

**FAMOUS  
MEN WHO  
NEVER  
LIVED**

*K CHESS*



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To the brave and resilient refugees of the world.

“She had a houseful of books that she could neither read nor bring herself to use as fuel. And she had a memory that would not bring back to her much of what she had read before.”

—OCTAVIA E. BUTLER, “Speech Sounds”

## CHAPTER ONE

Hel stepped over the threshold from the sagging porch, squeezing her body between towers of junk. She fought off the tight, proprietary excitement that kindled in her chest. The cottage, marooned on a street of much newer semidetached row houses in the Brownsville area of Brooklyn, was smaller and shabbier than she'd expected. Dwayne Sealy, the owner, followed her in and pulled the street door closed behind them. As Hel's eyes adjusted, she saw shoulder-high stacks of newspapers and magazines, blocking even the windows. A narrow path wound through the canyons of disorder, a passage three squares of brown-and-gold linoleum wide.

"Bulb's out, I guess." Dwayne flicked the switch up and down. "Wait right here—let me see what I can do." He activated the flashlight app on his phone and maneuvered around her, making his way into the dim room beyond.

Happy to stay where she was, Hel breathed in the precious dust. Within these walls in another Brooklyn, the great

writer Ezra Sleight had lived, rats under the floorboards, a pile of books in his bed. Within these very walls in a different Brownsville, he'd penned his best novels. His masterpieces. *The Pyronauts*. *The Pain Ray*. *What to Do with the Night*. But none of this was his. There was nothing worth discovering. Everything surrounding her here was an artifact of After, the time after the split.

This was not the Brownsville she knew. Just ten minutes ago, on New Lots Avenue, she'd witnessed a group of kids pretending to piss on a man slumped unconscious in an alley. She'd noticed melted vinyl siding fronting a building a few doors down, that ominous black smudge that marked a place where a car had burned hot. This was a different world, a world in which Ezra Sleight had died as a ten-year-old child. His life cut short, his genius never apparent to anyone, he never wrote the books that made him seem, to scholars like Vikram, worthy of attention. Perhaps a few had mourned the boy Sleight—his family and his schoolmates—but no one remembered to mourn him now.

No one but Hel. 1909. The date, when she'd learned it, stood out in neon.

Dwayne returned carrying a battery-powered camping lantern that cast a warm glow on the walls of old newspaper. "I forgot," he said. "They cut the electric. Come on back. I can't say it gets much better, but it does get brighter."

They passed through what might have been a sitting room, though no clear place to sit presented itself in the cramped squalor. They entered the kitchen, at the back of the house. Here, motes swirled in the sunbeams from the big windows.

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Hel sneezed. She noted mismatched appliances, a rounded, monstrous Frigidaire, the type of stove that must be lit with matches, a front-loading dishwasher in avocado green partially hidden behind a mound of black plastic trash bags. The double sink was full—not with dishes but with dozens of back issues of some magazine she'd never heard of.

Dwayne jerked open a drawer. “My grandmother. I loved the woman, but she had a problem. Didn't know it had gotten this bad.” He squinted at the clutter inside but did not touch. “I told you she passed away last week?”

“Yes,” said Hel. “On the phone, you mentioned. I'm sorry for your loss.” That, she'd learned, was what you said here when someone died.

“She practically raised us in this house—me and my brother—but the last couple years, she wouldn't let us inside. Now I see why.” He stood abruptly, kicked at a cardboard carton. Whatever was inside tinkled as it broke. “Shit.”

Traffic on the Belt Parkway two blocks away rumbled like distant thunder. Hel looked up high, up above the broken surface of this roiling sea of possessions. She examined the dirty wallpaper, fussy bouquets streaked with grime. A design from Before, from the shared history of her world and Dwayne's. She took in the dark wood cabinets, their old doors hanging crooked on the hinges, where Sleight might have stored his dishes.

Something reaching for her, making contact. Signs in the dust that most people couldn't read.

“Guess I should have checked things out before I brought you over,” Dwayne said. “You're not interested now.”

Within these walls, what might have been.  
“You’d be surprised,” Hel said.



