

Before the mountains lost their heads

Seven prideful warriors snuck into the rafters of the house of heaven. Watching divine bureaucracy at work, they were thrilled – now they knew how the world worked. In all their excitement, they bumped their heads on the ceiling, alerting the cosmic scribes. As punishment for their conceit, the warriors were turned into seven peaks of xanthous, the choleric colour of hubris. Forced to act as the guardians of the heavens, ensuring no one ever sees what is on the other side. Paradise, presumably.

There was no such thing.

These mountains lost their heads 58 years ago. A ray from the other side hit and, calamitously, undid millions of years of geology and destroyed one thousand years of history. Yellow and bright, power channelled into a single act. To one side, destruction as proof of progress. To the other, war with the unknown. The heavenstorm rained down on the capital, always believed to be protected from invasion, formidably ending a dynasty. The Europeans had come and demanded trade.

A man passes through the checkpoint. He is missing his left hand. His face suggests late thirties, but his expression must be older than he is. There is no paradise here. Just more land, a country, a border and an expensive train, a beggar at the station, police to pick her up. For half a decade, he has devoted himself to studying the West. Their systems of power, their political economies, their histories and intentions. What he has learned is worrisome. Coming home, he begins to cry.

Eria Naoshare had dreamt of coming home, revolution in tow.

Bright lights buzz around him like mosquitoes. Electricity is a new and exciting thing; it makes things so bright and so clear it forces everyone's eyes shut. Behind the shadows of the spotlights lurk rings and rings of the politically interested in their tribunes. Parliamentarians, reporters, party members, opportunists and the like, their breaths held abated as if suspended in a vacuum. He searches for familiar faces, only sees one. He hates it.

Besides him, four other students. Younger than him, but carrying the same change in their face. All of them have toured the West, and have special things to report. Politics, industry, economy, agriculture, military: the things the government wishes to copy, hastily – it believes it has some catching up to do, especially when it comes to imperialism.

Before them, seated in awkwardly high and wobbly 'tower chairs', are the sixteen men who form The Representative Coalition for The Dreams of the Empress. Or, less of a mouthful, *The Body*. They are, as defined by the recent constitution, the upper echelons of parliament, selected to represent the Seat-Above-All, the Tourmaline Throne. It is a brutally honest statement about the country's version of liberal democracy. But, the empress missing, so there lacks a vital check on what The Body may do. Without organs, the blood flows freely.

The man clears his throat in address.

"Honoured representatives. Before we start the interrogation, may I request to have one simple question answered?"

Eleven keep talking. Four listen. One answers: Yoppo Taika. Minister for Education, prodigal grandson of the country's biggest pre-Cleft slaveowner, leader of the Party for the Preservation of Culture and Future. Their political claim is nationalistic, nostalgic, and openly reactionary. 'Rekindling the warmth of house and home' is their party slogan. The worldview they maintain looks back to before The Cleft, coddling facts about how good life used to be for everyone.

They like to invoke the image of the *erisja*, the ‘housely veils’ that depict family histories on a single banner. Normally attached to the front beam of the house, embroidered with specific events. Grandpa got the watermill working! Son was accepted into a state school! Anyone against the party must clearly want to destroy these precious memories, waving in the life-bearing southern winds. Of course, these are the selective memories of the (old) ruling class.

“Very well. You have earned as much.”

“Thank you.”

He clears his throat again. The air here is colder than in Amsterdam.

“Honoured member Chiga Gimtúl is present, who I see has in my absence been *ennobled* to representative. My question concerns his co-leader Kalushau. Where might she be? And, I don’t see the white lapidary anywhere?”

Only two keep talking this time. The rest start to laugh. As do the people in the audience. He feels left out, his pride waning. Yoppo looks at him, gluttony in his scoff, stuck to his face like a sauce.

“Ahh, now I remember you. Eria Naoshare, right? Let me give you your answer, Butterfly Bomber. There is no more Communist Party.” Eria’s eyes instinctively catch water in regret – salt solution into an old wound, dousing nothing.

“What do you mean?! Comrade Chiga is right there!” Eria loses his composure, how could he not? “*Representative Gimtúl* made the salient decision to join the Preservation Party. Back when your recalcitrant party ended, last month.”

The liberals Eria met in New York seemed to enjoy calling the parliamentary hall ‘the room where it happens’. Fictions substitute reality when it isn’t taken seriously. Eria understands, one of few who do, that politics affect the circumstances by which a life can assume its survival. People who see that as entertainment don’t deserve to be elected – deserve much worse.

He sighs. If this is a circus, play the clown.

“Yes, well, this comes as no surprise – you’ve always had a knack for making the Delima run home visits.” The audience *ooo*’s. His radical stances give him, through the washing bin of entertainment, a bad boy image. He recognises the look on Yoppo’s face, pride smudged like a carpet stain. Same one when he was charged for abuse of police resources. At his behest, the police busted down the door and gave the dear old man in charge a heart attack. What he thought was an opium den was actually an *ie-nosh*: a family hospice. It’s been an understandable blotch on his political career since.

Before things get to escalate, Chiga finally responds. He sounds like an empty mortar and pestle, like the archetypical old man you wish would shut up. Highly intelligent and frustratingly logical, he has won every debate he’s ever been in. “Ending capitalism would be easier than driving a wedge between his words”, Kalushau once said about him.

“Actually, Eria, it was the Communist Party who elected, quite democratically, their own dissolution.”

The room falls silence, until Eria speaks up.

“Fucking *again*?!”

Beheading had been the available method of execution of the Europeans – first by the sword and then, with true industrial efficiency, by a machine. And then again after the tempest of 1848, they switched to hanging. More humane, apparently. The new nation states retained their right to demand

death, a vestige of feudal despotism. It was warm and pleasant outside when Eria witnessed a public hanging in France. It was an exemplary thing, attracting many crowds. The man had done something to deserve it, according to a vendor selling roasted peanuts for the occasion.

