

Domestica

Alex Pasquale

The dust is displaced by my boot as I step out of the car. I was advised to leave my car at the edge of the city. The debris is hard enough to traverse on foot. I adjust my goggles and mask around my face and begin my trek. The spires of the old factories slash the skies. The sky.

I had been to this city before only once as a child some forty years ago. The air had been a grey that seeped down to the tops of the buildings; the brutalist skyscrapers slowly melding into the omnipresent industrial fog. Now the sky is a radiant blue, wispy clouds dotting the horizon. The buildings seem oxymoronically smaller even though now their entire enormity is revealed. When I was young the towers seemed to stretch into the infinite grey. The blue is scarred with the intrusion of the skyscrapers now. The blue shrinks the skyscrapers though, their visible tops revealing the limits of their construction.

The color of the sky wasn't the biggest difference that I was focusing on though. Vines stretch across the surface of many of the buildings, their tendrils snaking across their massive faces. The ivy invaded windows, hung out of vents, and splayed across every surface it could reach. Hope surged within me that my mission here would be a success. The plantlife, even this kind, was a good omen. A helicopter was finally able to scout around the top of the city a couple months ago and an interesting thing came up on the scanner. Hundreds of miles of concrete and a single *malus domestica*. In a city abandoned decades ago, a tree was growing.

I hadn't seen a tree in my entire life. Of course I had seen pictures and read descriptions, but I'd never sat under its shade, run my fingers down its rough bark, or felt its feathery leaves. Truth be told I'd never laid eyes on ivy like this either. Not this expansive. A sliver of a section of a vine displayed in a tube is nothing to its complete glory, twisting around light poles freely and growing as far as it can, stretching upwards and upwards. I didn't feel dwarfed by the buildings, but the vines, alive and purposeful, made me feel incredibly small somehow.

I climbed over a rough concrete patch, the road now warped into a barely traversable path. I grab a piece of rebar sticking straight up to steady myself. I check the scanner fastened to my insulation

suit wrist, following the coordinates given. The end of my journey came into view as I crested a small hill of cracked concrete pieces. A large building stood, smaller than adjoining towers but only due to the top of it collapsing. The entire building seemed to be leaning, something shifting its foundation. The weight of the top of the building didn't last, its remnants crushing smaller buildings around it and scattering across the road.

I stumble down the other side of the rubble, working my way down as carefully as I can despite my excitement. My feet part the dust as I approach the former skyscraper. The walls seemed to have been mostly glass, the collapse likely shattering it all leading to its current desolate state. The tower's countless symmetrical dark pores loomed, the slight lean causing the building to hang over me. The front door was locked. I was almost amused. I walked through the gap left by a former window a few feet from the door, entering at last.

The interior of the building made me uneasy. I crunch through glass as I scan the entrance. Stark white walls, thick floor to ceiling curtains crumpled on the floor, a station to wash your hands, a machine that quickly puts on gloves. I felt wrong ignoring all sanitary procedures as I stepped over the cleanroom curtain. I walked further into the lab, a wary eye on every door and hallway, testing the integrity of the white tile in front of me. The ceiling was more damaged the further I walked, until I could see clearly into the next story, walking over crumbling ceiling tiles. The ceiling of the second floor was damaged too, and the next and the next until I was staring up into the sunlight. Walls, a floor and scattered lab equipment still surrounded me, but the open air made this place feel even more alien than before.

Then there, standing proud in the middle of a former room, was the tree. It had to stretch over twenty-five feet tall. Its leaves quietly rustled in the wind. I looked upon the plant with deference. The roots pushed the tiles out of the way, cracking concrete and deforming the construction around it. All around the room there also lay what looked to be small, deformed, brownish red lumps, I poked one with my foot. It was soft. Rotted through. But fruit nonetheless. This tree had made something. I was only here to witness its aftermath, but my mission might actually be possible.

I scan the room more intently and find a monitor tucked in the corner. It miraculously still has blinking lights on its side. I fiddle with the buttons in the front of the machine, coaxing it to life. The screen flickered on displaying a list of dates and entries. A record. The first few entries dated back to 3240, too early to make use of. I scrolled down swiftly, the decades of this laboratory's studies flying by. Eventually I slowed down at the 3300's. Then an entry caught my attention: Agriculture, a Lost Human Art. I opened it.

April 21st, 3309,

Dr. Feldman

Biology and anthropology

Agriculture, a Lost Human Art,

Today my contemporaries and I made a fascinating discovery. Early humans may not have relied solely on hunting and foraging for their food before synthesizers were invented some 1000 years ago! Due to multiple rediscovered records they seem to have been able to control the growth of certain foods before processing them into edible goods. I hope I don't need to tell you why this is an exciting discovery. The impending geomagnetic storm that will supposedly cripple the North American electrical grid is a few months away. A method of creating food that doesn't rely on electricity could save countless lives. I'll learn more tomorrow!

