

Warmth

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It was a solitary figure.

The lamp — a tall black tree with no branches, no leaves, only a bulb of yellow warmth — watched over the pathway. The young autumn air, dark and crisp, blanketed the grounds as if to lull the stones, the grass, and the fallen leaves into a collective chilled embrace. The slowing sounds, falling asleep, were now and then shocked into wakeness by the occasional activities of the night: the mating call - or was it a warning cry - of planes that flew over the treetops and stone dwellings, visible only by their lighted tails of blinking lights, now red, now white; the hushed purrs of cars and vans as they stalked the asphalt lanes for rectangular shelters to rest for the night; the periodic clacks of agile scooters racing across the open savannas of concrete, fleeing from the cold and the unseen hunters.

The young autumn's breath smelled vaguely of laziness, of things that could be, but wouldn't be. It was the geosmin — a bicyclic alcohol, an organic compound that smells of wet earth and causes inebriation of motivation — that hung in the air. It was the pheromones of a midnight reverie, and it led to an unshakable drowsy desire to curl up to the nearest warm object — the lamp.

It was an autumn night, with autumn sounds, and autumn smells. And one would think the lonesome lamp would be content with its role as sentinel of such a night. But a heat raged within its warmth-giving bulb.

Inside the lamp, there was a bridge. It was the pride of the golden metropolis, the source of its splendor and the site of its main productions. The residents of the city had named it "Heavy Stone" as an act of witticism — it was a sky-bridge, and below there was nothing but the swirl of a hazy abyss — although

the younger generation preferred to call it the Wolfram, as an early act of rebellion.

During the day, it was an unremarkable strip of metal, dull and grey in the morning light, and the city-dwellers enjoyed idling along its length, dangling their feet over the edge, occasionally throwing stones into the abyss below and waiting for a sound that never came.

On such mornings, with the soft breakfast colours of runny yolk and blue cereal boxes washing over the city, the denizens were content. The heavy surveillance that hung over the floating city — even at the skybridge the inhabitants were constantly watched over by the city nobles — was forgiven, and it even gave them some sense of reassurance, just as a boy, before he mans, appreciates the cradle of an overbearing mother. On such mornings, the city felt like the pause between breaths.

But pauses are temporary creatures, they startle and flutter off at the smallest movements in the air. And the air of this floating city was brimming with movement.

By night, the city began its work: light was its main export, and heat was a practical by-product. Together, they allowed the city to unfurl from its shrivelled daytime greyness into a yellow chrysanthemum in full bloom against the backdrop of night sky. The production of light, however, is a labour of love. Imagine being forced into a tunnel just a little too small. The jagged walls of rock close around you and dig into your flesh. You contemplate moving backwards, but then you would doom the rest of the procession following behind. So you press forward, cutting yourself on the unforgiving rock. The blood from your self-inflicted wounds, like ichor, produces a quantity of light, and this blood soaks into the walls of stone to slowly heat up the earth into a blazing furnace. This was the labour of love that the citizens went through nightly.

Or, more accurately, since there was no love in the trustless regime of noblemen and paupers, it was labour that one must learn to love.

It began as an orderly process. But this nightly revelry of masochism eventually became a nightly call to riot. The bridge was filled with charged citizens, marching along in protest. They met resistance of course, the hanging bridge was designed to control a crowd. But the people shoved onward, producing sparks and fires as they rubbed against the confines of the metallic bridge.

Floating in their safe high-up abodes, the nobles of the city watched from far

away. The house of Argon, the current head of the monarchy, was completely inert to the throes of the people surging below. Such was the burden of high-birth: to survey and be unmoved.

Fire raged nightly throughout the city. On the bridge, blazing trashcans, fueled by discontent, were thrown off the side; names and battle cries were carved into the metal walls; and incensed citizens would fling themselves at the abyss in demonstration. No sound ever came to confirm that they had existed.

It was not an uncommon pattern for such cities. When the sun rose on the scene, the charged residents would have burned themselves out and resumed their peaceful existences. But the bridge would be lesser than it was before. And the light produced that night would be slightly dimmer, slightly more tinted with the blood of its people, until eventually the metropolis that once glistened like a hot-blooded midday sun, would fade like a bruised sunset. One day, the tension in the city would snap the bridge. And while the two separate pieces were still close enough, there might be a spark of reconciliation, and citizens on one side of the bridge would reach out to touch citizens on the other. But these moments can only be brief. The electric blue reconciliation would smoulder out, and the city would blacken. Then, out of the darkness, as the denizens lie dazed on the bridge, like they do on so many mornings, the night stars would peek out. Looking upon the canvas of space, some might even feel that it was all worth it.

But this is a tale of the future for the city within the lamp. For now, the lamp would continue its pattern of pregnant calmness by day, and foreboding restlessness by night.

It was a solitary figure, watching over the autumn night of autumn sounds and autumn smells. And inside, a fire raged, and would rage and rage until the figure would light the night sky no more. Not for me. Not for you. And not for itself.