The switch from beheading to hanging coincided with the successful project of the 'East Breach' – the English name for The Cleft. A monstrous weapon that wouldn't stop growing, until it reached a size where it had no target left, save for the very earth itself. Six of the seven holy peaks fell on the European side of things, shattering the approach for decades. That double-edged destruction was what allowed the land's survival by a hair's breadth. One of the heads, however, landed right on top of the imperial garden. Peculiar, however, was that the peak didn't stop when it hit soil. Like a giant drill that moved myth into matter, it carved out a neat hollow complete with a path along its sides, winding down toward the deepest centre.

Hurried steps march up to the fourth floor of the apartment complex. The new headquarters is miniscule, musty, and filled with people hiding in the dark. They're excited and smiling, happy to have their legend back. Eria opens the door like he always does – wide open to slam it behind him.

"Surpriiii–"

"Where the fuck is my party?"

The surprise party deflates like a balloon. Someone whispers "I told you so!". Loi-Hen, an old friend more familiar with his crabby touches, approaches Eria. She ties the birthday wreath around his shoulders. A string of red flowers connected by a fake tourmaline pin. The flowers symbolise solidarity, but with the tourmaline, they gain a new cheeky meaning: *yes, you're important today, but the day will end.*

"Welcome home, *party leader*," she says with lazy, ironic eyes.

"Cute. I'm not done being mad, by the way."

"Wouldn't be you if you ever were."

"God, why couldn't you have been a liberal?"

Both smile; their embrace brings those five long years up to speed. Eria steals and quickly sips from Loi-Hen's gin – "*hey!*". He feels like a schoolteacher who hasn't been stern enough, even though the headmaster is right there.

"It's been five years since I last set foot in this place. And it's not like I expected the revolution to be done. But, this is the, the goddamn opposite of what I had in mind. Why did we disband? Why is Chiga with the conservatives? Where is Kalushau?"

Eria receives every answer in threefold. Voices eager to provide the correct analysis drown themselves out. As more people join the rally for social capital, the cacophony becomes a whirlwind. Discourse and pride carry the conversation much too high. What the party needs is their feet on the ground, but everyone continues to argue nonetheless. Loi-Hen uses the commotion to touch Eria's shoulder, tilts her head at the balcony.

"I personally could've done without the headless chicken squabbles, but it does feel like the first thing next to home. I'm just glad to be out of the West. Lemme tell you, that place is a mess –"

"Eria, stop. Internationalism is going to take a while, I get it. But, no, this is about Kalushau."

"Yeah, where is *màmà*?"

"In a coffin, Eria. Executed. Got caught graffitiing the palace walls."

"...what did she write?"

"'Break the hive.'"

It's too cold for him to cry. Needing something, Eria picks up smoking again, right then and there.

Shortly after the announcement of the Schemas for the Industrialization of the Nation, the National Law was enacted. Along came its enforcers, the Delima – Delicate Matters Police. Their express purpose was to isolate any element suspected of 'jeopardising the development of the country'. In practice, this meant radical writers, leftists, women who had had enough, and striking workers. Eria was there for the special police's first raid back in 1906, as a cub too young to drink with the Christian Socialists. They had gathered for the usual shit-talking while shit-faced in their favourite bar-slash-makeshift headquarters.

At 21:47, Delima officers broke down the door and the country became witness to the new, western-style equipment in action: police truncheons, sharp cuffs, arrest cars, and something from a spy novel. The officer in charge, visibly unarmed, jutted his wrist and revealed a spring-mounted gun to threaten the socialists with. Kalushau took the fall for Eria that night. She lied, "this is my son. He has nothing to do with this."

In the back of the police car, a woman was sitting there. Dressed to blend in, too proud to try – tourist-like. Her mask revealed her mouth. She simpered at him, an amused disdain, a smile that causes prison sentences.

The bar burned down that night. It was never rebuilt, its foundations too contested.

Back inside, Eria nearly crushes his nose in stress.

"All this because of a single question?"

"Yuuuup."

"Tell me, Loi-Hen. How does that... split a party?"

"Well, they call it a struggle session for a reason. It got pretty rough; Illi got knocked into the hospital. She has a glass eye now."

"Yes, well. Sorry to hear that. Have we at least figured out... if we are?"

The quiet responses (there are some awkward coughs) are enough to make Eria cry again. The communists know: it's impossible to overthrow what you don't understand. So the first order of business, as the Comintern demanded, is to analyse the country's political economy and its historical context. Twelve years on, no one has a single clue what they're up against, let alone what they're talking about. Chiga provided the most useable material history so far, but people hesitate to use a traitor's work:

In the first-ever parliament, the so-called 'Beekeeper Cabinet', *The Body* devised the Schemas, which meant that the country would haphazardly copy European bourgeois interests with reckless abandon. To achieve in 50 years what took Europe 250. The outcomes were relatively successful: rapid, ugly industrialisation; the nationalism that bludgeons peoples into one; the invention of rent and wages to pacify the massive underclasses; policing and military spending to quell insurrection; imperialist wars for markets overseas; spearheading the profitability of slavery. But the numbers went up, production and finance capital flourished. Never was this terrible human cost called into question, though, only handwaved by the prime minister as a necessity.

In the year of the Schema's completion, *The Body* owned approximately 70% of the country's wealth in terms of landlordism, family conglomerations, and stocks. Before the Cleft, the capitalists had been slaveowners, minekeepers, and warlords. Afterward, they quickly adapted to bankers, industrialists, and generals. They remain the same nobility as before, cliques of blood that dabbled in yellow rocks and redder stains.

