

The Long Game

by Will Chesson

Author's Note: While this chapter is based on a true story, the characters and their likenesses are entirely fictional.



Gonawi



The limousine accelerates along the endless stretch of highway into fresher air, escaping the pollution that plagues the city behind us. For the first time since we closed the doors, I can see patches of blue sky, colossal cumulus clouds floating over the browns and greens of jagged hills, and prized Hikarian hinterland which has long stood witness to the rise and fall of tribes and occupations.

At the back of the limo, Dr. Leo D'Aubigny takes the glass of Japanese whisky and reclines against the plush leather cushion, stretching his other arm along the top of the seat. Third in Hemrika's ranking of public intellectuals, shortlisted for the Featherstone Prize, winner of Mossok's National Book Award, the distinguished professor of media theory is decorated with more accolades than I can recall. Of course, snottiness wasn't a factor in any of the rubrics. Otherwise, his work might mean little, and his decorations seen transformed into petty plastics.

He takes a sip from his shimmering cocktail glass and sinks into the couch; looks like he's made this trip many times before and grown accustomed to the I-bankers' lavish treatment of their highly paid consultants.

Fortunately to my right is Dr. Brett Byrne, the only man in my adult life that's come close to a mentor. He's tender in tone and presence but tenacious with his work. Persistent with his vision. Even his eyes remind me of Uncle Arjun.

He must have been the tipping point. The compensation alone would have probably been enough to convince me to miss my daughter's first major performance, but Byrne was the palliative for the pain, the comforter that warmed me to the commitment. Without the data from his bubble prediction software, I'd still be teaching first-year Econ classes to business majors, not publishing bestsellers like *The Long Game* and serving as advisor to the Chairman of Noqueño Central Bank.

"Tomás?" Byrne holds up the uncorked bottle of Japanese whisky.

Hesitation fizzles beneath my skin. I don't love drinking, but it's Byrne that's offering.

"Sure."

"So," says D'Aubigny as ice cubes clink against thick glass, "a young economist challenges the Fed, is denounced by Ayotian intellectuals, holds his ground, and comes out on top. Risking his career for a mad scientist's untested model."

He sniggers as he takes another sip. The air is printed now with his contempt for courage, though on the surface he dons a smile, sitting back to enjoy my doubts.

Heat climbs into my chest, but I refuse the rising anger, especially in front of Byrne. Like a child, I want him to rescue me, but like a parent, he knows that it would plant the seeds of weakness.

My lips part with surprise but quickly fake composure to shield from his offense. Plus, my English is bad when ire is fuel for words. "Dr. Byrne's software proved successful in predicting small-scale housing bubbles in English Hemrika. The algorithm was solid, just that the few use-cases hadn't gained much—how do you say?"

“Traction?” asks Byrne.

“Traction. And after the War, with many foreign firms flooding Torinoco and there are smartphones everywhere, a bubble was inevitable, like a textbook. Applying Byrne’s model was really the only sensible approach; I didn’t care what others say.” I paused and shrug. “The internet was also underestimated in early days.”

D'Aubigny chuckles, riding out his default nonchalance. “You’re comparing BPM to the internet?”

Choosing silence, I take a long look at the ancient academic. *Risking his career, the mad scientist’s model*—that loaded line, the certainty that a career unsullied by controversy reaches beyond the bounds of decorum. Bending conscience for achievement. Atrophy of muscles and morals. Carrying regrets unresolved to the grave.

“It’s the same story as always,” I say. “A new idea challenges trusted models, investors put pressure not to raise interest rates or introduce taxes on capital gains. They can’t believe that a new generation has anything useful to say; so, they follow what makes them comfortable.”

From Byrne spills a sound that straddles scoff and chuckle. D’Aubigny maintains poise in his physique, but his eyes detest my brazen buck.

“Comfort,” mumbles D’Aubigny, “that too becomes scarce.”

“Indeed,” says Byrne.

He calls my name, handing me the glass of whisky.

Even the best people hold bits of the ugly inside. Even the ugliest bear bits of beauty.

The liquor burns my tongue. Though I try to contain them, a series of deep coughs spill out of my mouth.

