

The Precocious Lamb

Energy, Justice, and Action Humanities Lab

SOS498

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October 7, 2023

The sun was already high in the sky when she awoke, its blistering heat beating down on the urban tangle of gray and green that she called home. She turned over in bed to face the nightstand, dreading the thought of facing the world today, sweat beading on her hairline and furrowed brow, and a dull ache filling her body. The alarm clock beside her projected a hologram of the calendar, a fuzzy blue light that read: *May 23, 2078*. While the high ambient temperature and scheduled water blockade were certainly causes for concern, today was particularly distressing due to a scheduled visit to the oncologist. It had been last week, on a particularly innocuous day if not for it being on her 27th birthday, that she had doubled over by her desk in the wet lab vomiting blood onto the clean linoleum. A ghastly sight, indeed, but one that did not bother the young research head all too much; after all, she had a planet to save. Whatever stress that had presumably caused such an incident was surely worth enduring for a better future. Nevertheless, at the behest of her fellows and friends, she had visited the Colony hospital and was greeted with innumerable tests, check-ups, ins, and questions. Finally, she had met with her primary care physician, Dr. Diane Cecht, a close family friend, closer to an aunt than anything else. Yet, when she had entered that room, the air was thick with trepidation, assuredly heavier than the rest of the hospital. Dr. Cecht had sat her down, gloom written upon her wrinkled face,

“Úna... dear,” Diane paused mid-sentence, seemingly bracing herself for her own words, as if she was to receive them “I’m not sure how else to put this, but we found scarring and foreign tissue in your lungs.”

There was a heavy silence in the room. After what seemed an eternity, Úna broke the silence,

“But I’ll be alright? I mean, how bad is it? Even if it’s bad, can I still be treated long enough to finish my work?”

Diane shook her head. “I don’t know hon. If I did I wouldn’t be asking you to come back. But we’ve scheduled you for next week, with Dr. Morris. He’s a wonderful doctor, top of his field in oncology, I’m sure he’ll have better words for you.” She hugged Una and helped her up. “Let’s see you out, then.”

And that was that. That day, Úna had left the hospital reeling, but not quite worried. Even after running through the possible futures, Úna had kept her typical countenance: unbothered by outside factors and intensely focused on her research efforts. *It couldn’t be that bad. She felt perfectly fine. And there was just so much to do before she could allow herself to go... so much that was counting on her.* There was simply no time for existential dread, not today, and perhaps not ever. For her, at least. But now a week had passed and the reality of her situation had become a little clearer. It would be unfair to claim that Úna feared death, but she certainly was not one to welcome it. So she looked at the clock, sighed, and hauled her exhausted body out of bed to reach the hospital once more.

She ended up in a patient room following a lengthy physical examination (and a CT scan to boot). So she sat, kicking her feet back and forth, waiting for the doctor with a novel dread filling her stomach. Dr. Morris entered the room, a stark grimness to his demeanor.

“I have unfortunate news, Úna. The prognosis isn’t good. The tissue we found is almost certainly malignant and from the looks of it, too complicated to remove or treat with distinct efficacy. I’m deeply sorry, but please start looking to make arrangements.” He handed her the chart, complete with its terminal diagnosis. “We have resources to help you, but your timeline is less than a half of a year.”

“Oh. Okay. Thank you doctor.” He sighed, gave her a reassuring smile, and left her. Leaving the hospital, Úna had trudged on in a trance back to her apartment and threw herself on

the bed again. So now, it was real. It was all real. There was now a limit on her work. A time limit on how much and how exactly to help humanity. A time limit on life itself. Faced with incorrigible death, perhaps life itself would once again show its face. At least, this is what she thought. She had hardly given herself time for all of life's mundane pleasures. Of those, none were greater for times like these than a good walk. A right, proper walk in the woods. This way, she would not allow herself to cry, allow herself to feel weak when she was needed. This way, she would have some time, of what little there was left, to think. So, she packed up her rucksack, an old canvas antique from the 2010s, and headed out north.