The sound of a bell ringing instantly stops the discussion – immediately, the cacophoners do what they never have and listen. An unknown comrade steps forward, holding a ringed chime. They stand out amidst the mishmash of factory workers, farmhands who snuck in by country train, eager intellectuals, and class traitors. Standing out over their faded silks, is the wooden mask they wear. It resembles the Fafa, an old folklore character. A blind and capricious crone with the smile of a scarecrow: it shows up in nice dreams to wake you up from them – not corrupting, but interrupting. Their voice speaks:

“Eria Naoshare. You have chosen to act in service of the bourgeoisie for the past five years. To my judgment, that is the highest betrayal of our class and ideals. I should hope that the party agrees that this man should hold no more value than dust on a jewel. He is not our leader.”

“Yes, well, who’s this clown?” Eria chuckles.

The room does not laugh with him.

“The only laughing matter is your pretension to some social power. A clown? Eria Naoshare, I am all you have left. Call me *Fafa-je*.”

The religious comrades perform a small prayer against heresy – clutching the back of the wrist of the left hand. The -je suffix is a rare, archaic honorific that means “the last remaining family of”, and claiming to be related to the mystical is absolutely reserved for the imperial family. Eria bows his head somewhere between shame and scepticism.

“We, uh, haven’t had the pleasure, Fafa-je. I’m sorry for the rash comment. Thank you for all the work you’ve done for the cause. Let’s give a round of applause, everyone!”

No one does.

“This is no time to celebrate. We have a plan to set in motion.”

“You have a contingency, then? Good! We should–”

“Do not speak. It was by your insistence that we followed the Comintern’s Theses to the letter. Now their methods have failed us, yet they see no future in us anymore. We are not some dumping grounds for trial-and-error theory. We must devise a strategy ourselves.”

“Fine. I admit it, the Soviet way isn’t working for us. But what do you propose then? We base ourselves in history, and theirs is the only successful example we have.”

“Simple. The empress missing. Without her, there is no history. So we lay claim to the void she leaves behind.”

They inhale, their smile is audible.

“We find the imperial trove.”

On January 22nd, 1919, during the country’s first-ever Socialist Political Congress, the Communist Party announced it would complete its dissolution within the month. Kalushau’s notorious accusation caused massive outrage: the only ‘class war’ to speak of is the annoying, nit-picking debates in the editorial sections of *Purodusjone* [*Production*] and *Zatte nu Saisul-rek* [*Journal of Social Studies*]. “Four parties for socialism and only the communists are doing it!” They would continue to work on the ground level where it mattered. One month later, the Comintern ordered the party to reassemble.

Shortly afterward, in a historical breakaway from a tradition she was ought to upkeep, the Empress involved herself in politics. She invoked her glimmering right to change any law she sees fit, and added the first and second amendments of the National Law. The first targeted anyone engaged in organising explicitly leftist factions, and branded them as traitors. The second amendment made beheadings the

norm for treason. Eria, frustrated by imperial rule and the parties' constant infighting, filled four bottles with alcohol, took the tram to Caterpillar Plaza, and set fire to the capital's shopping district.

Seven simultaneous panic attacks erupt in his small, postured frame. Returning to Caterpillar Plaza was the last place he'd wanted to be. Partly because of guilt, mainly because this is where she lives now, in the last *ie-nosh* in the capital. They'd met in the draft – she was a medic, women aren't permitted in battle; he was a desk clerk, unable to carry a gun so held away from glory. Neither lamented being unable to serve the country. Both radicalised toward a greater vision of peace.

Visiting an old lover wouldn't be so nerve-wracking if the political future of the entire country didn't hinge on it; his knuckles stop short of the door each time. Guillotining the ruling class seems easier than completing this one simple movement.

Another knuckle knocks in his place. It belongs to Fafa-je.

"All the texts I have read do not suggest that socialism can be won through anxiety attacks."

"Socialism's also about supporting people through their flaws. Hey, can I ask you a question?"

"Which would be?"

"Who *are* you? Why are you doing this?"

"I am, above all, someone who cares, and someone who cannot be known as a result. Do you need to know me, to know what I have accomplished?"

"Yes, well, it's too late for any of us to start caring about that. Don't let me down."

"You forget yourself. You should focus on proving yourself to any of us, traitor."

"Not like I had a choice. Unless you wanted me to choose death. Because believe me, I did, too."

A familiar, unfamiliarly disfigured face opens the door. A scarred arm, burn tissue running up her shoulder as if her arm has been dipped in paint. The fire melted her. What was once snakes hanging from a tree branch, a sign of wisdom, now resemble the stringy hair of a demon, or soppy buckwheat noodles. Her hair is gone, and the eyepatch is not big enough to cover the scorch marks. This is the first time he's seen her since then – he begins crying out of habit.

Zada Kikooe slugs Eria in the face until blood stains his Rockefeller suit. He has no right to spill tears over her. There is no apology or amends in them. She bruises, bloodies, erases that practised, electable smile. With a tense fist, she drags a roughhoused Eria into a makeshift kitchen – a little wood stove and a small corner with two chairs labelled 'for meetings'. She stomps Eria for making her wake up some of the patients. Fafa-je chuckles.

"Z... Zada. Can I, can I go wash my face?"

"Yeah. There's a towel in the box. Don't get blood on it. Do you want something to eat, Fafa?"

"No, thank you. Do you remember the topic I wanted to discuss the last meeting?"

"I already gave my yes. But you wanted *him* present for that. Why, again?"

"*The Body* respects him. And the party trusts him yet."

"You mean his clique? They haven't done anything in the past five years but make him out as some kind of revolutionary. Do you think of him that way? Because in this place, we don't." She gestures at her arm and face as if wiping off a smudge.

