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Between the Cities

Had their belongings not been littered with foil-wrapped clumps of napalm, August would have easily believed their story. As the three men avoiding eye contact had put it, they were merely university students from Osteau interested in touring Adrington's prestigious galleries, ongoing conflict be damned. At one point, the recommendation of a small art house on Belheath Street had rested on the tip of her tongue. While not nearly as revered as the galleries on Wolkemotte or Mondhain, it housed the early works of obscure artists. The sorts of artists with an infamy that paralleled the tastes of supposed art students.

Their inability to name a single Adrington artist, despite their proclaimed passion, had sowed concern. One attempted, to what he seemed to consider the best of his ability, to make one up on the spot. It was a brilliant plan in theory. Adrington seemed to be the perfect dwelling for nomadic artists, and rightfully so. It was a truly beautiful city. Not that Osteau was without allure. Adrington was simply occupied by a more inspiring charm.

What the now-obviously Osteau soldier hadn't considered was the efficiency of the Dwell-bridge's fact checkers. Many tend to forget their abilities extend beyond issuing work permits and cross-checking identities. They also had the ability to fact-check even the most mundane detail. In a matter of moments, they had confirmed that Adrington wasn't the home to an artist—let alone a living person—by the name of Robinson Yvsevet.

“He’s an immigrant,” they protested. “An illegal one, yeah? It’s not surprising he isn’t in your system.”

“Is that so?” August humoured them. “What does he paint?”

“It’s difficult to explain.”

“I’m not unfamiliar with the arts. Give it a go.”

They conversed amongst themselves with hurried glances and nary a word. August struggled to attribute their shaking to the cold snap or their fear. She hadn’t allotted them much time to answer either way. They were in handcuffs before they could.

“Is this a joke? Are you seriously not going to let us in?” one said with near-genuine disbelief. “We’re not lying to you. We really did come to sightsee.”

The misplaced juggling of priorities amused August. One would imagine excusing the explosives to be of greater importance. Perhaps they were telling the truth. Maybe the napalm was planted there. Maybe they did leave their luggage unattended at the train station.

“Hold them for 48 hours,” she ordered. The notion of two days captivity sharply paled their skin. “See if someone can claim these kids. Sooner rather than later, please.”

As was the case with any soldier attempting to cross the Dwell-bridge, they had been carrying various propaganda fliers and brochures. Reminders of the good fight and what awaited them upon their triumphant return. Flagrant disinformation, really. August had perused one tucked into one of the suitcases. It bore a sketch of a bomb, dressed up in postage stamps, labelled with *Deliver to: Adrington*. Certainly not clever, but definitely xenophobic enough to attract the hot-blooded or feeble-minded.

Her hands searched through her pockets, first for the time, second for her cigarettes. They had been wedged behind a flask. Some had broken at the filter—the annoying reality of military clothing and cheap cigarettes. She hadn’t been much of a drinker. Her father’s cadenza with liquor deterred her from that lifestyle. Her vice, like her mother and grandmother, had been tobacco. The flask was merely an insurance policy. A swig of aged Osteau rye fetched a couple of cigarettes. More if it was the good stuff, as it almost always was.

Before the lighter could catch flame, a mousy man—face behind smallish, circular glasses—had appeared from the Adrington side

shouting her name. She waited patiently for him to find his breath. In the time it took him to, she could have finished a smoke, she thought.

"Mableaux would like a moment," he finally told her. He pointed behind him with his thumb.

"What? Now?" she said with a pang of disappointment. "I'm alone right at the moment. Guards just took some kids to detainment."

"It's fine—I'll sort it," he told her as he rushed her along. "Just get going. It seemed fairly urgent."

Mableaux's office being a meagre two blocks from the outpost didn't stop his receptionist complaining about how long August had taken. She had apologised, stating the ice made her walk cautiously. The receptionist snapped back that she had seen her finish her cigarette before coming in. She made sure to point out how badly of smoke she smelled. August reckoned that was a matter of opinion.

Across the office, sunken into his seat, was the bald, ever-sweating Mableaux. His gut afforded him minimal room between himself and the desk and as such he found himself slouched over often to the detriment of his back. Though the heat in his office was on its highest setting, he motioned for August to keep her jacket on.

"I'm sorry—this shouldn't take long." He looked past her to the receptionist. "Thank you, dear. Could you get the door?"

