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Four Possibilities For Future Living or The Expulsion of Chemie Spulung: A Contingency Plan for Social Rejects

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“What’s it gonna be kid?” The uniformed woman spoke with her hands at the thin dejected child that stood shivering in front of her. Her sign language was translated instantly into a squawking robotic voice, its tonal indifference bounced off of Chemie’s ear drums and landed on the dirty snow-blown ground at his feet. His clothes, paper thin, plastered with the decals of his former underground home, flapped in the cold that crept around him in the rapidly setting sun. Behind the woman sat a long convoy of fortified vehicles stretching far off into the distance; semi-trailers, work trucks, camper vans, RVs, off-road vehicles, motorcycles, all sat rumbling, waiting for a confused boy to make up his mind.

Chemie Spulung looked back at the hatch in the ground he had been unceremoniously ejected from. There was no going back to the sub-terr community that had been his home for the past thirteen years. It hadn’t been a great life in comparison to the people he had to serve under, but at least he had his own cubicle. He used to have a shit job fixing bots for the central casino and a small group of homies; homies bound by their untouchable status and their love of Gloop. Ah glorious purple grape flavored Gloop, he thought. Chemie was already missing its processed taste.

Gloop, spurned by everyone but the lowest of the low class, was a highly addictive, cheap toxic food paste that destroyed tooth enamel, but still guaranteed the minimum of daily nutrients. And depending on the flavor, tinted the skin color of the consumer into one of four, day-glo

colors. In Chemie's case, he had been slurping down Grape flavored Gloop for the past four years, and because of this, his skin had taken on decidedly violet hue that he wore with the pride of someone who pretends to wallow in their disaffected status.

Chemie like so many other young people who worked the shit jobs of the underground city, was a test tube baby. His parents had traded egg and sperm for a pass to better housing and in the process, committed their future progeny to a life of servitude. Chemie had been raised to be part of the permanent underclass that serviced the needs of the richer residents of E&M. It was not a perfect system by any means and Chemie, through an attitude expected of a child raised by uncaring handlers and machine learning, had come up delinquent in the system one too many times.

"Kid, you got five seconds to take your pick cause this train is leaving with or without you. You understand?" The abrasive robotic speech and rude signing woke Chemie from his pitiful reminiscences. The kid had been waiting in the open air for the past two hours searching up and down the thin strip of highway for the next band of travelers to make a pick up. He had spent most of that time, shivering in the cold, jonesing for Gloop, and contemplating how to answer that very question. Where the fuck should he go? There were only four choices to be had in this world of messed up weather: first pick, go back underground and hide ; second pick, get lucky and find a spot in the dome covered cities of L.A.; or maybe he could be adopted by the travelers (good luck with that); or dog forbid, try to make his way in the Archaean open-air cities of the former San Francisco Bay Area, where the only thing between you and the climate was something they called the energy forest. Energy forest, what did that even mean? Chemie had heard it was just code for some rickety scaffolding that sat over the city. You still had to live out in the open, he thought. That's what he had heard anyway.

Chemie fumbled his first choice by getting kicked out of his sub-terr community. There were other undergrounds to choose from, but by now the word would be out and he would be on the no-comply list. All the corporations that ruled the sub-terrs, the food conglomerates, the

builders, and the energy companies that had partnered up to provide underground living, would never allow him to immigrate to a different one. His former home, Exxon-Macdonald Assets, E&M, had banned him from its logs by now, and in doing so, had sealed his fate.

Nope, he would have to choose a new path and he would have to make that choice in the next few seconds, or else he might end up freezing to death and/or probably get eaten by some scavenger creature before the sun rose over this bleak desert landscape again. He looked the woman up and down who glared back at him. Even wearing a full-face helmet, Chemie thought she didn't look half bad. He tried to straighten up his freezing hunched over posture. It didn't help much, he still looked like a shivering twig of a boy, his flimsy clothes flapping in the wind revealing his scrawny undernourished body. The woman's eyes were serious and blue, her hair was black, she wore a heavy dark green winter jacket open at the throat, and a grey-green one-piece work uniform underneath. Like so many of the travelers Chemie had heard about, the woman appeared to be deaf, or maybe she was just using sign-language to fuck with Chemie. He wasn't sure which at this point. Chemie shouted over the wind, "Can I join up with you guys? I know how to wrench on bots. And um, well... I'm good at figuring stuff out." The woman smirked and turned around and signed something at a tall dark goateed figure, clothed in black leather, who sat astride a giant idling motorcycle. Probably her supervisor or something, Chemie thought. He saw the guy look over at him through his thick goggles and shake his head. Chemie couldn't understand sign language, but a dismissive gesture was a hard pass for sure. The woman turned back around and pressed a button on her coat lapel. As she signed her response, the squawking robot voice said, "No dice kid, we're full up. We're headed north this trip. There's some roads that need repairing further up the Five. We can drop you off in Archaea later tonight or you can try and sit tight, and one of our sister groups will be swinging by on their way south in a couple of days."