The water hits Eria's face and he winces. How triumphant and victorious he felt as his bottles broke and turned Caterpillar Plaza into a searing blaze. Truly, he had hit capitalism where it hurts. But, there was a truth he was blinded to: capitalism is not an abstract. It is real and it is lived every day, mostly involuntarily. It arranges a city. It becomes a physical space. Public, invitational, and seductive. If you have money, you are welcome to wander its many institutions – insurers, banks, shopping streets, and

so on. And, rhetorically, anyone can earn that money. Those most rung out by capital are forced to wade through its deceptive tides, to buy or look at a thing they like or need, or don't. Capitalism vitiates all other options until it becomes all options.

He remembers the numbers: 840,000 in damages. 122 injured, 17 killed. Only two victims were named and they were French. He later found out that Zada was there, getting the last bit of work on her tattoo done.

"That's why I'm here, too. To say I'm sorry, and to make amends –"

"Shut the hell up. How am I supposed to believe you're *genuine*."

"You don't think we *targeted* you, do you? We're comrades, not the Delima!"

"Following your fucking party strictures felt like tip-toeing with the police half the time."

"That's called education! Surely we can expect the people in charge of a revolution to know... how to go about that!"

"Sure, the proles never listen enough, is that it? You've always been more interested in hiding your own scars than healing those of others. This is why we had four socialist parties – you splintered us!"

Fafa-je interrupts the spat with a loud ring of her bell.

"*Ahem*. We are here to stipulate how this country, and then all others, can be saved. Eria, opening your mouth is clearly conducive to disaster, so I suggest you keep it closed."

"Yeah, I'm with Fafa on this one."

"Fafa, I am just as important–"

"You will call me Fafa-je. And did I not mention for you to shut up?"

"Didn't they?"

He stands by the window and lights a frustrated smoke.

Without him, the two go on to demonstrate, in one tableside conversation, that a revolution wouldn't need men. Fafa-je, still a total mystery, asks with care about the patients. About supplies and rent, about what can be done to keep the hospice afloat. What medicine she has, sources for funding, extra hands to help, it's Fafa who has provided that. Zada chuckles and steers them away from the subject – almost no time has passed since they last asked. It is this gospel of charity that comes from the heart, that can be felt as a socialist act. Theory can predict and define all it wants, provide arguments for who is logically more correct, but dictum will not sway anyone who won't be shown. Zada has had all the reason to become a liberal or worse, but hasn't. Through the fingers that apply these lauded, caring actions, people can understand on the deepest level that this has a name and a plan. Eria, over his shoulder, glimpses the trenchant revolution that is a mere heart-to-heart.

Eria had just finished penning the day's thoughts, reflecting on his imminent execution when he got picked up. The jailers dragged him through the streets – his legs were still broken, the crowds cheered on – all the way to the government plaza. There, at a nearby French-style café, sat former prime minister Hoofddorp. The Dutch general who had fired the all-ending cannons, given a job to help reform the army. He offered Eria a deal: travel the West as an ambassador and learn all you can. Do that, and be pardoned. Since the alternative was execution, Eria accepted.

Not begrudgingly, though. His naïve mind glimpsed Lenin. He had no idea what he looked like, but what he saw a silhouette of pursuable glory; he could see himself travelling those same lengths. Cast theories and polemics aside – text on paper never killed a capitalist! – and perform history. He fantasised about his big speech that'd rally the proletariat. "We'll make work about life, not the reverse," he'd yell from the podiums, gesturing with one arm outstretched. "And for this simple thing,

still a revolution is needed. Etched into the bones of a ghost we call the state is a demand of the ruling class. That your life be broken, hurt, and reformed into a number. The number of their wealth. My comrades, they will come to fear *our* numbers.”

“So, scratch the movement. We’re off on a treasure hunt instead?”

“Yes. I’m sure you’re familiar with the old tale, the First Mine?” Zada nods. “That is, as it turns out, no mere tale. It is real, and it is of immense value. And we mean to find it.”

“I can see how it’d net you all a pretty sum. But, if money’s the goal, why not rob a bank or a financier for that?”

“It is not merely the economic value! Imagine if we availed our return with a literal legend. With the First Mine, the beginning reaches of our history, we would win an incalculable measure. The support of the people!”

“You make it sound so revolutionary. But this is appealing to imperial nostalgia. That sounds, uh, like Yoppo’s deal. Like, I’m in because you’re in and I need money to keep this place running. But I can’t believe Eria, Mr. Purist himself, is on board with this?”

Both motion in permission for the man to speak again.

“Yes, well, I’m not on board. But you can’t win a revolution without the masses. As it stands, most people find the Tourmaline Throne comforting. It’s a symbol against the West. The throne adds meaning to people’s lives. Kalushau... Kalushau taught me is that faith at its most basic is the belief in what socialism can bring. We can wait for divinity to flourish an earthly, perfect garden or whatever – and with the current dogmas that seems very unlikely – or we can start plucking out the weeds ourselves. So, that’s my excuse. And like, if we went around telling people that the empress is technically just another landlord, we’d get executed.”

“Yet, remember our constitution. Its first article permits those who operate with the blessing of the Empress. If we retrieve her trove, parliament is law-bound to listen.”

“That sounds like dictatorship to me, Fafa.”

“Only of the proletariat. The trove is a powerful artefact, certainly, but power becomes what its wielders want. We want democracy, so we shall have it. And what better poetic flourish than to end the imperial house by its own permissions?”

The two comrades-by-proxy feel uncomfortable with this plan. It’s nothing short of abusing the same loophole the nationalists have been for the last five parliaments. An oversight in a bourgeois document that permitted the old feudal order to stay in all but name. Is a revolution permissible on these grounds? A revolution that bypasses the popular front, one that throws the movement to the wind, that does not cater to the worker’s immediate needs. Is this the revolution Eria wants to come home with? This is a power grab, but at the same time, there is an excitement, an opportunity that makes sense. The hurried scribbling of history can be felt around this wobbly table. It seems, for what it’s worth, like the cusp of a revolution. The communists surface again after being forced into those dilapidated backroom. Now, these three can form a tiny vanguard, becoming a liberal nightmare they hadn’t dared dream of.