As she took him up on his offer of a seat, August noticed her personnel files spread across his desk, the focus of which was her record of employment. It only covered half a page. She had been with them since she came of age as was typical of those living on the Dwell-bridge. Where others rose through different roles quick and often, she found her place in the outpost. It had been a gracious step up from the mail room.

"I have to say, your record since your draft is remarkable," he noted, eyes glued to his desk. "I'm especially impressed with how well you handle soldiers trying to cross the Dwell-bridge. Always swift and effective. No ounce of doubt crippling your decision making."

Despite her discomfort in receiving compliments, she thanked him anyway. It was the polite thing to do. Compliments were hard to come by, especially those which didn't have a condition tacked onto the end of them. Mableaux's tone suggested this wasn't one of those.

“Have you ever heard of the Publications Department?”

“I haven’t, sir,” she told him. He seemed almost too delighted by her answer.

“Well, it’s rather a pleasant job in some respects. For starters, you won’t be subjected to these damnable winters. Just the joys of internal heating—and cooling in the summers. Better yet, the risk of a soldier from either direction shooting you is reduced significantly. That’s always a bonus.”

“It almost sounds too good to be true,” August joked. His ominous excitement had converted to outright giddiness.

“Look, I’ll cut to the chase. It’s a desk job. It can be flat-out boring. Seconds are minutes down there. Hours are days. You get the idea. But it’s an important job and someone with your experience would flourish down there. You’ve dealt with folks from Osteau and from Adrington. You’ve probably heard every excuse in the book in your, uh...” He took a moment to look over her employment record, returning to the conversation astonished. “Wow—nine years on outpost. That is quite the dedication. You must have a somewhat deeper understanding of these people, then.”

“In a way, I suppose,” she said. “I don’t let it affect my judgement, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“Oh, goodness—no, of course not. I hope that’s now how I’m coming across.”

In a single movement, he had plucked himself from his chair, swept the papers into a single pile and sat on the edge of his desk facing August. His legs were crossed as were his arms. Some found this an informal, not-quite-intimidating pose. August just found it looked uncomfortable.

“Look, the department’s output has become rather stagnant. Budget cuts, layoffs—I’ll spare you the bureaucratic odyssey. What we really need is someone with a fundamental understanding of both peoples. Someone who has talked with them; who could differentiate the varying stresses of an Osteau vowel or the idiolect of an Adrington consonant.”

“Aside from understanding the cities, what does the job entail?” she asked.

“It’s tough to say. One day you could be writing copy for journals.

The next it could be taglines for print materials—brochures, posters. It'll become clearer once you get into it. They'll explain it better than I could."

He allowed August to think about it as he shuffled back to his seat, expressing that he hoped it wouldn't take too long to decide. She had often considered transferring from the outpost. None of the other departments ever seemed to pique her interest. A desk job might completely bore her. On the other hand, they did tend to pay handsomely. Perhaps she could move further up the Dwell-bridge. Further away from the borders.

"I'd definitely like to do this then. However, as a hypothetical: let's say I find myself not particularly enjoying the Publications Department. Am I out of a job at that point, or would I be able to return to the outpost?"

"I would hope you stick through it until you feel you absolutely can't carry on. That said, if you really feel that strongly against it—of course you could. Just please speak to me if it gets to that stage. We can always discuss your concerns."

Mableaux was explaining she would have to hand in her weapons and outpost credentials as the receptionist walked in. She was fond of her weapons but didn't want to risk it. She didn't like the idea of having to leave the Dwell-bridge. Osteau was cluttered. Adrington was costly. This was her home. Not perfect, but home nonetheless.

August followed the receptionist through a series of hallways and staircases—many of which she was unaware even existed. She never knew the Dwell-bridge went down so far. Maybe it hadn't. She had stopped paying attention a few twists and turns ago.

Deep in the scarcely lit hallway, through the third-to-last door on the right, was a perfectly typical door leading to a room that was anything but. The decor, the choices in wallpaper, even the carpeting possessed a style from which no origin could be deduced. At one point, the fractalesque floral carpeting was reminiscent of a century-old royal style from Osteau. The wood panel covering the lower third of the tangerine walls was almost unmistakably Adrington.