The trail she had set upon was largely untended, as was her preference for these sorts of things. She had been raised by New-Druids, a sect that had emerged after the Collapse and it had been her father that presented to her the whims of the wilderness even after the cloister had disbanded. There was no place she felt more at home than among the trees, green, and fresh mountain air. She headed up north, just far enough to feel proper solitude from the bustle of the city, but not truly alone. Never truly alone. Not when her beating heart was the conduit for the Earth itself. Once reaching a proper elevation, she looked back upon her city. There was an ephemeral layer of fog covering the buildings, and the dirt she trod upon, only the vertical wind turbines reaching above the mist were truly visible. The Colony. What had once been the city of Bergen decades ago was converted into a solarpunk vision for the future years ago after the Collapse, an attempt to merge humanity's post-war technological efforts with a healing landscape. This was met with resistance from wilderness purists and zealots, who gave the city the ironic nickname. But the name just stuck. This was where she had come from, where she was heading the research on a modular cannon of sorts that could distribute aerosols into the cloud layer in an effort to improve the albedo of cloud cover and cool the Earth's¹ atmosphere. For Úna and the Colony, there was no greater mission than to create a brighter future, to adapt and reverse the changes of those that came before her. She was close, too; close to a breakthrough in solving the dispersion problems that hindered that particular effort. But with her diagnosis, there was only enough time to *just* finish her work. She knew that she would not live to see her vision, to see the new world that it would create. Of all the claws of fate to come down, for her, this was by far the most cruel. To have all of her efforts, time, and passion amount to futility: to have the radiance of a new dawn for humanity stripped away from her by genetic happenstance. This is what begot her tears. Surrounded in a grove of young leafless birch, her tears began to flow, the soundscape of the forest broken by sobs. So she shed the kind of tears that bead up in the throat, the ones that fills the sinuses with sulfurous fluid and invites a dry heave, until all strength leaves the body. The kind that leaves the body aching with an ironic pain, dull and jagged, that somehow, only further tears seem to help alleviate. *God. It's just not fair.* Strange as it may be then, is that she felt selfish. Selfish for crying, selfish for even being allowed to feel her pain. There was still so much suffering in the world, and regardless of if she would be around to see it heal, her work would still help them. Contradiction it may be, Úna somehow felt a guilt for shedding her tears, that she would deign to lament her station when she could still see the sun, feel the wind, and drink the rain. In the end, the worst pain was not that she felt her tingles of guilt, but rather that there was nothing that could be done. Her disease was not one of social conditions or a crisis of money or physical burden. It was one of time, and it just *was*. Her fate was simply the stalwart resolution of the world; and her wailing tears doomed to fade into an indifferent universe. Eventually, she closed her eyes upon the forest floor, and let the reticence of the mountain swallow her whole.

¹ A facet of Solar Radiation Management - See Oxford Geoengineering Programme

She awoke to the sound of crickets chirping and wind blowing through the trees. This far north, the sun would not set for a good while this time of year; yet, it was as dark as the midnight sky. *She couldn't have possibly slept that long, right?* Shivering and weak, Úna began to set upon the trail again, or at least try to. It was now gone. The distinct tracks of dirt and mud that led her to this clearing in the first place were missing, and in its place a deep underbrush of pine boughs and juniper bushes. She reached into her pack and pulled out her flashlight. *Dead. Great.* Despite this, against her better judgment, she continued south through the thicket, using the moonlight and stars for guidance. After what seemed like a good hour, she stopped to catch her breath, but the forest had only seemed to grow thicker and darker. There were no longer the chirping crickets, or even the sway of the wind. Even the moon had been occluded by the canopies of ash and elm. Dead silence. The kind of silence that is resounding in its deepness: one that makes the sound of blood flowing through one's veins thunderous. To say that she felt unease would be an understatement. Her heart filled with fear, a primordial fear of the unknown and the dark, the type that perhaps was last felt thousands of years ago when humans were hunters and gatherers in tribal communities, or so she had read. The place where she had ended up was strikingly unfamiliar, and she had been through this wood a thousand times; it was her first home, and now it was nowhere at all. Despite her fear, she trekked onward into the dark. For a while, she was followed only by a settling unease and shallow breath until she slipped on something in the dark, sending her tumbling down a small hill. Smashing into trees and rocks in the dark, she was met with searing discomfort until hitting the soft mulched ground further down the way. Every part of her body now screamed out, her ribs, likely broken, and skin battered and scraped. If it was not the cancer that would take her, then surely it would be being stuck and bleeding out in this foreboding, ancient copse.

