

# AJDENIA

*Let there be sunlight.*

BY NATALIA THEODORIDOU

It's cold and sunless in the tunnels. Bart is sweeping the walls vigorously, trying to warm himself up inside his stiff uniform. He scans every crack he comes across for contaminants, seals it, then moves on, sweeping and scanning, scanning and sweeping. The job is repetitive; he's heard of people who've been driven mad by the repetition of it, lost their grip. But Bart doesn't mind. If only it weren't so cold. If only there were some Sun in the tunnels. But of course there isn't.

"Sun is precious, Sun is rare," he whispers behind his mouth cover. "Sun is for the worthy." *And for Ajdenia*, he adds silently.

He tries to recall the warmth of Sun on his skin. He almost succeeds.

*And the worthiest of all get to live above, showered in sunlight.*

He finishes the length of tunnel number 8 and enters the Ra intersection. All the intersections are named after long-lost deities associated with the Sun. The next one is called Helios. Then there's Tonatiuh, Solar Logos, Surya. Bart knows them all, every name, every inch. He always works methodically. He's good at what he does. He's worth five minutes in the filter room, under the Sun. Maybe next year he'll be worth five and a half. Or six, even.

There's another employee in tunnel number 9. Bart takes a moment to observe them. Their uniforms are identical. Their mouth masks, their goggles, their hoods. He wonders what that person looks like underneath. He wonders what they are worth. Do they also spend a few moments each day trying to remember the feeling of Sun on their skin? Are they about to lose their mind?

He continues his work on the intersection, sweeping and scanning, scanning and sweeping. The next time he looks, the other person has disappeared behind a turn in their tunnel.

Bart has finished an entire section of wall when the alarms go off, ear-piercing. The ceiling lights switch to the highest setting, bright, almost blinding. Bart puts down his scanner, sealer and sweeper, and heads

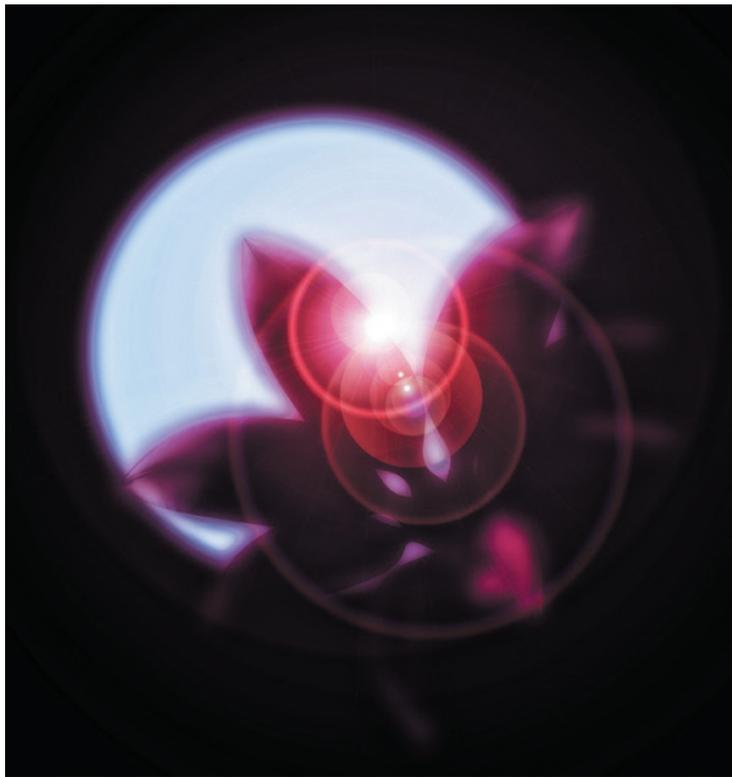


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"Which way did she go?" one of them asks.

"Who?" Bart blurts out, and immediately receives a blow to the ribs from the guard's baton.

"Your cooperation will be rewarded," the other guard says. "Two more minutes under the filter will be added to your next payment, if the information you provide proves correct." His tone implies that something will be taken away if not, but the exact nature of it is left vague.

*Two whole minutes of light*, Bart thinks. *Two whole minutes of Sun.*

As if noticing his hesitation, the guard who struck him scans Bart's forehead, proving they'll keep their word, one way or another. "Come on," he says. "Spit it out!"

*Could it be true?*

Bart raises his hand and points towards tunnel number 5.

towards the centre of the intersection, as he's supposed to. He's almost there when a girl comes running out of tunnel number 7 and bumps into him, nearly throwing him off balance. He grabs her arm without thinking, steadies her. Her uniform is torn. She's not wearing a mouth cover. Bart can see her eyes behind her goggles. He would expect them to look frightened, but they are not. There is something else in there. Something bright. It makes Bart think of the Sun. It makes him think of Ajdenia.

"What are you doing?" he asks. "You're not supposed to be here."

She brings a finger to her lips. "We can live under the Sun, you, me, all of us," she whispers. "They are lying." And then she lets go of him and she's off, running into tunnel number 5.

Bart thinks of following her, but he knows he's not supposed to. He's supposed to stand in the middle of the intersection and wait for the alarms to go silent, for the lights to go back to normal. So that's what he does.

Soon, a pair of guards come out of tunnel number 7, helmets shiny and batons in hand.

Bart is in the filter room, waiting for his payment. He's thought of the girl in the Ra intersection often, ever since the day he found himself in her way. He's thought about what might have happened to her, and about her words. Could they really live under the Sun, without slaving away in the tunnels in exchange for a few moments under the protection of the filters? *She was probably one of those who lost their minds in the tunnels*, he assured himself in the end, *one of those who didn't know how to deal with the cold and the repetition, how to make themselves worthier than they are*. Bart shuffles in his chair. *And if not...* but as the thought crosses his mind, the time finally comes, and the lid of the filter room opens, letting in the Sun. Bart unzips his side pocket and brings out the plastic pot with the pink flower growing in it. He raises it towards the light. "Drink up, Ajdenia," he whispers.

He watches the pink petals shine against the Sun until the lid comes on again. ■

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