place. “You,” he says, addressing the one who had been by his side, “keep an eye on him, we can’t stay on top of everyone.”

“Yes, yes... Sure,” he responds. Just at that moment, as soon as my colleague has turned his back on him, the other one panics again and runs off with little dexterity, attributable to the numbness of his limbs.

“I have to get out! Leave me alone!”

“Calm down, I’ll get him!” To end up messing up the situation, the other civilian throws himself after the fugitive with his best intentions.

“Damn it! Hey, hey! Matthieu, Léon, grab them!”

A big commotion ensues. By domino effect, now there are more nervous rescued people who seem to have something to say about it. Half join the spontaneous mutiny, and the other half do so indirectly by trying to collaborate in taming the first ones. Duchesne and I can’t cope with blocking our end of the hallway, and the frightened one manages to overtake us.

“Shit! Catch him!”

“Don’t worry, we’re helping you!” a female voice sounds behind me as I run after the fool who seems to want to return to his room to continue his usual day as if the building wasn’t on fire. I only need a few yards to catch him. I grab his wrist and he almost falls to the ground. I’d gladly slap him, but we’re strictly forbidden to do so.

“Stay still! Have you gone mad?” even though I know it’s a rhetorical question.

“Let me go! I wanna go back!”

Footsteps sound to my left. Just as I’m wondering how I’m gonna contain so many people all by myself, I see that my three “clients” have decided to come and lend a hand. Just what I needed to ruin my day. Is there anything else?

“Are you stupid? They’re firefighters, they’ve come to rescue us.” In spite of being the youngest, Yvette has emerged as the group leader, it seems.

“Listen to this man,” adds Jean-Claude in a calm voice, so low that it’s hard to hear him. “If we cooperate, we’ll be out of here in no time. Besides, I’m afraid your home must already be ablaze... You wouldn’t want to go back in there, would you?”

Chloé doesn’t say anything, just stands there with expectant eyes.

“Flames... It’s okay. I’ll put them out! It’s my house!” the man argues, with the expression of a madman on his agitated face. He takes several steps back in the direction he came from, and for a moment I entertain the illusion that he’ll fall into line and return with the group, but then with a gesture of urgency and decision he heads towards one of the doors. It’s the cleaning room that Duchesne pointed out to me earlier. My sweat dries up instantly.

“Don’t open it!”

He grabs the knob and screams in despair when the skin on his hand burns, but he quickly pulls it away and doesn’t give up. He uses his clothes as a rag to wrap it around and starts to turn it. In the distance, my colleagues have also seen it and watch in astonishment.

“NO!”

I turn around and push the rest, screaming for them to get down. I try to position my body so that it covers them as much as possible. A roar hits my eardrums and the deflagration surges violently when the oxygen-deprived fire inside the room is rekindled by a gust of air after the door is opened. The bulk of it hits the unfortunate man in front of it, and it’s the last thing he sees. The hallway lights up and the smoke and flames invade everything with joy at being released. This mistake couldn’t have been more costly, but for now there’s only one victim to mourn. There are sixteen beings left to bring to salvation. Slowly, very slowly, I lift my head that I had covered with my arms.

“Is everyone okay?”

They scream like the damned, their faces red and the trauma of what they’ve lived deeply etched in their retinas. On the other side of the hallway, they must be roaring too, but it’s impossible to hear it over the din that still

echoes in this narrow space, and the sound of the burning materials. I take a look at the disaster. The passage's been blocked and the corpse—increasingly charred—of the man lies there in the middle as a warning saying “don't even try it.” I don't have a fire extinguisher on me, and the nearest one's in the oven that just cremated that poor wretch. We'll have to find another route.

“Oh Lord, oh Lord, it can't be true, why?” Chloé begins to lament. The other girl's completely stunned and doesn't react, while Jean-Claude, who has witnessed death before, just looks sad, but immediately tries to comfort his fellow sufferer. I, for my part, have no time to think about anything other than the possible exits from this area. There must be some within our reach. If only I were alone, I could...

Such thoughts occupy me when the communicator in my helmet comes to life with Forget's voice.

“Kid, are you all okay? Say yes.”