Eria takes Zada’s free hand.

“Zada, you don’t have to forgive me, but this is bigger than us. I hope we can work together.”

“Fuck off with your words. They haven’t changed a thing. So show me, how desperate are you?”

“Not firebomb-desperate, but pretty desperate.”

“Good. You know there’s this thing you do very well.”

A surprised, alerted look dawned on his battered face. She nods slowly, flashing a grin.

The first time they tried it, exciting as it was with the press nearby, they nearly caused another party scandal. Even so, it was a considerable alliance between the tenant union she belonged to and the party he was appointed leader of. Concurred by way of her thighs wrapped firmly around his head, ushering in tongue, mouth, and moan to the point of suffocation, and his hand grasping to keep them there. Zada struggled to keep her composure as she used his face like a throne, still answering the media's loaded questions about health worker unionisation. "But if they strike, who will take care of our sick and elderly?" "Who will take care of our nurses and doctors when, ah, they collapse frommm... from exhaustion or stress? Labour power should scare you. Preferably into. Into. Meeting their demands." From underneath the table, Eria winked with pride, swallowing something else.

This time, they did it in the kitchen, the stove rattling with each upstroke. "He does have his uses, see?" Fafa-je chirped before leaving Zada to her needs. She struck his head against the radiator, against the kitchen counter, against any hard surface. He felt like a coconut, she tried to split his head open to get to the good part (his death). Blood and cuts graced his face once more, a doll to toss, years of trying to feel something in her left arm paid off as she smacked, jostled, and pushed him around and into. When she was done, and this time, there were no towels for him to clean up with, she stroked his face like a dog, his face red at affectionally being called pup. He barked out of habit, and quickly again to convince her it was sarcasm. Most thieves sign their pact in blood – but it seems other fluids can be used in a pinch.

When they emerged from the kitchen, Fafa-je was tirelessly washing some of the patients. They had their mask lifted up somewhat and their mouth was visible. It formed a smile he had seen before.

"You two are finished, then?"

"Yes, well, it went as expected. So, what in the world is next?"

"You will be doing some more eating, actually."

The eternal science stopped working at this point in time. Like all sciences, it had room for error, but the country outrightly refused to develop the way Marx had said all would. The communists began to worry that Marx was wrong. Drowning out these thoughts, scholars, as if inspired by the new national air force, scrambled to find an answer, strafing down questions and providing airstrips for their theorems to land. Explanations became social hopes, effervescent clouds through grasping fingers. One historian yelled: "The stagnation is caused by the remaining feudal elements!". "No, too much agrarian backwardness did it!", shouted the economist. "Too much *shukze genje!*", Kalushau spoke. Everyone else gasped.

Eria's leader, his foster, his reason in both the spiritual and the scientific sense. He agreed with her, never questioning. Paradoxical, heretical, but evident in how many people continued to worship the empress. With the first constitution, her divine right was made synonymous with the nascent state. Everything that happened, therefore, happened for her. To critique capitalism's development was to teeter on heresy's edge. Before this faith became state censure it was known as *shukze gen-je*. "The Nearest To Heaven". Kalushau's polemic shook up the reading world. "Like the drones in a honeycomb, our labour is bound to a queen. For freedom to develop, and true solidarity to complete, the hive must break."

How repulsive, then, that Eria would search for royal honey.

The honeyed chèvre tastes quite good.

"How is it, Naoshare?"

"Extravagant. Like goat cheese ruined with gold paint."

"Come now, like you weren't given a tour of similar cuisines while you were touring Europe. We have Zurich chocolates for desert – in your reports you admitted that you quite enjoy them. Acquired a taste for the finer things, no?"

"Everyone loves chocolate, Taika. Just because it has a price tag doesn't mean it's some forbidden fruit. Besides, if you want me to betray my principles, you'll have better luck with *soba* over whatever it is you purple-grins eat. This just makes me miss lard."

Eria's host quivers with a laugh, betraying the acid stains on his teeth, the classic markings of indulging in wines. The hypocrisy of the luxuriating conservative: profiting from the present and yet tells others they must live in the past. The sole clink of a fork hitting porcelain marks the end of the aperitif, a heavy sit in the stomach. Yoppo beckons for an attendant to dap his mouth and spray his face with refreshing mist.

"Naoshare, I am supposed to keep this a secret, but I hate you enough to tell you. I didn't accept this dinner of my own volition. I was ordered to arrange it in secret."

"I figured as much. I mean, the Butterfly Bomber and the Minister of Education eating together? You're smart enough to avoid that kind of press."

"Indeed. Moreover, I was told to accept any request you had."

"Wait, what? You were? By whom?"

"By someone who believes we share a common interest."

"That's, concerning. And highly unlikely."

"In this moment we do. Our love for, shall we say, the imperial gleam."

"I support the empress' image neither in person nor on the coin. We have debated more times we have breathed. Honestly, I was ready to blackmail you. I still am! But this seems too easy."

"Yes, well, perhaps the time calls for pragmatism. As a matter of fact, the people *are* getting restless. Even though we speak for the empress, our word isn't as... graspable as hers."

"Even if she were here, everyone with a pair of eyes can see whose side she's on. Dig through Gimtùl's bibliography and you'll find a great paper on how the empress is just another landlord. 'Capitalist Subinfeudation', did you read that one?"

Wine goes into the wrong pipe; the rich sound so angry when they choke. There's no need for blackmail, but still, Eria is amused at the thought of *The Body* launching an investigation into Chiga long after he's joined their ranks.