Looking back, she wished she’d deliberated about what to carry through the Gate. One bag, the evacuation officials ordered, providing maximum dimensions, as if those thousands luck had chosen were booking seats on an airship for a vacation.

But Hel remembered her world history. As she packed, she’d considered the rumors about forced labor at America Unida’s hidden education camps, and about what the Power Brothers in Ceylon had done in the jungles to city-dwelling elites. And she’d remembered the KomSos clearing the shtetls of the Pale from east to west. All of these regimes relocated citizens en masse by imposing arbitrary rules that encouraged compliance and complacency. Leave what you own behind. All you’ll need is your identity papers. You’ll see your neighbors on the other side. Then, the march into the caves, the group showers, the trenches to be dug. Docile victims unaware of what was coming: the suffocation, the live burial. The shot in the back of the head.

Stay calm, the Evac Commission instructed. And yes, it needed to be said. Order was just barely being maintained in those chaotic days, by the hope—a fiction Evac promoted—that everyone had a chance. Hel’s name being chosen in a frantic lottery didn’t mean she was going to get out alive. Anything could be waiting.

Thus prepared for the worst, Hel brought practically nothing. Packed in her padded shoulder bag: her portable ordinator

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and its charger (not compatible with anything here, of course), the medical journal she happened to be reading at the time, her allergy medication, two liters of water. And just to be safe, inside a plastic folder, her passport, birth certificate, and a copy of her New York State medical license.

In the other pocket of the folder, she'd tucked a drawing her son, Jonas, had made for her in pre-form, years ago, back before her ex-husband took him away to California. It depicted a tiger with a red-crayoned mouth and blood-dripping claws. On the other side of the page three crude human figures smiled, representing Raym and Helen and Jonas himself, all three of them drawn with the same scribble of hair. Hel could tell which one was meant to be her because of the earrings sticking straight out from her head—as big as hands—and by the mole next to her nose, which her son had been careful to add in brown crayon.

That bag. All she had left of her home.

That fall/winter 2018 issue of the *Journal of Clinical Insights* with its drab cover. Nothing special about it. The report of a study on a radical new treatment for Albertson-Huhn syndrome in immunocompromised patients whose methodology had once seemed to her positively irresponsible. In the years since, she'd read and reread the piece, along with every other article between the covers.

Because the issue was the last, the only. Because the *Journal of Clinical Insights* did not exist here. The study did not exist here. Albertson-Huhn syndrome was named after someone else entirely.

Everything was like that. 1910 was the magic year, as far as anyone could prove. Before that was a known quantity. It was

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After—after 1910—that things slowly started to unzip, one set of possibilities uncoupling from another and veering off, gradually at first, but then more and more drastically.

Without exception, when UDPs like her gathered in groups, they asked each other what they'd brought through. It was almost a party game. People laughed at Hel's practicality when she answered this question, when she described the water and the charger and the antihistamines.

The knife—that flick-blade she'd always carried—she'd concealed it in her shoe, but the sticks found it at the checkpoint, confiscated it before she passed through. She'd had to buy a replacement, later. She knew better than to mention that, even to UDPs. None of them would have found it funny.

Vikram, the man Hel lived with, had his own regrets. In his hurry, he'd brought only books, his backpack straining with them. Now, he mourned the loss of the picture albums from his New Jersey adolescence, photos from family vacations. Most keenly, Vikram rued his hasty abandonment of his mother's bangle, an heirloom etched with Mughal designs passed through her family for generations. It could have fit right in the front pocket, he often said, where he'd made room for one more paperback instead.

Hel was glad he'd chosen books; UDPs who'd taken objects of more tangible value found themselves disproportionately likely to have that property missorted by the authorities during Debrief. She teased him, though, about his choice of titles. Why just literature—no science, no books on technology? (Because Vikram probably hadn't owned any nonfiction at all, before he lived with her.) Why so many older books, books from long

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Before, which turned out to be superfluous? (Because he didn't know—none of them had any way of knowing—and because he didn't think he could live in a world without Rumi or Tolstoy or Jules Verne.) On the whole, Vikram made his selections with wisdom and luck. He'd saved novels by Darby Kenyon, by Grant Wilder, by Samara Vaughn. He'd preserved poetry by Nakamura Hideki rendered into luminous English by renowned translator A. J. Butler. These bestsellers, prizewinners, and canonical works existed in unique volumes on Hel and Vikram's shared bookshelf in the Bronx. And he'd rescued an electrostat draft of his own unfinished dissertation, as well as the novel it treated. A slim paperback.