When she came to, she laid by a roaring campfire, covered with a reindeer hide to keep her warm. Crouched next to the fire was an elderly man, weathered by years in the sun. His golden-brown skin seemed to glow in the firelight. He was unkempt, but not dirty. An overgrown beard and mane, but still the jet black color of youth. He also lacked the wrinkles of what might have been a man his age, but somehow, Úna could feel the deep wisdom within his eyes. Groggily coming to, she got up slowly with a deep groan. She clutched at her side, expecting some sort of agonizing cramp, but to her surprise, she felt nothing at all. *Strange.* The old man was boiling something by the fire, staring deeply into the flickering flames.

"Um... Hello?" She uttered sheepishly. The man refused to take his focus off the pot. "Did you find me? How long have I been out?"

The man finally spoke. In a quiet tone, "Don't know. Time is a little different out here. You were broken. So I fixed you."

"Okay. Interesting." *Those injuries were pretty severe. Either Úna had been out a good while or something strange was going on. Even then, she would have been able to feel something. Some leftover pain from taking that fall. But there was nothing.* Before she could have much time to ponder her situation, the man reached over and grabbed the pot he was boiling his drink with and poured it into a wooden cup. He held no hesitation to grab a blisteringly hot pot, and Úna could hear the sizzle of flesh and smell its acrid tinge. He set the pot on the ground and the moment he did, his burnt hand began to shimmer with a slight blue static electric field and the burn faded away. She tried her utmost to stay calm. "So, do you happen to know where we are? Because I have somewhere to be and there *are* people looking for me." It was not that she felt uncomfortable with the man, rather the opposite: there was an instinctive ease to his

presence. It was rather that she was faced with the unfamiliar, something that challenged the sensibilities of her scientific mind. “So where exactly are we?”

He paused for a moment. “The old wood. Or what’s left of it. The land that came before that holds the spirits of this world. The place that was no more because of your people. At least, until recently. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? It chose you, after all.” He pointed up into the treeline. The twisting underbrush seemed to breathe and move to his actions, and the clouds above split and a fierce moonlight began to shine down on the two. Now, Úna was sure she was in the presence of something greater. She had always been fed similar stories from her upbringing, those of myth and mystery. But now, faced with abject presence, she could only feel a sort of awe brought about in her, and not her worldly woes. “Are you some sort of god?” She asked. The man seemed amused at the thought. He let out a slight chuckle. “I have been called that before, I suppose. Cernunnos, Enlil, and Ieshy. But no. I am no more a god than you are the wind or the sun. If anything, I am more human than anything else.”

“But I saw you heal. A-And you seem to know what’s happening around us!” She retorted.

“Aye. That is my condition. I just happen to have been around for some time. But I have questions for you.” He took in a deep sigh, seemingly absorbing the very essence of the wind itself. “First, why did it choose you? The wood, I mean. Humans don’t just find themselves out here, unless they’re supposed to be here.”

“I’m not quite sure. I’ve been working on something important to improve planetary health. Maybe that’s why?” She said with a furrowed brow and her fingers held up to her chin, something she had always done by instinct.