Chiga may have been born a commoner, worked his way up as a Marxist economist, but his ennoblement comes as no surprise. He was quick to defend the invasion of China, even corrupting Lenin's texts to call it 'petty imperialism'. An exigency for newly-developing, non-western nations to compete on the global market. Imperialism as the motor to "develop new technologies which will resist Western imperialism". What he thought of as the rational course was the same sugary poison digested by *The Body*: 'we must copy the West in order to compete with the West'. The hunger for power, fed by wealth.

"Just fucking tell me what you want, Naoshare. I want this night to end."

He isn't sure what to say. Fafa-je hasn't told him where this plan will lead, only that it will work, that permanent smile on their voice. Eria feels anxious about only being provided a slogan. There has to be a guarantee, in more concrete terms than 'we'll get socialism out of it'. Fafa-je's smile has come to represent, somehow, with fairytale-like mystery, the correct path for the communists in this country. '*The Fafa has come to wake up the capitalist from his squalid dream*' has a poetic and satisfying ring to

it. But the poetries of the past are failed verses. Facing Yoppo, his hesitation balances on the tip of his tongue. There is a tug-of-war between him and the Fafa, and here is another hand to pull the rope his way. He can still come home with revolution in tow.

"I request a secret visit to the Delima armouries. And some Zurich chocolates to go."

Fafa-je told them to meet them there, in the *Schole-hakk*, the *Hidden Discovery*, where the peak fell on top of the imperial gardens. There were no guards, no spotlights, no escorts out. It was quiet all the way, with only the distant border train registering away the suspended atmosphere.

Zada and Eria descend the spiral. The rock wall splattered with streaks of blood-red, the occasional debris of yellow-painted wood, the remnants of pulverised life add small sensations to the journey, providing a horrifying emotion.

He looks so different, smiling only when it's polite to. He sighs the times he would have otherwise. The frail, hunched back in front of her seems unable to carry anything on it – be it responsibility or the explosives. Zada looks at her molten arm, its nerve endings cindering permanently, and wishes one of the grenades would go off. Maybe a small stone whacks a blasting cap and sets off the TNT. Or he trips and tumbles into the new basin, and all that remains of the Butterfly Bomber are the last scorches of a blast. There's enough explosives in those bags to end the dynasty all over again – surely some can be spared for him. *If only he could feel what I did*, is the thought that keeps her silent during this long march.

Ages of her broiling resentment and his quiet guilt continue.

"Yes, well –"

"I wish –"

All those minutes pass, and still they manage to interrupt each other. They used to do that, during debates or in their downtime. That familiar coincidence always made them laugh, but the air between them tastes burnt. They go quiet again until they arrive.

Fafa-je awaits in front of a massive, bejewelled relief, jutting from the lowest stratigraphy in the *hakk*. It appears miraculously untouched for something that was unearthed by a gigantic stone drill. It depicts a *fafa* holding a wreathed whip, standing steadfast over a small engraving of a miner.

"What is this...?"

"This, compeers, is the First Mine."

"I'd pray if I had my left hand still. And hey, I get it now. The Fafa thing. Clever."

"Fafa, again... how... how did you know this would be here?"

"Such questions are irrelevant. All that matters is that you stand before the country's very origin, and that I have led you here."

Eria gives out half a shrug, his body battered and mind absent from the trip.

"We've come this far. Might as well. What do I do with these?"

"Place them on the statue's head. We will blow it up."

"Wait, are we robbing a grave or making a pointless gesture?"

"Yes, well, with the head gone, the body will crumble. The symbolism is literal, in this case."

Even being theoretically, principally, and emotionally invested in the destruction of everything this grave represents – from the inequality of an empire system to the most recent mine riots – Eria's hand still lingers over the plunger before pressing it down. History goes flying as it had 58 years ago, a sad

sight to behold nonetheless. Zada and Fafa-je watch from behind cover, a shocked sadness on her face and the permanent grin on their mask. There are far more explosives to use yet. Eria carries them inside, into the annals of imperial history, though none of the crew are especially interested in them. It's all been mandated learning, anyway.

The halls of a palace stretch out before them, aligned with murals of the various empresses the country has had. The First with her tourmaline egg, the Second eating her Figs, the Third and her Furnace, the Fourth on her Tower, The Fifth behind her Armies, The Sixth with all her Jewels, The Seventh upon her Throne. Missing are The Eight enacting her Programmes and The Ninth, still suspected to be alive. Zada wonders what her epithet would be – her Cities? Smokestacks? Colonies? Each empress is remembered as distinctly unique from her predecessor, but the one constant between each depiction is the stewardship of the Fafa – suggesting that, indeed, imperality is merely an interruption from wandering the hallowing heavens.

Zada scowls at what she sees, unable to parse it as beautiful. The feudalists protect history by making themselves the synonym of history. Time is their lineage, and beyond this self-serving, blood-addled rhetoric, they claim there is nothing. In turn, the bourgeoisie lionise history – their history – as the unending engine of progress. An inhumane, mechanical metaphor that covers its own smiling mouth when asked what it propels or produces. No exploitation remains unaccompanied by misery, vague and hopeless. History, Zada thinks, is a helix. Organic, moving upward, requiring fertile ground. The bourgeoisie set feudal history ablaze with their own revolutions – there will be great fires at the era of their end.

She remembers a treatise, how she hates how much it has stuck.

'Herein it is the duty of the historian to show that history is not the unending cycle of pain and suffering, of capitalism's hierarchies and relations of death. Of the soldier ending lives no less valuable than ours at the behest of spoiled pigs, of the worker toiling and sleeping in small rooms for decades before succumbing. What has been happening is not a precedent for what ought to continue.' – Eria Naoshare, *A Prisoner's Thoughts on What Ought To Be The Last War*.