*The Pyronauts* by Ezra Sleight.

Why, Vikram lamented aloud sometimes, in moments of self-punishing sorrow, had he thought only of his job? Of his stupid life's work, meaningless now.

"You weren't thinking of work," Hel would say, to comfort him. She could hear in her own voice a fierce protagonism. "You didn't make a mistake. You were thinking about the persistence of our *culture*."



In *The Pyronauts*, the world was cleansed by fire.

The aliens arrived in shield-shaped ships made of shining crystal on a mission of peace. They had monitored Earth's communication broadcasts, so they already knew how to speak human languages and how best to solve earthly conflicts. Tall, wise, and graceful, with long appendages, the aliens were

brilliant scientists as well as natural mediators. They went to the Council of Nations and disinterestedly fixed all the looming problems of Sleight's early twentieth century. They gave the Jews of Europe a permanent homeland in Polithuania, convinced Japan not to attack the AMFR, introduced a hardier and faster-growing strain of millet to the starving Chinese, eliminated smallpox and the battle flu, and brokered a peace between the warring Dominico-American and Voudon armies. Humanity hailed them as heroes.

But then, to the chagrin of the aliens, the world they'd gone to so much trouble to save began to wither and die around its inhabitants. An extraterrestrial organism, a microscopic pirate from the homeworld that clung undiscovered to the hulls of their crystal ships or stowed away in the folds of their flowing robes, proved toxic. First to the trees, large and small, and then to the crop plants, and finally even to flowers, grasses, and lowly weeds. The pollinators starved and the animals famished and in their turn, the people of Earth began to suffer privations, suffering quickest and worst in the lands the aliens had visited personally. The blight spread, ungovernable, moving through water and air. The visitors invented a vacuum-canning process that would enable the beleaguered human population to preserve what was left of their stores, showed them a subterranean cultivation method for edible mushrooms, and then, with profuse apologies and vague promises to return, got into their shields and left Earth's survivors to their own devices.

In North America, survivors formed scattered fortress-settlements underground or in those rare valleys whose natural topography provided some shelter from the killing winds,

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imposing quarantines to keep travelers from spreading the aliens' final gift. Only the pyronauts—men and women in special suits whose job it was to burn all infected plantlife in the Neverlands, the abandoned world beyond the settlements—were given license to move freely.

Apparently, it all stood for something bigger. Hel remembered that from the high-form classes she'd taken against her will as a teenager. It reminded her of the Truth deck, of spreading the cards out in horseshoes on the bedspread and interpreting them for her sister. Literature always seemed to have some hidden meaning that a normal person wouldn't guess. According to Vikram, most critics understood *The Pyronauts* to be an anti-colonial narrative and an anxious exploration of the possible consequences of the atom bomb. It was read and taught as a parable, warning its readers of the possible unforeseen results of harnessing a power greater than man to influence geopolitical affairs. Now, Vikram saw the novel as a trauma narrative speaking to the varied ways in which individuals cope with adversity. "What a conference paper I could write about it today!" he would say.

Or used to say, two years ago. Back when he still cared about Sleight.