“Interesting. You know, I have been here for centuries. At first, it was by choice. I was jaded with the way that humans treated this world. But eventually, I grew accustomed to only this life. Yet, I have seen the world change around me. Subtly. Little by little. The rivers flow once more, the trees have begun to whisper to me again, and the songbird once again sings. Please. Tell me why. Tell me of the place outside this place that I have yet to see.” There was a deep sorrow in his eyes, a solemn promise to the unknown that was all but forgotten. And so, intrigued by the man and replete with pity, the two sat around the fire and spoke about the world. Úna began to tell him about all she knew. She was born after the Collapse, so she only knew stories about the world before, but her current history was certainly up to snuff. By 2028, the Earth had warmed up considerably due to the unfettered activities of the humans before, by a margin of about 1.5 degrees centigrade. Catastrophic, in both scope and effect. The resulting climate disasters created a world bid for a resource war, which only resulted in further chaos and conflict as revolutionary armies sprung up throughout the planet. These cataclysmic conflicts resulted in an unprecedented shift in geo-political structure, affectionately named the Collapse by new age historians. For a decade, war continued until power and resource wealth had shifted considerably enough for humanity to coalesce into a strained peace that focused its primary efforts upon rebuilding societies that focused on planetary health, in order to avoid the mistakes of the prior generations. Of course, there was opposition, especially from those that were anarcho-primitivist in nature and refused any sorts of these advancements. They advocated for strict preservation of the wilderness, especially since biodiverse systems had begun to heal in the time when the wars had reduced human impacts considerably. But ultimately, new cities began to spring up, with their food sources focused locally, and on regenerative agriculture, turning to the practices of indigenous knowledge of the associated landscapes in order to attune with the Earth

to feed their populace². Once food had been secured, communities stabilized and began to communicate with one another to solve the root issue: the global temperature and preserved carbon in the air. The Colony where Úna had lived was one of these places focused on communal geo-engineering efforts. Úna was born in 2051, but by the time she had grown up there, the new orders of humanity had already made great progress in slowly reversing and preventing the planetary changes spurred on by previous generations. One of these primary methods was through direct air capture to store the concentrations of CO₂ in the atmosphere, which had only improved in efficacy since the early 21st century. Additionally, with new human cities built upon cultural frameworks that valued cooperation and populist action, energy research and equitable distribution improved immensely and within the past few decades, nuclear fusion energy had become viable, especially when combined with dramatic growth of renewable energy, built on multi-purpose land³. Of course, this combined with other carbon capture methods such as dedicated biochar farms, and mass reforestation, the world was well on its way to a new future. Even ocean acidification was beginning to be addressed through iron fertilization, with bioengineers creating a new species of injectable phytoplankton that lowered oceanic carbon levels without the mess of releasing its stored carbon during post-mortem decay. Humanity was on its last hurrah to a truly sustainable future, and Úna led the charge. Her life's work: an unobtrusive method of aerosol dispersal that was able to be readily produced and efficiently managed was the final key⁴. She was young, yes, but she was an unprecedented prodigy nonetheless. An eidetic memory and a passion for seeing her community, and thus the world, succeed in the project of climate healing. She knew that once her research was finalized, the world of the future would finally be ready to emerge. This was the tale she told the man, a bright gleam on her face, pride in her achievements. The man seemed completely intrigued in her recounting of the world he did not know, and was particularly interested in her possession of a photographic memory. "Hmm... I see. So this is how the world has turned out to be." There was a deep, satisfied smile on his face. "I did not expect this. Perhaps I gave humanity too little credit and lacked the necessary faith. But if you are to truly remember everything, perhaps I can share my memories with you. I too, can remember it all" Úna was ecstatic at the fact. For although she loved her climate science and research, she craved a deeper understanding of the world before. Much of the cultural and historical knowledge base of humanity had been lost in the Collapse and reconstruction, deemed less important than solving problems of a scientific nature. What little knowledge there was was scattered and spotted. With her disbelief all but completely suspended, the man began to recount his existence.

