

The ledge is narrow; just wide enough for the soles that would contemplate their departure. I don't think I look nervous. Don't think. This is my final act. Looking around, none of it seems real. Not the bridge or the view, nor the cars jammed up on both sides. People are watching me, waiting. But they keep a safe distance. I can see it in their eyes: boredom, frustration, even the twinkling of a morbid fascination. They have places to go and appointments to keep, and though it's all been done before, they've still got to see. And it's not only them watching. There are cameras everywhere. I can feel them. Beady glass eyes that never blink. They are the only part of this that feels real.

I don't think I look nervous. Yet despite my preparation, I can feel my muscles start to quiver. My proficiency at pretending does not extend to self-deception, and doubt seeps through my shoes like water from an unseen puddle. I'm not surprised when I see a man making his way toward me. Right on cue. His police uniform is faded but fitting, and his brimmed cap casts his face in shadow. It seems odd that this man—an unknown—should play such an important role in these final minutes. He comes to a stop at a mark on the ground, then looks up at me.

'Are you alright?' he asks, his chin catching the light.

I shake my head, lifting my arms in illustration.

'Why don't you come down from there?' His voice wobbles a little in its search for paternal patience. 'Let's talk about it.'

I look at him a moment as if considering his proposal. 'I can't.'

'Of course, you can.' He takes another step.

'Stay back!' My lips twist into a snarl. 'Don't come any closer or I'll jump.'

'I hope you don't really want to do that.' There's a glimmer of aspiration in his eye, but his tone is soft and he stays on his mark. 'Why don't you tell me what the problem is?'

Behind him, the crowd is still, and I focus my eyes on the space between us.

'You don't want to hear what I have to say.'

'Give me a chance,' he says with a bleak shape to his smile. 'Maybe I can help.'

I shake my head, but the timbre of his delivery is convincing. It has a jaded melody, invoking the times he stood here before, trying to talk others down. The quality of his training is apparent, which bothers me, and now I'm aware of the cameras again. Glass domes, gazes indifferent.

'I can't live like this.'

'We all have things we regret.'

'You're right,' I say, looking at him sharply. 'And that's what makes this so easy. We're all in the same sinking boat.'

'I hear you.' The inflexion in his voice suggests he thinks he's found his angle. 'So let's fix the boat.'

'With what?' A strange laugh flutters from my mouth. Edging backwards along the ledge, I hear gasps when my foot slips, but I ignore them. 'We've got all the hammers and nails, but no wood.'

'Did you lose someone?' Exasperation deepens the lines in his face. 'Are you sick?'

'No,' I say, looking at him. 'At least, no more than the rest of us. But that's the point. Everywhere I look, the omnipresence of human degeneration prevails.'

'Sure.' He tilts his cap back, and his eyes are green. 'That is the nature of the human condition.'

‘It’s not nature,’ I say. ‘It’s learned, encouraged, nurtured by the systems we perpetuate. Do you have kids?’ His face dips, and I know the answer. ‘Are they at school? Are they learning something useful, like how to grow vegetables with limited space and energy? When are you going to tell them about this social contract they were born into? And the fact that they can’t opt out of it? Have you told them about the indifferent nature of the universe, and how everything we do is meaningless because there is no right or wrong, and all we perceive are the consequences of our own pathologies?’ His eyes darken, and I notice the shadows on the ground. ‘You’re a policeman,’ I say. ‘Have you told your kids that prisons are privatised? That they’re businesses now. Do they know that it’s your job to enforce arbitrary laws so that people can be put in chains at a profit? Or how about these desperate and condemned arrivals fleeing the horrors of war? That, despite their situation being the result of our meddling, they are illegal because of some inconsistent notions of nations? What about justice, and how an ever-widening wealth gap, bolstered by the insatiable greed of a capitalist ethos, means it can be bought? Or democracy, and how it exists nowhere on this planet? That the illusion of choice is presented to us by obscenely wealthy plutocrats, lobbying and bribing us into lethargic and collective annihilation.’

‘Stop.’ He angles his head so that the light catches the carved line of his cheekbones, and I know now why he got the job. ‘Just because we’re having a rough go of things right now, doesn’t mean we get to give up. Isn’t the struggle the point?’ He pushes his breath, his eyes shining as the paternal pitch returns, and I can almost hear the orchestra elevating his words. ‘I do have kids. And do you know what that means? It’s my job to try.’ He inches closer. ‘You and I, we have to plant the trees now, even if we will never enjoy their shade.’ From his delivery, it is clear that this recital is meant to have some import, so, as a matter of courtesy, I allow it time to settle.

‘What trees will you plant that can grow in these conditions?’ I glance around. ‘And where will you plant them, if the very earth we stand on is perpetually claimed by some violent power? You and I both know it won’t be your children enjoying the fruits of your labour.’

‘So that’s it?’ His voice breaks. ‘You quit? You just give up? Do you know how incredible it is that you should even exist?’

‘An unlikely accident,’ I say. ‘A failed attempt. My eyes are made from the same elements created at the beginning of time. And it is with these eyes that I have watched us fail. I am a distillation of the universe observing itself, and I have reached my conclusion. The experiment is over.’ I stretch my arms, a selfish Christ. ‘I thank you for your time, but it is mine now to leave.’

The policeman lunges when I step back, but he’s too late. Gravity takes me and, for a moment, I am afraid. But the wires hold strong. Bright lights flood the bridge, and I can hear the crew hurrying about their tasks. I look up, and from below the set seems obvious and mountebank in its construction. Then, I am reeled back up to the bridge.

‘Are you alright?’ the director asks, checking the time on her phone.

‘I’m fine.’

‘That was amazing,’ she says.

‘Thank you so much,’ I say, turning to my co-star. ‘Was the dialogue ok?’

‘You were great,’ he says. Then, accepting a diet Coke, he turns to the director. ‘But I felt like my delivery was a little heavy-handed. I kept thinking if I could only connect...’

‘No, no, you were fantastic.’ She turns to me. ‘Speaking of connections, there were some problems with the audio when you slipped on the ledge, so we’re going to have to do another take. Let’s do it all again in five.’