In the book, pyronaut John Gund and his patrol-partner, Asyl, walked the hills of ash together in the waste-state of Pennsylvania with their tanks of fuel and their fire-spewing hoses. John Gund, a former cardsharp and all-around wastrel, had been serving a long prison term for shooting a rival gambler at the time the aliens arrived, and was let out by mistake in the ensuing upheaval. He found that he preferred the scorched Never to the flashy Philadelphia of his youth but felt he must

keep this judgment, like all of the details of his personal history, a closely guarded secret from Asyl, young enough to be his daughter and born in a bunker city, who often asked him what the world had been like Before. (They used that term too; “the capital *B* audible in speech” was how Sleight’s narrator described it in the book.) John Gund and Asyl walked through the floating cinders on their endless patrol of the Never, checking every stalwart new blade of grass that poked its way out of the charred ground with their alien-provided test kits, always finding unacceptable traces of the microbes, inevitably having to burn each sprout. Together, they crouched in their fireproof tent in the evenings, the helmets of their suits removed so they could eat their miserable vacuum-sealed ration packets of fungal protein, and John Gund entertained Asyl with tales of Before, full of self-aggrandizement and lies of omission.

Lovely, innocent Asyl in the tent, her face framed by curtains of dark hair, who said her prayers every night and harbored stubborn illusions—she touched Hel in a way Hel didn’t really understand. Asyl, whose very name meant shelter.



Vikram heard Hel’s voice, strained, but measured, from his place on the edge. He listened without understanding. “I found it,” she was saying, and then he was coming, so he lost contact with the world for a moment, squeezing his hands into fists by his sides—trying not to touch her, because she didn’t always welcome it, not when she was on top like this and she was about to come too.

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When it was over, she flopped next to him on the mattress, dug her sharp chin into his chest, staring into his face, wanting something. He closed his eyes, listening to her breathing as it slowed. He wrapped an arm around her and they rested.

She'd been impatient for hours. Earlier, when he got home from his shift, she'd been waiting for him on the bed wearing a T-shirt, reading the dog-eared *Sleight* book. "You know, this is so great," she'd said then, closing it gently. "Really great. How could the world do without this?"

She never read for pleasure; she'd told him as much when they met. He remembered how they'd been when they were first together, both of them disconsolate with grief and loss. They'd ride the subway trains for hours. Underneath the earth was the only place where Vikram's pain felt sufficiently muffled; how jarring it had been to emerge. Once, when the G train they were riding climbed unexpectedly from the tunnel—the tracks running aboveground for a few blocks in Brooklyn to cross the Gowanus Canal—the sudden pain of it, of that slice of dark sky and the spreading landscape studded with lights, had cost him the last of his fragile control over himself. He'd cried for his mother, then, for his two sisters. His boyhood best friend, Keith Chen, whom he hadn't talked to in years. His job. His city—the real one—with its velocabs and duple buses, its efficient elevated tramways that looked so much like this short stretch of track.

Hel never cried, not even in the first months. Instead, she walked around all day, picking vicious fights with the people who didn't seem to be real to her—the trainee social worker, the assimilationist housemates she'd lived with before moving

into Vikram's apartment, the junior agent with the tape recorder who'd questioned the UDPs from her entry group, even the tired old men sitting out on their stoops. When Hel wasn't arguing, she was obsessing. At a certain point, Vikram had felt obligated to take that old medical journal away from her for the sake of her sanity, removing it from her custody before the pages softened to illegibility. "Careful," he'd joked. "Someone else will want to read this artifact someday."

That remark might have been the start of it. Her preoccupation with documentation. Her conviction that some outsider might actually care about their stories.

"Wake up," she said, after a time. She nudged him. "I was telling you, I found it."

One by one, Vikram stretched out his limbs. He flexed his fingers and toes. "What? What did you find?"

Hel threw a leg over him, then sat up, obviously ready for more. "Sleight's house. You won't believe it when you see it. It's full of junk."

"You want to switch?" Vikram asked. He still felt spent, inebriated, unable to think clearly, which put him at a clear disadvantage; she never seemed to have that problem.

"No, I don't want to switch." She rocked on top of him. "The house where he would have lived, if he hadn't, you know, died."

"You know, that's not remotely sexy."

She leaned close, breathing in his ear. "It should be a museum, Vikram. I'm going to make it happen." Now she moved his arms, positioning them above his head and pinning his wrists in place with one hand. She knew what he liked. "What do you think?"

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The ends of her hair tickled his shoulders. “No one would care,” he told her. “Who would want to go to this museum? Literally no one.”

She leaned forward, increasing the pressure on his wrists. “Why not?”