When the door shut, and the receptionist had not come through, all August could do was wait awkwardly. The evenly spaced, symmetrical rows of busybodies hadn't turned their heads from their

workstations. Some had desks covered in various flecks of ink and their tools. Others had a more modest setup of a single typewriter, a cup of pens and a neatly stacked pile of books—spines faced out.

She cleared her throat to obtain a speck of attention, but none could be spared. It was unclear whether they had been too busy to notice she was there or just too busy to acknowledge her.

The fragments of conversation travelled along the thin air. Most were of ink and typefaces. One suggested the typewriter dings could be mitigated by dropping to a new line sooner. A typist argued the ink fumes were making it difficult to breathe. Another suggested that if air quality was such a concern, they should put out their cigarette as it was mostly finished anyway.

Finally, a woman rushed out from the back office. Her hands accommodated the abrupt turns between the rows of desks, not spilling so much as a drop of whatever was in her cup. She apologised profusely as she approached August.

“You must be the woman Mableaux was on about.” She juggled her cup and papers around until a free hand grasped August’s. “Look, just grab a desk—whatever’s free. Try and get a typewriter. Good first day work, that. Unless—are you a creative? Visually speaking, specifically?”

“I dabble in watercolours but that’s the extent of it,” she replied. The woman pondered this, scowled, bit her lip in contemplation and waved it off in one fluid movement.

“Never mind that. It’s all in the typefaces and copy anyway. The best posters don’t have pictures. If you manage to get saddled with an art station, just have fun with it. We can always revise.”

She glanced at the unoccupied desks as the woman returned to the back. As luck would have it, each was an art station. Unkempt resting grounds of ink pads, pen knives, stencils, and various types of paint August knew to be expensive in hobby shops. Where the typists had books, the artists had stacks of blank paper that varied in size. Beneath the desk was a small set of drawers on wheels. Each contained an assortment of letter-stamps, organised both alphabetically and by typeface.

The pouch hanging off the side of her desk contained papers written on identical stationery. It was copy for the print materials as

the title suggested. Before she perused them, she took some time to tidy the station. The splatter of inks and paints had long since dried and seeped into the wood. There was nowhere to put the tools, but as she looked around the room, she noticed a set of shelves near the back where the tools resided.

When she finally pored over the copy, each word tightened a knot in her stomach. Many of the words, mostly compiled into one-liners, she found herself reading over and over. It seemed she hadn't misread them after all.

The document was divided into two columns: one designated to Osteau, and the other to Adrington. Much of the writing had been built on stereotypes she had heard in passing. Others were outlandish claims: how Adrington women were addled with sexual disease or how Osteau still used concentration camps. Many were lazily abject calls to violence. *God would smile at a burning Adrington. Who would want to displease God? Or Every child in Osteau would rather a bullet to the head than a doll in hand.*

Strangely enough, no one shared in her outrage. The typists churned out line after line. The artists pieced together collages. There were small groups huddled around various desks discussing the effectiveness of the writing and how well it would translate to art. They even debated an anti-Semitic angle without a scrap of hesitation.

August clenched the papers between her hands and stormed towards the back office. Through the kitchenette and past the lavatories were another shorter set of desks. The woman who greeted her was sat among an array of scattered mugs and dishes.

"Excuse me, Miss. Do you have a minute?" August interrupted. The woman jolted up. She took a gasp for air as she resurfaced.

"Did you not find a desk?" She surveyed the room. "No matter. Take one back here for the time being. We'll sort something out later."

"No, actually, it's this, what is it called—copy?" August handed the woman the sheet. She lowered her glasses to examine it.

"Brilliant—these work," the woman said, handing the sheet back. August wasn't exactly sure how to react. "You only have to run them by me if they're multiple lines. The art team can take those from here."

"I'm not sure I understand." August collected herself and sat next to the woman. She laid out the sheet, flattening out where frustration manifested as wrinkles and pointed to the top line. "What exactly are these for? These are really quite awful."

The woman removed her glasses and tossed them across the desk. She let out a heavy sigh as she reached into her bag. Two cigarettes had slipped between her fingers. She offered one to August, who declined.

"There's a lot of nuance in the work we do that isn't clear within the mere 20 minutes you've been here," she explained. "It takes time to comprehend it."

"I don't want to comprehend it. We shouldn't be writing these sorts of things. It's absolutely unnecessary."