“Don't worry,” I reply. “Aside from the one with the brilliant idea, the rest of us are fine. But they're sure to have nightmares.” I know the rest of my team's also hearing this, and sighing with relief.

“They'll erase them, it's okay. Now what you have to do is find a way to get to us. The hallway's impassable.”

“You don't have to tell me. Okay, let's see what I can come up with.”

I look around. It's getting harder and harder to breathe. I'm between a rock and a hard place: a fire or a bigger one. It might not be that simple. At my feet, the civilians hug each other in fear, unable to respond, looking at me with pleading eyes. There has to be something, an option that escapes me... Think!

A sudden inspiration.

“Boss, can you tell me if the cornices are passable? I thought I saw that they were.”

A few moments pass. I imagine him hastily fiddling with his device, consulting the structural plans of the building.

“Width of twelve inches.”

Plenty. I'm not in a position to be picky. Now I just need a way to get there. Quickly, I feel door after door for the temperature, looking for one

that won't bring me the same fate as the civilian. Please don't let me be wrong. Please don't let me be wrong.

"This one!"

I charge shoulder first, blessing the protections of the suit. I was right: there's smoke but no flames. At the other end, the living room window is visible. We can't hesitate.

"Come on, get up! Come with me!"

My words are a possibility that they cling to in case there's a certainty behind it: survival. Millennia pass, but the human mind remains the same, anchored in the most basic instincts. They'd have walked into the fire if I'd ordered them to. Good, that'll make it easier. Almost pushing me, they enter the apartment and follow the direction I indicate with my arm to the window. I put the door back in place even though it doesn't do much good with the broken lock, but psychologically it helps not to see the problems.

"And now?"

"Through here."

With the pickaxe, I break the glass into multiple pieces that fall down. I hope no one was walking down the street. I quickly clean the frame so they don't cut themselves on any shard.

"No... Wait. Are you serious?" Yvette exclaims, disturbed.

"I'm totally *not* going out there," the woman affirms.

They have no other choice, I'm afraid. And I make that clear to them.

"There's no problem. The cornice is wide, and I'll help you. We'll go one by one. You hold on to me."

They hesitate for a few seconds, enough to convince their brains that there's no alternative. But their faces are a sign that they would've accepted anything else.

"You, you go first. Come on," I tell the young woman.

I go out to the facade. The vertigo test was much worse, here we're so high that distances aren't even distinguishable, like flying the ship. Piece of cake. I advance with cautious steps to the furthest window, which leads to an area beyond the main fire focus. I break it and clear it just like I did with the

other one, and retrace my steps. I face the building and grab the girl's hand, encouraging her to come out.

"I've got you."

Reluctantly, she does. She's shaking like a branch in the wind. She places her hands on the wall and closes her eyes. She doesn't even lift her feet, she drags them insecurely. I don't mind, as long as she gets to the other side I'm satisfied. After an agonizing minute, we make it. She crosses the threshold with a sigh of relief and sits on the floor.

"I feel awful," she says. "I'm having trouble breathing."

"That's fear," I reply.

"Who'd want to feel like this *voluntarily*?"

I would, I think, as I try to find the words to explain to someone how great it is to feel fatigue, pain, hunger, sleep, thirst, and know that this is what it feels like to be alive. That no simulation ever made, no matter how realistic, will ever come close. That the whole world inside seems false and vicarious, an illusion made up of mirages, where nothing lasts and everything's ephemeral. But in the end, I feel incapable of conveying this, because it all comes down to personal feelings and beliefs, to personal tastes. And I know I'll never convince her, so I prefer not to say anything. What matters is that each person is happy.

"I'll be right back. Stay there."

I go back for the woman, who's next. She does it the opposite way to Yvette: she backs up against the wall and hugs me, drawing me towards her and pressing her generous bust against me. Part of my body hangs over the void, but I don't mind, as I use any element of the facade to secure myself as we move sideways to the window. This strange day has run out of excuses to surprise me.

Only Jean-Claude remains. When I return, I check in surprise that he has already gone outside and is contemplating the distant asphalt with a doubtful air.

"Jean-Claude."

He doesn't answer.

"Jean-Claude..."

With fatigue, he looks at me. He's crying again.

"I felt very sad when she died..."