Helplessly, he bucked up with his hips. “Because everyone who isn’t a Bible Numericist hates us. You know that UDP who’s all over the news for cutting up the old lady and then stabbing her thirty-seven times? That’s the association people have. They think we’re unhinged.”

Hel had released her grip; he began to bring his hands back down to his sides, intending to risk a touch, to stroke her thigh, but she shook her head, admonishing. “No. You don’t move. Stay still.” Her warm, dry palm on his erection. “1909. You *know* why I think it’s important.”

“You’re a doctor. You’re supposed to be a scientist.” He was finding it difficult to maintain focus. “Just because two things happened doesn’t make them related.”

Her hands roamed up and down his chest as she shifted her weight on top of him. “Shh.” She twisted his left nipple. “I told you to stay still.”

“Hel. That hurts.”

“What else explains it, if not Sleight’s death?” She guided him inside her. “What else could it be?”

“Chaos theory,” he said, the words coming out half-choked.

“What did you say?” she asked. But he couldn’t answer. They moved with each other, then against each other. She rode him with head thrown back and he knew her eyes were closed. She always closed her eyes. He watched a muscle in her jaw

jump. Experimentally, Vikram released one of his hands from its imaginary bonds and placed it on her hip. This time, she didn't say anything, so he moved the other one up too, slowing the pace.

"More rain," he forced out. "More rain in Asia breaks a dam. Crop prices go up. People starve. Births decline. Population dives. And the person who was going to invent flying pods never gets born."

"Shut up," Hel said. "There's still no flying pods."

Afterward, he lay in her arms, her face right next to his. He could see the clumps of mascara in her eyelashes. Taste her breath, that mint-and-Helen taste. "What's your biggest regret?" he asked. "Your biggest regret in life."

What did he expect? For her to jump out of bed. For her to slap him, for her to rake her nails down his chest. For her face to go slack, or tight. For her to say something about Jonas, whose name was taboo, spoken by her only when she was asleep. To say nothing at all.

What he didn't expect. Her hand moving up to pet his hair, and her answer: "The books. All the books I never read."

And after she left to shower, he lay alone in the bed and he couldn't fall back asleep. He rolled over and opened the window to smoke a cigarette. At home he'd used sniff, but they didn't have that here. Hel, who used to be an otolaryngologist, said sniff was also bad for you, but at least it didn't reek like smoking. So he leaned his whole head out.

He watched the beginning of the October day unfold for the kids down on the street walking to the subway with their school backpacks on and for the store owners unlocking and

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rolling up the metal gates over their premises. A shirtless guy wearing some kind of head covering with long ties that looked like it was made of black panty hose was trying to shake the dirt out of the floor mat from his enormous car. Vikram wondered what the head covering was and why the man wore it. He wished there were a way to look that kind of thing up on his phone. The guy banged the mat against a sickly tree. The tree shook. Synched traffic lights on Jerome Avenue flicked to green, one after another—green lights to eternity.

She was back from the shower, a towel around her hips, her breasts rosy-tipped. She took her comb from the dresser. “The kid who owns the Sleight house? He’s maybe twenty-five. The place was a bequest. He would love to have it taken off his hands.”

Vikram threw the cigarette stub out the window. “Leave it alone. OK?”

“I can’t. What dam, Viki? Find me the dam that did it.”

He grabbed her right hand and kissed it, tracing with his lips the mysterious scars that crossed all four of her fingers. “I don’t know what dam. I made the dam up.”

“There is no dam. There’s just Sleight. His death.”

Every UDP agreed that something had gone wrong. Only she had it narrowed down to a day, a minute. A singular event, dividing Before from After. Her fascination and her talk about another world worried Vikram. Next thing he knew, she’d take out those Tarot cards he’d bought her in the Village as a joke.

How torn Hel always seemed, between the rational and the mystical. He sank back down on the bed. “There are plenty of causes more likely than some science fiction writer falling out of a rowboat as a kid.”

**K CHESS**

“*Some science fiction writer?* Really? That’s all he is to you?”

What was he supposed to say? “I never knew him, Hel. You never knew him either. He’s not even real anymore.”