He told her of his first memories, eating the carrion flesh of large feathered theropods, dinosaurs, in an age before. He was born with nothing in his mind, no semblance of language or anything at all, really. And so he ostensibly wandered for eons, millenia until time had passed that he saw the first creatures that looked like him. So then he walked with them, for centuries too, watching family, friends, and those he loved return to the dust as he stayed the same. And everytime a soul was returned to the Earth, he could feel it all: their memories, their dreams, their prayers and promises. This was his curse. An immortal being that could feel all of the pains of the world and of its life. He had tried to end it all. Many many times. But the world would not let him die. The divine forces that granted him his immortality kept him alive no matter the

² Regenerative Food Systems Slideshow - Humanities Lab

³ Direct Air Capture-Mani Korah, Humanities Lab

⁴ Arcusa Carbon Coin Slideshow - Humanities Lab

circumstance. Úna could see tears welling in his eyes as he spoke, and he held out her hand so that he could be less alone. His only friend in over a hundred years.

So then the days passed, with Úna and the man eating from the forest's bounty and drinking from its clearwater streams. Every day, the man told her the stories of the past that he knew, tales of great empires of man lost and found, destroyed and rebuilt. He told her of cultures where boys were trained as warriors from birth, places where philosophy and science were valued above all, of an empire stretching upon a great grass sea to which there was no end, and of great marble cities that would one day crumble. He told her of great empires of gold and jade, where the mountains themselves were but stone spears into the heavens. But he also told her of man's proclivity. That there would always be rise and fall, and a great penchant for violence and hatred. He told her of a time that members of an ancient clergy held him captive under the presumption he was a divine being. He endured needless, unceasing, and conscious pain from those that claimed their god was a god of mercy and love. Worse then, was that the god they had worshiped had been his friend and confidante in ages past. He told her of great wars and the battlefields he roamed, where he stood upon the ashes of a billion dead souls and bore not just their pain, but also their unseen futures, lost to anger and flame. He told her of the great ships that sailed across the widest seas to conquer and pillage peoples that knew the ways of the land as he did. He told her of all these great ships then racing to bind others like them in every way but one into cruel shackles. It was these aspects of the world that he shunned, that drove him into the old wood. So that with enough time he could hide away and forget about the pain he was forced to bear. So that he would not live to see a new advent of suffering or ages of torment. In these tales, because of her gift, she too could feel his pain. Humanity's history of pain. Perhaps most importantly though, he told her of the wondrous Earth and its beautiful dead, and how it had been raped in the name of an unceasing growth. He made her promise to keep these stories alive, to remember the hearts of those who were lost to hardship so that the new world she had shown him would not end up suffering the same plight. This was the hope that Úna gave the man, the hope of a new future for the world that he so deeply loved in spite of all what the years had weathered him. It was these days, these stories that had distracted Úna from her life back in the Colony that was on pause, stranger then that she felt little effect from her illness while learning the stories of the world.

But soon, she knew it was time to return. Yes, her project could have been finished without her, as she had left behind everything to complete it, but she wished to spend her last days seeing it come to fruition and to remember in silence the stories granted to her by the man. But she could not leave. The wood had not yet allowed her to leave, is what the man told her. Nevertheless, her frustrations were too much to bear and she wandered off on a sunny day in hopes of scrying a way back to the Colony. Once again, she became lost and exhausted in her continued expedition. Leaning upon the base of a great oak tree, she fell asleep, reciting her promise in her head. When she came to, the man was standing nearby, looking up at the sky. In her anger she exclaimed with some exasperation, "Why can't I leave?! I need to get back.. I- I only have a little bit of time left and- I need to finish my work! I need to see the world again and keep my promise to you." She let out a stifled sob. "I just. Want to see what it all becomes before I can't anymore." There was a deep silence in the forest clearing. The man stared at her for some time. She had not yet told him about her cancer. But she began to. She told him of her diagnosis, of her time left on the Earth, and of her greatest regret and deepest sadness that she would not live to see, properly see, the new world. Finally, words escaped his lips. "I'm sorry Úna. I'm sorry I've kept you here. But I knew. I could feel the cancer cells in you the moment you found