"Well, that's simply untrue," she scoffed and shook her head. "I can understand how some of the writing can be a bit of a shock, but I'm sure you've seen this kind of thing before. We create them. We distribute them to both sides. Did Mableaux not explain that?"

August took a moment to compose herself. She felt the fire in her stomach rush through her throat but was smart enough to let it peter out on her tongue.

"I'm not sure I follow," she admitted. "Or rather I might be missing something completely. Are you saying we produce propaganda and distribute it as if one side has created it about the other?"

"That's correct. They're remarkably effective pieces too. You should have seen the spike in new recruits Osteau had when we sent out one comparing them to rats."

"What possible reason could there be to do such a thing?" August shouted. "All you're doing is winding them up. For God's sake, no wonder this bloody war has gone on for as long as it has."

"That's precisely how it's designed to work."

"Excuse me?"

"Look: how many Dwell-bridges out there are ghost towns now? The few left, this one included, are smack in the middle of conflict."

"Conflict you manufactured, by your own admission."

"All a necessity."

"You'll forgive me if I don't see war as a necessity."

"Then perhaps you can look at it like so: the Dwell-bridge has

maintained a substantial amount of peace between Osteau and Adrington, the 18th of October notwithstanding. Sure, of course we created the conflict, but given their proximity, a war was bound to happen. This way, we can mould it to our own specification. It's a sort of peace in its own regard."

"I can't think of a single person who would consider that peace," August snapped.

"Peace can't exist without conflict; much in the same way conflict can't exist without the notion of peace. We draw on our own peace from their conflict. Without it, this Dwell-bridge becomes another free-pass ghost town. Then what if another war broke out?"

August couldn't stomach another justification. She stood up and crossed the room to leave.

"The Dwell-bridge exists for itself as well. It has every right to. You have to think outside of just Osteau or Adrington."

"I'm leaving now—sorry. I'm not sure I'm suited to this job."

"That was clear the moment you stepped foot in this department."

A series of winding halls and staircases led August back to the surface. It was still unclear whether she had come from above or below. When she got her bearings, she made a beeline for Mableaux's office. Luckily, it was only a block and a bit away.

As she entered, she walked past the receptionist and into his office. He was in the company of a stunning woman. A prostitute from Adrington. That was the story the makeup told. The dots along their temples were especially a dead giveaway. Though mildly amusing, this wasn't any of her concern.

"Back so soon?" Mableaux said with feigned concern. "No matter. I guess it's not for everyone."

"I wouldn't have accepted had you told me what went on over there," she clarified. He sent the prostitute out of the room, assuring her he'd only be a minute. With a few reluctant stamps on her papers, much of which were still sprawled out on the desk, the last hour ceased to exist. She was to return to the outpost. The discontented expression as he passed the room to collect his jacket bothered August.

"Just remember." He stepped back and placed a hand on August's arm to guide her through the door. "Your job isn't to agree or disagree with anything that you perceive to be happening. Be sure

to keep that in the front of your mind.”

Despite the acrid gossip wading through the two outposts, August was relieved to be back. The last of the sunset flickered out near-synchronously with her cigarette. The night shifts were calm in their own right, winter ones especially so. She felt at ease. This was what she was suited to.

Silhouettes from Adrington’s side climbed beneath the amber street lamps. August could make out their camping backpacks as they crept closer. She felt almost insulted by their lack of effort.

She did as she always had: asked for their papers, confirmed their identity, asked where they were off to. Though one difference stood out. Unlike other times, she found her mind wandering. First to nowhere, then back to the Publications Department. The smell of ink and typewriters overpowered the powder snow dancing about the breeze. The list after list of racial slurs and falsehoods. Then Mableaux, his fat face and how badly she wanted to smack it. It was all she could do to pull herself from her thoughts, and as she did, she surprised herself even further.

She let them through. No bag inspection. No second opinion. She just stepped aside and wished them well on their outing. The soldiers were taken aback, not surprisingly. They may have been posing as winter campers, but they weren’t quite that dull. The distant gaps where the streetlamps couldn’t reach masked them as they rushed towards the border.

There was an explosion not even an hour later deep in the heart of Osteau. The plume rose well into the heavens, much in the same way as August’s spirits did. The first steps towards real peace needed to be a rather large leap, after all.