The palace marble transitions into natural rock. There is another mural. It appears thicker, more of a wall than a door, more of a warning than an invitation. The Fafa on it has their left hand raised with an index finger in front of their mouth. There are no miners or workers, no empresses or holy guards, only the dreamwaker suggesting secrecy.

"Where did all the fancy marbling go? Wasn't this a mausoleum?"

"The reason for that is as simple as it is apparent: we are nearing our destination. Beyond here lies The First Mine."

"So, what are we going to blow up, what are we going to take, when all the gold is here?"

"Zada, I beseech you to –"

"Fafa, I won't move my feet another goddamn inch until you tell me what your plan is."

Zada, once again, is braver than Eria could ever be.

"Then stay still. Eria, blow this up."

He complies. No "yes, well", just a stocked breath where amends should be. The door breaks easily. After all, hardly anything can withstand the technologies and explosive patents that were imported post-Cleft.

All Zada sees is handless wave with Eria's left, some strange metal sticking out. She sits on a nearby pedestal – The Seventh's. The two she trusted – one five years ago, another until now – disappear into the minework. After a minute, she hides.

Gemmology is the ancient, prevalent trade that formed the base of the land; determined the economy and its requirements; arranged the state and its social demands. What can be called the first 'national' event of the country is the digging of The First Mine. As the myth goes, there were three people, desperate for beauty in a desolate land. They began digging into the earth, discovering scores of treasures. Silvers, gems, and other pretty stones. The most beautiful stone they found was a gigantic, oviform tourmaline. Of course, it cracked open when a dolabra struck its surface by accident. From the crystal egg emerged the first empress, to bless the lost diggers with the highest beauty one can attain: unobjectionable worship. After The Cleft forced the country to unify, this history of indenture became proudly featured on the national flag.

It were the early anarchists, the unions, and the militant feminists who vehemently contested the canonisation of this history. For every tourmaline on the empress' seat, they had famously said, three families lost their fathers, and three more were forced to give up their sons. A more compelling argument might be the fact that the First Mine has never been found. Its existence is a myth; its meaning is an adornment. The origin of the country, Chiga Gimtùl once wrote, is as brittle as paper, not as dense as stone. Hence the flag that the communists adopted: a white lapidary hammer shattering that irredeemable xanthous stone: tourmaline.

The both of them look at a bundle of torches left behind by some ancient explorer, or perhaps a bureaucrat, or even a feudal entourage. Both of them agree it would be a terrible idea to light a fire while one of them is carrying a rice basket of explosives around. Fafa-je, surprisingly, concedes they should have planned this out a bit more.

"Excuse me." Fafa-je demands their privacy.

"Sure." Eria tries to adjust to the darkness.

He hears a small ruffle, the delicate sound of hair bristling shoulders, and the unholstering of a gun. His breath goes ragged. As if on cue, Fafa-je asserts:

"You will continue walking in front of me and not turn around. Should you anyway, I will shoot you."

"Yes, well, I can't say that you're cultivating trust right now."

"You act as if I ever wanted trust. Obedience is what I require now. Walk."

He does so. The Greek myth of Orpheus comes to mind, radically rewritten to give Eurydice a gun.

Even in the dimmest light, The First Mine can still be made out to be an enormous disappointment. But perhaps expecting anything from an ancient mine was a mistake on nationalism's part. The point is to keep myths mythical. It is cobwebbed, creaking, dusty, narrow. No equipment, no preservation, no artefacts. Just the earth, hollowed out in search of some resource. No country can be recognised in any of this dilapidation.

The echoes of their footsteps grow louder and louder, bouncing off of fragile foundations. The pitter-patter begins to speed up, faster than they're moving, mice scurrying through a warehouse; they multiply, bugs swarming a fruit. Tears well up in Eria's eyes as he realises.

"Fafa-je. We are being chased."

"Indeed."

"HALT!"

More guns being readied, rifles by the sound of it, three. Eria turns around in his panic and feels the hardness of the ground before he feels the pain in his leg. Blood jets from the bullet wound.

Fafa-je screams, but not for him. They scurry backward toward the lanternlight of the soldiers, body backlit and face beautifully contoured by long, dark-brown hair and, a maskless smile. A smile he recognises from years ago, 1906. Rage flounders like a fountain, impotently splashing downward.

“You piece of sh—“

“Empress? Are you alright?”

“I am so glad you have arrived. Years have I been kept from ruling my nation by this ruffian. He forced me to act as his guide, in the hope of destroying all that is the glory of our empire.”

The soldiers aren’t civil in apprehending him. The rice basket goes spilling along with his blood. In the commotion of various cries, one calm voice stands out, gritty like an empty mortar and pestle. A second traitor enters, a frightfully large man, adjusting his glasses with the spread of his left palm.

“Naoshare, this is what has become of you?”

“Chiga... How...?”

“An anonymous tip placed you at the train station, but you never hopped on any train. It was an easy enough conclusion. Besides, what made you think you could take such heavy ordnance from the Delima? You didn’t think we’d let you go, did you? You were our eyes and ears, now you are on our watchlists.”

“I remember... when you were on there... with us.”

“And I have since abandoned the petty pride of thieves.”

The stock of a Lee-Enfield shuts Eria up again.

“But, praise where it is due. The communists found The First Mine, yes yes – too bad you won’t be able to destroy it. Empress, my deepest apologies that we allowed this to happen. I, Chiga Gimtùl, your loyal servant and organ of your body, am here now. We will escort you out now.”

The Ninth shakes their head.

“We stand near the origin of my reign. Let us divert this victory into a deeper investigation.”

“I advise against that, Your Majesty.”

“Why is that?”

“Who knows how long these mines will remain, especially since a gunshot went off.”

