

## The Final Beginning

I stare endlessly into the spacious and desolate hall, my eyes fixated on the dais where I would soon be standing awkwardly. I don't know how long it's been since my subconscious dragged me away but suddenly, it doesn't feel so empty anymore. The crowd floods in, the chattering souls taking their respective seats. My intrusive thoughts take a suffocating hold on me and I consider bolting for the exit but something stops me. I feel a hand on my shoulder and look back to discover that it's President Kai, Head of the Astronomical Society. "You ready, Amara?" he says while smiling, the statement turning out to be more of a signal than a question. His voice was raspy as always and he never failed to sound like a back-seat driver. I simply nod.

It's time; I approach the stage slowly but surely. The whispers turn into a tumultuous applause and I can't help but feel a sliver of pride. I felt 'over the moon' by all means— literally and figuratively. After all, I had just completed the first-ever lunar mission in the history of mankind. The adrenaline rushed through my body. Halfway into my talk, however, my sense of honor was extinguished with the arrival of my assistant who had the word panic written all over his face. He leans into my ear and whispers....

Numb. Here I was, basking in the glory of my achievements, utterly blind that I had single-handedly planned the Earth's funeral. My journey to the rough and rocky lunar surface was meant to be another 'giant leap for mankind'; unbeknownst to me - it was much more. Those groundbreaking samples I unearthed were meant to save humanity, not end it. That unassuming vacuum-sealed tub wasn't home to just decrepit moon rock; but to a malicious virus hell-bent on ending our world. How oblivious could I be? Harboring those greedy vigilantes on my vessel... I unwittingly delivered the key to our demise right on our planet's doorstep. My sweaty fingertips fidgeted with the beads of my bracelet. I looked for President Kai in the hope of some support but he was nowhere to be seen. Immense dread seeped into my veins; my vision clouded and I could envisage it: bleak streets corrupted by unruly vines, megacities drowned out by the deafening sound of empty silence.

My pause spoke a thousand words— the rapturous applause had morphed into concerned whispers. I found myself being ushered into a laboratory by hulking bodyguards. A collective gasp exuded from the shocked audience - they watched in horror as I, the epitome of desperation, was dragged away. It was at that moment that I was forced to face reality and the worst part is, I discerned it with my own two eyes. The snapshot of the microscope lives rent-free in my mind, haunting me at every chance it gets. My eyes deviated elsewhere, catching a glimpse of a silhouette leaving the building in what seemed like a rush. The spectrum of my thoughts left me at last and I compelled myself to concentrate on the multiplying amoeba— I registered that there was no stopping it. Thoughts of my family, friends, and pure mortals cloud my brain, and a jarring scream shatters me, wrenching my gut and leaving me a mere husk.

Once I fathomed the gravity of the situation, it was time to contain this soon-to-be cataclysm. I comforted myself that at least it couldn't get any worse. Except, it did. It got much worse. The news spread like wildfire and I found myself surrounded by many news reporters. It was like a foreign feeling to me. My mind spiraled, setting off a chain of tragic events.

Mortified, I escaped the asphyxiating confines of the auditorium, evading the grasp of the hungry reporters. I could still catch tiny fragments of the music in the traumatizing hall which now sounded like a distorted dirge in my ears. A gentle zephyr blew through my auburn hair and I sensed the smell of petrichor. My gaze shifted to the most breathtaking of skylines in front of me. The looming skyscrapers gave the metropolis shape and, in time, carved themselves into my psyche like an optical lullaby. How long had I been here? These structures, these silver trees of geometry, were soon adorned with magical lights, igniting a spark in me.

But that incessant throb in my heart returned, guilt wrapping itself around me as I watched a young boy play so innocently with a toy rocket. Perhaps, it was his fantasy— as it was once mine— to travel among galaxies or forage for the supernatural. It tugged at my heartstrings, knowing that I had been the splinter in someone's dream. Another masculine figure entered my line of sight, someone familiar. He held out an astronaut figurine for the boy and they exchanged laughs. My brain steadied on their piercing hazel eyes, blotched freckles, and tousled, wispy hair. President Kai. It's strange because I've never seen him this content before; usually, he couldn't

care less if the world was ending. “If the world was ending,” I whispered to myself, overenunciating each word. If the world was ending.

The gears in my mind twisted. Something was off – apart from the fact that humanity was going to witness an apocalypse. A reel of today’s events played and I had an epiphany. Why was he so insistent about the mission? And he wasn’t smiling, President Kai never smiled. It was more of a smirk. The dots finally connected. He knew all along. He had always earned the fame of being a misanthrope but no one could’ve foreseen this monster in his soul.

I stole one more glance at his amber eyes– the paternal instinct I observed just moments earlier had contorted; I saw malice now– unadulterated evil that sparked desperation in me that I didn’t know existed. This was supposed to be the beginning of something great for me, not the final beginning.