I must tread very carefully from here on, as it's unstable ground, like walking on charred planks. I remain silent, pondering to hit the mark with what I say.

"And, how do you think she'd feel if you died?"

He freezes, and my words seem to have an effect.

"She'd want you to move on and be happy," I finish.

Once again calm, he regains his smile. I'll have to publish some self-help book...

"You're right. Forgive me, I'm a fool."

"No problem. You're very brave."

The smoke is already billowing from the window we escaped from. With great caution, I take the man to the other side. He does quite a bit on his part, truth be told. Once the operation is completed, I let them rest for a few minutes while I do a reconnaissance of the exit door. I'm pleased to see that I wasn't wrong: this flat's beyond the original fire, which seems to have a predilection for advancing in the other direction, perhaps due to the air current. We have a few paces of margin to pass. If I had thought about it a little more, it'd be too late now and all this adventure would've been for nothing.

"Let's go! This is going well."

The exodus resumes. Holding each other by the wrist, they follow me faithfully like ducklings to their mother. After turning a bend, I distinguish the metallic color of a door leading to the maintenance area. These areas are invaluable shortcuts and we'll be able to move faster, as they run through the central area of the building, so the distances are smaller. I take my special key (similar to the one we have to unlock the elevators) out of my pocket and open it. We pass to the other side.

"But what's all this?"

They've never been in a place like this. Accustomed to bright, cozy, and clean environments, they turn up their noses at all the machinery, the ladders, the grated floors, and the giant fans emitting a persistent hum. These are the bowels of the beast. No one should dwell here.

“What a grimace, how dirty, everything’s a mess,” says Yvette. She still drags her words a bit when she speaks.

“It’s the maintenance area. Behind the scenes, this is how the world really works. This is what makes it move.”

“The real world is a crap. Nobody wants to leave.”

That’s not true. Pollution and wars disappeared years ago. But if they said that, almost everyone would want to “return”, and the system’s no longer capable of supporting that level of load. Year after year, the services of the physical world have been reduced to a minimum. Due to disuse, it was lost, like a kind of atrophy. And although it sounds selfish, I almost prefer it. I like the world out here and I don’t want it to get spoiled again. I want it intact, beautiful and perfect as it is, all for me.

I consult a floor plan that is laminated on the wall. I trace the route we are going to follow with my finger, memorizing (I could take a picture with my device, but I’m too lazy). We continue the march. Chloé has her shoulders hunched, arms crossed and stuck to her body in a very funny way. She probably suspects that she’ll suffer an electric shock if she makes contact with any of the panels or cables. The other two, on the other hand, look with increasing curiosity as if walking through a museum.

We go down several floors to the base of this block. There’s an access lock to the lower one, but it has automatically sealed when the emergency began, and not even I have the codes to invalidate it. It doesn’t matter, what I’m looking for is something else. We exit through the door to the residential area, and at this height, I know that halfway up each facade there’s an outcrop similar to a balcony but not intended for people to walk on. They looked pretty good from the aircraft, and what really interests me, is that they were ideal for a hoist rescue. We’re not gonna stop to look at the beautiful sunset, we just want to get out of this mess.

“Archangel One, do you receive me? We’re on the base floor of this block, south side.”

I’m comforted to hear Duguay’s voice.

“Are you okay? Thank goodness! We’re almost done here, another team has arrived to assist us. There’s one in arrest, they’re doing CPR on him right now, too many stairs for him it seems. The rest, healthy.”

“It could be worse. We’ve had a hard time, but I’ve managed to bring them here. Now I need your cooperation, I’m thinking of a hoist. Do you remember those outcrops, like small terraces?”

“Yes! Good idea. Because you don’t have much of an alternative... Are you still four?”

“For now, and let it last.”

“Say no more. Raven on the way, delivering an express rescue.”

I love them. Not even two minutes pass and the bird’s already discernible, silhouetted against the blue sky. It descends carefully to thirty feet above while the drones move a prudent distance away. Through the open door, my colleagues signal to me that they’re ready to proceed. Duguay has already prepared the phosphorescent orange harness.

“You oughta see it... There’s burning rubble falling every so often. From afar it looks like the building’s crying tears of fire,” he broadcasts.