The driver, tired of our intellectual posturing, cranks funky, Hikarian music and chuckles. “First time in Hikari,” he announces, nodding at me in the rearview.

“He’s Noqueño,” replies Byrne. “They drink rum.”

Now he defends me!

The driver catches my eyes in the mirror. He wears a multi-colored tunic with intricate patterns of blue, yellow, and white on the sleeves and in a large V around the neck. I scan his face for the mixture of Japanese and African heritage common in South Hikarians. Moving his shoulders to the heavily syncopated beat, he says to me in lilted Hikarian English, “Noqueño, eh? You should know how to dance.” He pauses, smiling. “But no matter where you from, professor types always stuffy.” He sits upright and elongates his face in imitation of us.

“Not necessarily,” Byrne remarks with a wily grin. “My wife’s Hikarian.”

“Flavor suki desu ka?” says the driver in Hikarian Creole. “Jamais kurenakatta.”

I whisper to Byrne laughing, “Did he say, You like flavor?”

He squints at me, saying, “You know Creole?”

“Just little bits from movies. Elegant culture, you know? Refined but creative.”

Byrne nods in agreement.

“Going Hikari City madottara,” says the driver.

I look at D’Aubigny across from me, frowning his brow in response to the driver’s festive spirit as he takes another sip of his whisky. He’s the kind of pale-skinned Bakra that gets a bad reputation in Torinoco.

Byrne—red-headed, full beard, Irish heritage—is better natured: unsuspecting and open-minded. He speaks with a hint of the Gaelic brogue that still lingers in northeast Hemrika. “Is that right, Joji?”

“Avec Noquein dans le groupe, maybe Frenchy, you know, relax?”

I chuckle despite D’Aubigny’s gruffy grunt. His scowl tells me that he sets himself apart from others, that he ranks himself higher than ‘uneducated underlings’. I never wanted to be an academic like that. Too many Noqueños suffer at the hands of the self-righteous elite.

For the first time in an hour or so, no one is talking. No discussion of financial trends or parties in South Hikari. No complaints of Hemrikan politics and civil rights violations. No juggling of football terminology to mask the emptiness of our connections.

I take a sip of the whisky and look through the limousine’s tinted windows. We’re nowhere close to Sohi’s crystal blue waters and palm-patterned beaches. Cacti, sagebrush, and dusty hills surround us on all sides.

“I thought we were going to a resort,” I say to no one in particular.

“We are,” says D’Aubigny, mumbling. “Way out in the desert.”



Two security guards holding semiautomatic rifles and dressed in black camo stand on either side of the limo. The one outside Joji’s door hands him back our IDs and nods to the sentry in the tower above us to open the tremendous wrought-iron gate that stands some three meters tall. I rub the sleep from my eyes and take a drink of water.

Several hundred meters in front of us, an array of modern stone and glass buildings sit snuggled into a light-colored rock formation as wide as three or four city blocks. A couple of structures stand outside the formation, but the rest of the compound appears to reach far inside.

Otherwise, for as far as I can see, there is nothing but scruffy, barren desert. I've never known any bank exec to drive three hours from the airport to vacation in the 'wastelands'.

When the limo stops, a Sohi attendant in black dress slacks, a white button-up and a vest lined with gold embroidery opens the back door. Two other brown-skinned male attendants dressed exactly the same stand at the double door entrance wearing well-paid smiles.

Suddenly, a sonic invasion billows through the ether. A private jet descends from the heavens and heads towards a black tarmac half-obscured by a broad and rugged tor up ahead. Of course they're not driving three hours from the airport; they have one right here.

The sun sinks low now, throwing violet and pink streams into the western sky. A strong breeze whips across the arid plain, and a golf cart trundles towards us as my colleagues exit the car.

"Dr. Castañeda," says one of the attendants, "let me show you to your room."

Coconut velouté gently drapes over the bright white turbot filet, the sort of fish served only in the upper echelons of Parisian restaurants. To the side sits crispy yuca topped with caviar and a zesty salad of avocado, pickled palm hearts, and tropical herbs. The flavors seduce my tastebuds and dispel the wave of skepticism I've been riding since I arrived. It's the kind of meal that kindles enchantment and dissolves boundaries—wooing guests with delicacy and delight.