System failure! If he couldn't roll with these bio-diesel driving deafassholes, then he would've had his mind set on the climate controlled dome goodness of SoCal. None of this open air shit.

He'd heard from his homies that in L.A. everyone just sat around all day just watching vids or creating entertainment content for shipping all over the world. Chemie had heard that in L.A., Gloop was legal and subsidized. Not like fucking Archaea where everyone was forced to go to school and pick a job and do civic service and mentor people and give a shit. How could his life get any worse? "Why won't you take me, cuz I ain't deaf?" The woman stood over him and gestured for Chemie to pick up his duffel bag and tool box. Then she pointed at the back of an open semi-trailer at the front of the line.

"Get in shit-head before we leave you here to feed the desert dogs."

The inside of the semi-trailer was dimly lit by two sets of soft white lightstrips that ran along the tops of the sidewalls. The back of the trailer was divided off from the front, by a metal partition with a security door in the middle. The woman indicated for Chemie to have a seat. She took his duffel bag and tool box and placed them into one of a row of lockers that ran the length of one side of the back area. On the opposite side a line of people sat. Some slept with their arms folded, heads slumped on their chests- others whispered quietly to each other. Chemie's sat in the last open spot near the back door of the trailer. Next to a man who nervously fidgeted with a comm device.

"It's funny huh, how these things only work in the directory your from? I mean what's the use anyways? If it weren't for my pictures I might as well just throw it away." Chemie looked at the device.

"Nah, keep it doot. There's precious metals in there. You could get a couple credits just for the raw materials."

"Yeah, that's true too, I guess. Thanks kid, I'm just nervous. You know you look a little nervous too if you don't mind me sayin'?" Chemie shrugged. The man continued, I'm heading to B-town in Archaea to live with my Aunt Zeta. But I don't know when they'll officially let me into

the city proper, you follow?” Chemie studied the guy next to him. He seemed alright. Light brown skin(boring), straight dirty blond hair. No full face gang tattoos, it looked like the doot had most of his teeth. Chemie decided the stranger danger was minimal was this one.

“Why’s that, I mean why won’t they let you in?” The guy fidgeted some more with his device not looking up.

“Because, he whispered, I just got over the stress bug, but I don’t have any paperwork. They strict as hell in Archaeon territories. No vaccinations, no entries. I got mine on the sly, for cheap, you translate?”

“Yeah, I get you. Chemie pulls down his lower lip showing the guy a series of numbers tattooed in black ink. Underground, where I’m from, that data is mandatory. I got mine when I was just a pre-pube.”

“Your lucky kid, I lived outside the domes in So-Cal my whole life, when you last in line you don’t get shit.” The man looked at Chemie and smiled weakly. “So what are you gonna do? I mean when you get to B-Town. Will they let you in?” At that moment the trailer lurched into motion. Everyone grabbed their seats to keep from bumping into one another. The light strips dimmed further as the truck began to pick up speed. “My Aunt Zeta says I might have to quarantine for awhile in a tent city on the outskirts. Maybe a month or two. She says long enough to run my blood deets, get me some legit paperwork, find me a job. She said they cool, you get more respect for sure then down south.”

Chemie snorted,” That’s not what I heard. My homies told me that Archaea’s like a work camp, they tell you where to live, what to eat, what jobs your gonna do, and they make you go to school. And you outdoors all the time in the storms, rain, wind, sunspots, all that shitty atmos.”

“Oh man, I heard about you underground slobs!” That’s all bad code doot. Archaea is the shit, you got your wires all twisted little man. Let me school you...”

Chemie was surprised to hear someone so emphatic about Archaea. He had to admit, that like most things he heard in the sub-terr, it was all heresay. Everything had to go through editors

and media filters before you heard it yourself. You just assumed that what you knew was the real deal. Chemie relaxed in his seat. It had been a hard few days getting run out of the system. It felt nice to just sit and shoot the shit with someone halfway friendly.

“Okay homie, feed me the real data. Is it true they don’t have Gloop? I mean that’s some shit right?” The man laughed out loud. He recovered himself and went back to speaking in a hushed tone.

“You know it’s funny how the these deaf travelers don’t like it when we make some noise right? It’s ironic, huh?” Chemie didn’t know what the word meant and the guy could see it on his face. “Whatever, anyways, here’s the real on B-Town, it’s like every other Archaean place. They all got the same rules cuz they all run the same social program. That’s what Archaea is, it’s a platform that organizes people and allocates shit.”

“What do you mean, allocates?”

“I mean Archaeons, people that join the platform, they have inalienable rights: housing, education, food, clothes, they even set you up with jobs.”

“Yeah, but you don’t get to pick’em right. I’m new I’ll probably get a shit job.”