April 30th, 3309,

Dr. Feldman

Biology and anthropology

A New Opportunity

Exciting new developments! Apparently Norwegian scientists found an ancient tomb built to house thousands of seeds. The Svalbard Seed Vault! What an incredible find! We are being generously sent a few hundred seeds to run some experiments on and find out how to develop these seeds into growable food. We're starting from scratch but humanity has figured it out before. The seeds are due to arrive in July.

July 6th, 3309,

Dr. Feldman

Biology and anthropology

Svalbard Seeds

So many small pods across the lab! I can't wait to test new conditions and see how the seeds fare in a couple months. My colleagues and I are incredibly excited. We have multiple different vessels for growth and all theorize on different growing methods even on our breaks. Safe to say morale is high.

October 13th, 3309,

Dr. Feldman

Biology and anthropology

Some Trouble

The seeds aren't growing as fast as we'd hoped. We tried many different environments for the seeds and none of them grew very much. The seed fully submerged in water seemed promising at first but it stopped growing and slowly died. We must be missing a component here. Or several. But that seed still grew! It wasn't much but some green poked out of its hard shell. Water might be a component, but not the whole. I refuse to let this deter me! We'll continue our experiments.

October 15th, 3309,

Dr. Feldman

Biology and anthropology

A Discovery

On microscopic inspection of the small leaf that grew from our failed submerged seed, it seems like the leaves contain a material that responds to light. It seems to be...absorbing it? We're on the right track! In a few months we'll have this mystery cracked open.

Lots of data heavy entries separated the last entry from the next narrative one.

February 26th, 3310

Dr. Feldman

Biology and anthropology

Frustration

We tried every combination. Different wavelengths of light at different intensities. Cycling the lights to simulate a day/night pattern. Giving the seeds lots of water, fresh water, salt water, none of it seems to matter. The plants have to grow out of the earth. Is planting them outside the only way for this to work? They won't get any sunlight out there. Or water that isn't contaminated. Just finding suitable soil to plant these seeds in is difficult. Every sample of dirt that I've tested has some heavy metal pollution. Is that the problem? There isn't dirt suitable enough on this entire planet? Having food before April seems like a fool's pipe dream now.

I scrunch my face. Sunlight was my best guess as to why this city was now flourishing with life. The tree grew because the roof had collapsed and sun finally poured into this lab housing seeds. That was it right? But there had to be something else; this entire lab would be a forest.

April 21st, 3310,

Dr. Feldman

Biology and anthropology

The Storm

The Storm hit today. We have no power and no expectation of getting it restored any time soon. Zero plants have grown past the germination stage. My colleagues are talking about leaving the city, but we just planted a new batch of seeds last week. Leaving now would mean everything was in vain. I have the backup generator running with three months worth of gas. Enough to keep the lab sun lamps on and the irrigation system running. I'm not leaving this second chance at human life.

August 4th, 3310,

Dr. Feldman

Biology and anthropology

The lack of a title already put me off guard. My brow furrowed deeper as I read the entry.

Three more days. Power runs out in three days. The city has evacuated. Personal air purifiers take too much power to run 24/7. The air outside is toxic enough to leave you coughing up soot after an hour of continued exposure. I don't have a purifier, but I haven't left the lab. We have our own air circulation system here. But I won't have it after three days. I'll also have no way of accessing fresh

water. I've already had to ration out the food we had left here. I don't think I'm getting any more food. All my colleagues are gone. It's just me left.

September 18th, 3310,

Dr. Feldman

Biology and anthropology

I'm lethargic and weak. Checking on the seeds once a day takes up all my energy. I've scavenged everything I could in a five mile radius of the lab. I'd be dead from pulmonary disease without my insulated lab suit. I still only have an air filter and can't be outside for more than a couple hours at a time. I'm out of food and out of water. The plants haven't moved. Everything is a waste. But I can't leave.

September 20th, 3310,

Dr. Feldman

There's one seed left. One seed unplanted. A tree. *Malus Domestica*. There isn't a patch of dirt big enough for it currently. I can't let it go. My last hope. I finally sent a distress signal yesterday but it was too little too late. No one is going to find me or this seed. Sorry to humanity. I haven't had anything to drink in 2 days. I'm not leaving this lab.

I stared at this final entry. I scrolled down futilely knowing this was the end. It couldn't be the end. My gaze swiveled from the flickering monitor back to the tree. Its powerful trunk casting its shadow across the room. The leaves allowed dappled light to dance across the cracked tiles. Its rhythmically waving branches were hypnotic. I took a couple steps toward its base. I reached a tentative hand out. My fingers brushed the bark. It felt like defiling something divine. My hand jolted back like

I'd been burned. I walked around the tree, trying to take it all in. On the side facing away from the rest of the lab something caught my eye.

Sticking out of the tree at about shoulder level something caught the sun and flashed. I walked closer. It was pure white. Only about the size of my thumb but definitely in the tree and bright. I stooped a bit lower to get a better look at the strange object. I stood back straight abruptly, electricity coursing through my veins. The missing piece of the puzzle.

A rib bone, polished by the wind and bleached bright by the sun. That scientist, Mr. Feldman had died holding that seed. The building collapsed not long after. The ingredients the scientists couldn't find but Old Humanity must have known well: sunlight, water, and death.