Chiga’s mortar provides an intoned analysis of the situation, one that whispers, “I know you’re not on our side, Empress, but you will be, one way or another.”

Gritting their teeth, the Ninth runs past the crouched Eria, picking up a grenade in the process.

“Wait!”

“What the hell are they doing...?”

As the soldiers and Chiga give chase, so does Eria hobble along. He moves forward like a dying storm, each limp spraying blood along the rock wall. He firms his left arm, making sure it’s still attached. The visit to the armoury paid off.

At the end of the mine, it is not a mine. Just the end of a naturally occurring geological formation. The only traces, the only myths, the only signs of civilisation present are the guns held by the bourgeoisie.

The Ninth is surrounded, trapped in the last little space the cave provides. The First's egg, for centuries to have been right here, isn't.

"...it is only a cave..."

"Empress, put that down."

"No tourmaline in sight..."

"Please, Empress, calm down and come with me. We will return you to your rightful throne."

"Rightful?! This does not indicate rightfulness! Where is my trove? Where is my legacy?"

"A secret can be kept. Your reign shall remain unhindered."

"Unhindered? I've had to watch you run my country for me! I have to stand by an idle spectator as you drive it all to hell, put it on purchase for any foreign investor that emerges from beyond the Cleft!"

The Ninth, throughout their entire reign, has been on the backbench. The Eight and Her Programmes had ushered in some prosperity and security for the people in a time of unpredictability and turmoil. Hospitals and daycares, *ie-noshe* and *erisjas*, festivals and wages. But when the mergers of the past slavers and warlords completed, and their families emerged with corporations stronger than any state power, she dwindled away. By Yoppo's careful revision she had become, unofficially, the least popular empress. After her, The Ninth took to the Tourmaline Throne and only had to sit. An embodiment of the state – a feudal stage, capital as its playwright.

Eria witnesses the pathetic squabble. He can't stop laughing. Hand in his hair, pained sweat on his face, tears in his eyes, he laughs like he's the punchline.

"It's only a cave! A cave! Chiga, you were right! It's not real!"

"What?"

"You called it, years ago. The First Mine doesn't exist! And you're still right, because it doesn't have to! But, hahahaha, imagine that! We were infiltrated, led on, deceived for years? And for *what*? A fucking *cave*! Just wait until the people hear about this...!"

"Guarded by their own needs, the people will never find out, Eria. And what *The Body* has spent building does not shatter so easily at a rumour. This secret dies with you. Men, take the Empress away. I will handle this."

The soldiers escort the Ninth away as Chiga unsheathes a traditional knife, bequeathed to all members of *The Body*. A blade of sharp, xanthous tourmaline, greedy to be wettened, the only of its kind here. Chiga, the stone tower of a man, with all the killing rationality of a sociopath, comes for Eria. He cannot even stop laughing and falling, let alone back off.

The knife plunges into his chest like a spoon into a parfait, begins a similar scooping motion. Chiga topples him, mounts him, takes two hands to do it. It happens slowly, so slowly, the traitor might as well be carving the characters of his victory into his flesh. Unable to resist, Eria reacts the only way he knows how: by crying. His eyes roll back as tears overflow from his mouth, as drool cannot stop from his mouth.

"Know that your death will not have been in vain." A glimpse of a smile appears. "Communists kidnapping the Empress? Yoppo will be delighted. A fine precedent for a new wave of political cleansing, wouldn't you say?" White-hot fury begins to take over.

Through bleeding, gnashing, shattering teeth, with the weight of two traitors bearing down on him, although one more immediate, Eria says,

"Courtesy... of the Delima."

From his coat-covered stump, a contraption appears. Chiga has half of a second to raise his eyebrows in surprise as a spring-mounted gun emerges from the revolutionary's sleeve. Blood and brain splosh everywhere, pieces of broken glass from his shattered glasses fall into Eria's skin. Doesn't hurt as much as the knife does.

He continues his struggles, harder than he has ever. To make up for the fires, to seek forgiveness from Zada, to find mercy for the five years he spent supplying *The Body* with the everything they needed to know. He vomits blood and screams, his lungs balloon with red, he chokes and chokes. Head falls back on the empty stones, vision goes blurry. For a full minute, as oxygen retracts from his body, bloating him with pain, he has glib thoughts about the nature of his country, about its ruling class. *It's all fake, Chiga*. Lenin remains lacking from his analysis. He dies, nothing else dies with him.

Zada finds the traitor atop another traitor. Pushing Chiga off of him, she begins stomping Eria in his dead face, the *smack*-ing echoes in the concordance for minutes. Upset, relieved. She leaves when the rumbling starts. The 'First Mine' collapses behind her, no grenade ever had to be set off.

Chiga's death did not prevent the cleansings. The Ninth, restored to the Tourmaline Throne, demanded series of crackdowns on leftist political parties and organisations. The remnants of the Communist Party and the newly-disbanded four socialist parties scattered, not like sand, but like the seeds of an *Arms-Around-The-Shoulders*. Before the end of the calendar year, the Preservation Party withered after the surprising loss of its electorate to non-voters, despite strategically expanding the suffrage before the elections. The number of rice riots, tenant protests, underground trade unions, however, flowered.

The Body had already gone too far, and mercy is not a reaction. Loi-Hen, the treasurer of the old Communist Party, travelled to China to aid anti-imperialist struggles. Years later, she returned to the country with money, people, and power, no longer toe-dipping in the theory of hows and whats, but in the praxis of thens and theres. By that time, she found that fascism had taken its firmest hold yet, with the Ninth once again gone or dead. That didn't matter this time. The new wave of revolutionaries faced a body without a head. Her aid was welcomed by a certain revolutionary woman that remained.

"They will come to fear our numbers." So says Zada Kikooe, militia leader of the Hivebreakers.