Very poetic. But all the more reason to get out of here quickly.

“Puff... Finally. I thought this moment would never come,” whispers Chloé.

“Well then. You’re gonna be the first.”

Without hiding her relief, she lets me put on the harness that they’ve lowered to us while I do my best not to look at her breasts. In a flash, they lift her up to the ship, where they accommodate her in one of the seats and fasten her seatbelt. I’m sure they’ve exchanged a suggestive look. Lucky Duchesne isn’t here...

Next passenger. Jean-Claude offers to go.

“It’s not out of cowardice. I think it would be better if I didn’t stay last, like before. You know.”

I nod. They lower the harness again, I hook him up firmly, and before they lift him up he says goodbye to me with an affectionate pinch on the chin, constantly thanking me. Behind me, Yvette throws a reproach as she walks in circles.

“And I’m the last one! I can’t wait for this to be over, and to go back inside...”

“I prefer this. It beats any fantasy.”

“But what are you talking about? It’s great! You can do whatever you want, without consequences. People don’t really die in there. You can fulfill all your dreams, you can travel the world, meet anyone, be whoever you want. It’s all perfect.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s not real. They’re just images, sounds. Signals that the nervous system processes. It seems real, but it’s not.”

She stops and looks at me, very serious.

“And if it’s real to your mind, what’s the difference?”

It’s hard to counter these kinds of arguments. They even make me fear that I might change my mind someday. And that seems terrible to me. I can’t pinpoint why, but I need to be outside. I don’t want to live deceived, in an illusion, however immaculate it may be. I want to inhabit reality, to know absolute reason, the cold and calculated rationality of the physical world. I want to truly see, hear, smell, touch, and taste, without feeling trapped inside Plato’s cave. And if there were another dimension outside of this one, I’d want to be able to get out somehow. I feel suffocated knowing I’m trapped, more than the smoke from any fire. And with these same words, I tell her.

“I think you have some kind of disorder. You’re old-fashioned,” she laughs.

Maybe. But everyone has to live their own life, not what someone else likes...

“And when you’re an old man, and you can’t take care of yourself?” she insists.

I hope to be dead by then, I think.

“Come on, the last one and then you!” they communicate to me over the radio. I’m almost glad to interrupt this discussion that’s going nowhere. They lower the harness again, and just as I’m about to put it on the girl, Duguay deafens me with a shout.

“LOOK OUT!”

I look up without understanding, but alert. They're signaling to me. I'm left breathless when I see what's coming down on us. As the ship veers sharply away leaving the harness out of reach, I lift Yvette off the ground and carrying her in my arms I run to the window which fortunately is close. Without regard, I jump inside. The piece of balcony from the upper block, undoubtedly deteriorated by the fire, falls plumb and impacts the exact point we were on just three beats ago, collapsing the structure and sending everything to the street, so far away that the noise doesn't even reach us. The girl and I look at each other, incredulous. We've taken a good hit, but a bruise can be fixed, death cannot. I inform my colleagues of our status.

"Fuck!"

"No, not back in here again! We were almost there..."

Nothing I say is gonna take away her despair, so I think of another alternative while she cries with rage, slapping the floor with each syllable.

"I'm fed up, damn it! Fed up! We're never gonna get out of here!"

I'd get angry too, there are plenty of reasons, but that's not gonna teleport me out of the building by magic. I only have myself. I let her release tension while I mentally review the options. The simplest and most direct is to run to the east or west terrace and repeat the play. It'll do.

"Come on, get up. They'll extract us on the other side."

Hearing this makes her tantrum subside a bit. Truth be told, for being so young I expected something worse. Obedient, she follows me and we go back into the maintenance area, to shorten the distance. There are more and more flames everywhere. Whatever we do, it's probably our last shot. I refuse to let this become my funeral pyre.

"Let's see, it has to be around here..."

One room, then another. We only have one last stretch and we'll be free. I'm not gonna die in this stupid cheap building. There's still a lot to see.

"Here it is," I certify, after seeing the sign on the door. I open it, and...

"No!"