your way to me. I just... I don't want you to die. You'll stay alive here, I think; but not out there." he muttered sheepishly. A rage began to brew within her. An unbridled rage, a pure, red-blooded ferocity borne of her helplessness and it boiled out of her in a scream, "WHAT?! WHAT. THE HELL. IS WRONG WITH YOU??!" She did not have the energy nor the courage to run away into the unknown, so she collapsed to the ground, tears filling her head again until she could only hold herself in a fetal position by the great oak. The man just stared at her. Eventually, he brought her a cup of hot tea, drawn from juniper and pine. She refused, of course. After what seemed like an eternity of silence, the man asked her, "Do you *want* to die, Úna?"

"No. Of course not." internally, she knew she was fine with dying. Just not yet. "I just.. I just- don't want to die just yet. Not now."

The man stared at her, deep into her eyes in the way that cuts one's soul. "There was a friend I had once. Long ago. My very first friend. I think you would have liked him. Enkidu, he was. A fierce spirit, but also one I lost to time. He granted me my first name, my oldest name: Gilgamesh." Úna looked up, red and teary-eyed from her crumpled position. She finally had learned the man's name. He continued with his speech, a sadness in his voice, but one of tremendous resolution. "I am not a god, Úna. Neither am I a forest spirit, or creature of myth, or whatever you have presumed me to be. I am simply the lifeline of humanity. I am the unceasing wheel of time that has turned only for as long as I remember. I am the record of all things, the record of this world and the creatures that inhabit it." He stopped and sat down next to her, offering his hand for comfort. For his or her comfort, it could not be discerned. She took his hand nonetheless. "I told you that I did not know why I was granted this eternal life, but I do. I just never met anyone who could perform my duties. I was the record of the old world, and now I have passed on all the stories to you, the architect of the new one. You will not die, not until you wish to pass them on again once more." She looked over at him, and witnessed a solemn peace in his countenance. He spoke once more, "You are a troubling, precocious child indeed, but you have given me the only thing I ever asked of this world, and for that, you may carry on its stories, should you choose to." She nodded her head in reverence. "Please, never forget your promise. Never forget that we are the stories we yearn to tell. Never forget that each and every child born into this world holds the miraculous love of humanity carved into their bones." He looked into her eyes once more, one final time, gazing upon another being. A smirk came across his face. This smirk was one of satisfaction, one of true tranquility and pride. "Thank you." She knew what was to come. As he uttered these final words, Gilgamesh faded into an ethereal dust that fell upon the leaves of the forest floor.

The forest began to open up its thick brush, and the mist and fog began to fade from the horizon. The path that Úna had originally set upon all those days ago had reappeared and she continued down it once more. Once more to return, she would have a proper walk in the woods. She had inherited Gilgamesh's duty, to be the record of this world. But it was no longer a curse. No, she knew now that it must be a blessing. A blessing not just to keep her alive, but to keep the spirits of the Earth alive. To keep the dreams of its capricious, sentient species alive, as well as the hopes of its wild creatures of air, sea, and land alive too. Her eyes filled with tears yet again, but not the kind of a deep and absolute sorrow, but those of hope for that which was yet to come. Thus, she returned, so that she may see the world she would help create. To bear witness to humanity's future of hope.

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Humanities Lab Presentation - Carbon instruments and Negative Emission Technologies

Humanities Lab Presentation - Direct Air Capture by Dr. Mani Modayil Korah

Humanities Lab Presentation - Regenerative Food Systems by Sara El-Sayed