“No little man, that’s the beauty of the platform, instead of bein’ a zero, you a one! Everyone is the same to the platform. It’s all statistics and resources and shit. They going to run diagnostics on you. They’re gonna see what you good at, ask you what you like. You’re gonna get choices doot. Everyone gets their favorite five. My auntie told me, you may not get your first choice, but you get to choose. They don’t tell us this shit where we from, you read me?”

It was a lot to process, Chemie sat next to the man for a few moments in silence.

“It’s cool little man you’ll see. Just give it a try. I know you heard some shit about the domes right.” Chemie brightened up at the mention of the dome cities.

“It’s lies man, all lies. Believe me, I’m from there. You only visit the domes. Go in for work, then right back out. Most people don’t have the credits for that life. We’re livin’ barely scraping

by. The broke muthafuckers, we're the ones out in the weather." Chemie shook his head in disbelief.

"Naw doot, it can't be. I've seen pictures."

"Yeah, yeah, I know about them pictures. That's for the vacation set homie. People like you and me, we wait on them hand and foot. There's no magic kingdom for us." Chemie felt dejection creep back over him. It felt like someone had stuck his dreams with a sharp needle and it up and blew away.

"Listen little man, keep your lil ass purple chin up. Look at this, I got a picture saved from my Auntie." Chemie stared at the image on the man's comm device.

"What is that? Where is that?"

"It's amazing looking right? That's the sky over B-town all lit up at night during a thunder and lightening storm. That's the energy forest lil' man. It generates all the juice for the whole city a hundred times over. Each tower branches out over a whole block of the city and they're all connected at the top. That's the job I want. It's like the biggest union in Archaea. You work on the forest, doin' repairs, upkeep, keep it all hummin', you read me? The part of Chemie that loved to solve puzzles, to use his hands to build things, to repair broken down bots, that mind of his that was ripe for new engineering knowledge, suddenly lit up at the dazzling scope of what he saw in those few precious images.

"How's it work man? Can I look at them closer doot?"

"Sure go ahead." The man gave Chemie his device. Chemie zoomed in on the picture of the energy forest lit up collecting the lightning from the storm. He poured over the small details of each tower and the way their branches articulated out of the main hubs. He studied the way the crown connected to the scaffolding above it.

"Those leaf groupings coming out of the branches, those are solar collectors?"

"That's right kid, you smarter than you look. They're solar collectors and they can also be a million little windmills, soaking up the force of the wind. And get this, when it's too hot and sunny

or there's an ozone storm forecasted, the towers become giant umbrellas for the whole city. The energy forest is why people can still live outdoors and not be miserable, you copy? Man, I tell you, it's been my dream for a minute to get up here.”

Chemie kept staring at the picture, his mind swirled with new information, new thoughts, new ideas. “What took you so long to come up then?” He asked.

“Well, I was stuck in an indentured contract. You know what that is?” Chemie nodded. He knew all too well, he was born into that life. “I only made enough for room and board. I owed and owed.” The man’s voice dropped lower. “You see kid, I’m on the run. I just left, couldn’t take it anymore. I don’t care if I have to spend a year in a quarantine tent, I want to be an Archaeon. Not trapped in a dust storm watching people live it up in a bubble.” Chemie nodded his head and handed the device back to his neighbor.

“So they help you find a place to stay and all that.” Chemie asked. The man picked at Chemie’s shirt.

“Little man, we got human rights in the platform. Like I say, it’s your data. You got choices, you may not get your number one every time, but I’m guessing it will be a helluva lot better than what you been going through before. Yeah, there’s responsibilities, you got to contribute, help out when you’re needed, but that’s real freedom you copy? Everyone pulls together, then we get to be free to live the life we make.”

Chemie suddenly felt exhausted. It was like all the stress of living at the bottom of the food chain had suddenly been lifted from him, but he wasn’t sure how to breathe in this new atmosphere. What if he fucked this up too? Where would he go then? He was so used to feeling like a nothing, what if he couldn’t adjust to people having real expectations of him, real responsibilities, or having a real say in how his life turned out?

The man sitting next to him took back his comm device. “It’s okay little doot, we’re going to have help. We’re not the first refugees and we won’t be the last. The hardest thing for you will

be coming off that Gloop. But don't worry, they got something for that to. You and your yellow, green and blue homies just need some extra attention. You'll see little man, you'll see."

Chemie folded his arms and let his chin droop down on his chest. Maybe it would be okay. Maybe instead of dreaming of watching the vids under the domes of SoCal, tonight he would dream of being up in the tops of one of those energy towers high up in a storm, strapped in, spanner in hand with a real job to do, electricity lighting up the sky all around him. Chemie let the low hum of the semi-trailer drift him into a well-needed rest. His last thoughts before sleep overtook him were of himself, all grown up, not purple anymore, laying in a hammock three hundred meters in the air holding a proper sandwich. Chemie fell asleep humming along with the energy that sparkled all around him.