Fire. Burning, at the end of the hallway. Always, always the damn fire. I hate it. That's why I became a firefighter, to battle it. And now, from the end of this narrow corridor, it laughs at me and my helplessness. It's the only

thing that separates us from the residential area and the west terrace, but I have nothing to extinguish it. My suit can withstand a quick run through, and the Administration will pay for a new face if necessary, but it's too much for the girl and that clothing that barely covers her. I remember Duchesne's words. You can't put it out by peeing.

Think. Think. It's there, you can touch it.

"I guess it doesn't matter anymore..."

Yvette sits down and closes her eyes, hugging her knees. If religion still existed, I'd say she's praying. I'm not gonna leave her here. I can't. Think, think. Firefighting class, day one. Methods of extinguishing a fire. But they all require something, and I have nothing, just the radio, and this disgusting maintenance area that...

Wait a minute, could it work?

No, I correct myself. Do I have another option?

"Laurent, are you there?"

"I'm not leaving without you," he jumps in instantly.

I love him. He's a wonderful person. And what's more, he's the best computer technician on our teams. On one occasion he even had to go into the simulation to convince a reluctant civilian to leave. Fortunately, he succeeded, and that experience led us to the possibility of sending the disconnection order. They didn't want the same thing to happen again. I've seen him fiddle with more systems than he should. Almost all security is now "inside," not outside. I explain in detail what I want him to do.

"I don't think I can do that."

"Come on, don't mess with me, I've seen you rig the vending machine to spit out extra chocolates. We're running out of time!"

A few seconds pass that feel like hours.

"I'll try, but I can't promise anything," he replies in an innocent tone.

I hope he hurries, I think, although I don't want to seem desperate in front of an insignificant "sleeper," let alone a teenager.

"Well, it can be done, although I've never tried it before. Waiting for your command."

I crouch down next to Yvette. I tell her what she has to do. I put on her my full-face helmet with airtight mask and air supply.

"I'm scared," she says.

I look her in the eyes, or where I think they'll be behind the one-way vision methacrylate that the screen's made of—it's my face I see—while I put my hand affectionately on her right shoulder.

"That means you're alive," I reply.

And after a few seconds, she nods, and it seems that she has finally understood.

"Now, Laurent!"

Playing the waiting game. That's all we have to do. My partner sends the order to the fire extinguishing system in the maintenance area. With the doors sealed, the pumps slowly flood our location with heptafluoropropane. It's an inert gas that displaces oxygen, "killing" the fire by inhibition, but unfortunately it also causes asphyxiation and death to anyone present. For this reason, if the sensors detect human presence in the area, the safety mechanism prevents it from being released, a mechanism that Laurent has overridden at my request. I took a good gulp of air before, and I lie on the floor as still as possible to make it last. It's like being in the pool. Though there, they only asked for one minute...

The girl grabs and squeezes my hand, as if to encourage me. She got the easy part. The mask has a half-hour supply, but sharing it would be somewhat complicated since breaking and restoring its seal takes a few seconds and I prefer not to risk her panicking. I half-lied to Jean-Claude earlier. Administration doesn't ask us to be heroes, we impose it on ourselves. Better to die with a clear conscience than to live with guilt.

"Ready," Laurent informs me after a while. I turn my neck to see the results. With the atmosphere saturated with gas, the flames have gone out like a candle. Smothered, it leaves only harmless wisps of smoke behind.

I don't want to talk, but as we agreed earlier, I tap the microphone twice to give him the "Now" signal. Not too soon, that's clear. The anguish I feel is terrible.

"Here it goes!"

He stops the extinguishing system and activates the ventilation to the maximum, unlocking the exterior access to the residential area. The violent gust of incoming air hits my face and feels invigorating, but...

“Yes! Take that!”

I hear someone, but I don’t care. I’m far away. Very far away...

“Hey!”

I open my eyes, but something’s not right. It’s like they’ve turned off the lights.

“Hey!”

Far away...

“Are you okay? Please, tell me you’re okay.”

The heavenly choir stops singing and there’s only one angel left. I focus the image. It’s Yvette, who gently slaps me. I’m lying on the floor and we’re still in the maintenance area. What happened? Oh, yes, the air...

“You fainted,” she says. “I gave you mouth-to-mouth,” she adds shyly.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Where’d you learn to do it?”

“In virtual first aid classes. What do you think, that the simulation’s all video games?”

“I see... Did I really stop breathing?”

She blushes and looks away.

“Well, maybe not, but... I’m an opportunist, I know.”

And her eyes are those of a girl caught drawing hearts with chalk. I’m only seven years older than her, but I feel like a whole century separates us.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

From the rooftop, the world seems different. The color of the glass through which you look changes. Sometimes, if what you've lived truly marks you, the change is permanent. As Yvette and Chloé hug each other, I close my eyes and inhale the sweet smell of burnt plastic. Bernard's familiar hoarse voice sounds.

"How's our tot?"

Alive, thanks to you.

The cleaners appear, the teams in charge of eliminating all traces of everyday miseries and restoring immaculate harmony. They have the painful duty, among others, of removing the bodies of those who die alone without being claimed by anyone, or of those who die in the company of others who never find out. And even—and this is even sadder—if the others have found out, but decide that it's not important enough to suspend their simulation. They usually organize virtual funerals to say goodbye to them, while a few paces from their physical body the corpse of their former companion's put in a bag.

Gaston, the head of the team that arrives, greets us cheerfully. His macabre job has never erased the smile from his face. I still remember the last anecdote he told me during a visit, having a coffee in the leisure room of our watchtower.

"Once, the jobs piled up, because those who die alone are assigned lower priority, you know, and when we got to the last one, the cat had already eaten half of the owner's face."

The capsule had automatically opened after the death waiting for the caretakers. The unfortunate one didn't have a robot to take care of the feline's needs as some of the "sleepers" do. Sometimes, they operate them remotely from inside the simulation. But animals haven't yet been able to reeducate their instincts like us. For them, the city is just another type of jungle. There are machines for everything, except to teach us to live.

Forget comes over and high-fives me.

"We were worried about you for a moment, but you handled it well. 10 out of 10."

"And now what?"

"They're gonna move them to another residential building temporarily, but it'll almost certainly be permanent because when their building's repaired they won't want to move again, out of laziness. It always happens."

When you live in a dream, you don't care what the bed is like.

"In reality, this is more common than you think. You just haven't seen it before because you've been lucky."

"Lucky."

"Yes."

"Lucky..."

The civilians approach us to say goodbye before they're taken away. The heart attack victim's already in a hospital receiving care. The Jacques go ahead of the procession. Duchesne, the ass, whistles when Chloé passes by, and the woman smiles and blushes. *Hope they never change*, I think. I've gotten used to them, to their virtues and vices, to their quirks. I don't want others.

"Can you teach me to live? I mean, for real."

It's Yvette who said this, catching me by surprise. She moves next to me, sitting on the parapet. She's so happy she seems like another person.

"It's something you get with experience. No one can teach it."

"Well, I don't know. I... Well, I'll think about it," she promises. "For now, I have a lot of things pending inside, you know, but as soon as I can... Maybe this isn't so disgusting."

She'll change her mind tonight, I tell myself. When she remembers the dead man.

"But you..." she continues reproachfully. "You have to promise me that you'll try it at least once. And please don't be so formal with me! I'm younger than you. Deal?" After lying and telling her yes, she kisses me on the cheek and goes to her air transport.

The last one is Jean-Claude. All cordiality, he hugs me and tells me that he's at my disposal for anything I require. He's learned the true value of existence, he claims: to enjoy it while it lasts.

Having been officially relieved, we gather everything and head towards our ship. We still have half a shift left, but I think that not even in half a life

will I experience something similar again, and I must confess that I'm not attracted to the idea. I feel strange. Inside me, a debate is taking place between declaring myself happy or falling into depression. It's odd, I don't feel any inclination towards one option or another. It's as if I've been left in no man's land, on the border between two worlds and without wanting to tread either. What I've just lived has affected me and left me intact in equal parts. I suppose I'll declare it a draw, one more experience. We take off back to the tower.

I open the side hatch with the acquiescence of my companions, I move to the crane operator's post and, after securing myself to the lifeline, I let my legs hang free and swayed by the wind. And then, I look serene at the beautiful twilight horizon while I think about everything I've ever lost, and everything I'll never have.