I take another bite and study the glass bottle in front of me labelled *Berg* with the tagline 'Iceberg Water from the Artic'.

Outside, water arcs out from the sprinklers and glistens under the streetlamp as it hydrates the 9-hole, par-3 golf course that looks even more unnatural than the ski slopes inside the Mall of

Torinoco. Catching the runoff, citrus trees line the course; they still seem out of place, though much less artificial than the perfectly manicured fairways in the distance.

They've built a little paradise for themselves here, away from the worries of the world but connected enough to import every detail. Space operas throughout the years always have scenes where station execs walk through terraformed biomes imitating sorely missed earthscapes. I could be in a space city somewhere in the asteroid belt, drinking ice water from the rings of Saturn and eating vat-grown meat.

Seven vacant chairs join me at the table, each place set with the finest silver- and glassware. Nine other tables are set just like mine, each place empty, though shiny under the incandescent lights overhead.

I count thirteen other patrons and wonder if they'll be my audience tomorrow—light crowd for bringing in a foreign economist first-class.

Nimble footsteps approach behind me. "Will you be having dessert, Dr. Castañeda?" says a petite Sohi waiter with a heavy air of separation in her stance.

In this moment, I'm one of them.

I want to tell her that despite various offers to work in private Hemrikan universities, I've chosen to stay at a public school in my home country year after year; that a professor's salary in Torinoco isn't much; that I came for the money as much as she did. But there are capital letters behind my name, and I'm staying in the deluxe suite tonight.

I look down at my empty plate with only traces of sauce to spare. "No thanks."

"If you change your mind, we have room service," she says.

"Thanks."

I watch her walk across the dining room to check on the cackling financiers and execs at the other two tables, the men with loosened ties and the women just as sharp-looking at 7:00PM as they were twelve hours ago. They savor cocktails and laugh as if they rule the world.

Aren't we the company we keep? And what of Byrne? Is he good company? Dignified?

Maybe my wife is asking the same of me.

After one last sip of iceberg water, I wipe my mouth and put the napkin on the table. Walking across the tile floor, I listen to my footsteps reverberate across the half-hollow space, the clacking of my dress shoes bouncing off carefully decorated walls and rising to the grand gables overhead.

Outside the dining hall, I take out my map and navigate the way back to my room.

Bubbles from the hot tub's jets propagate into a cluster and float towards me as a raft of suds. Despite the lights scattered around the resort, I can see the stars overhead—the Milky Way in a large swath across the sky like a brilliant cloud.

Two centuries ago, the first wave of former slaves and free people of color trekked across these western deserts. The Accord of 1874 allied French Louisiana and English Georgia into the Hemrika Federation and provisioned federal troops to oust the unwanted underclass from southern farmlands and northern cities. The area west of the Great Divide was claimed by Japan, but their settlements had spread no farther east than the Hikarian mountains. In exchange for depositing tens of thousands of outcasts in its rough terrain, Hikari accepted Hemrikan military aid to secede from the motherland.

Once the underlings of the Ayotian continent, the Freeman's passage to Hikari would eventually make their descendants some of the most influential people of the twentieth and twenty-

first centuries. Eating gamey rabbits and squeezing the water from spongy cactus pulp under the luminous river of the cosmos, it probably would have been nice to know that their great-grandkids would become some of the most celebrated humans on the planet.

I lift up a handful of suds and blow them back into the water; watch them disperse and recycle into newly formed foam.

What about my grandchildren? How will my daughter's daughter look back on Tomás Castañeda?



At eight in the morning, a golf cart pulls up to the back patio of my room, just past the hot tub. Two Hikarian men in matching fleece pullovers wait outside as I put on my blazer and grab my computer bag. As they gulp upon energy drinks, they don't say much to me other than the normal pleasantries.

Minutes later, the golf cart arrives at another building whose high ceilings give the impressions of the conference hall where I'll be delivering my talk.

One of the men escorts me down the wide hallway, the corridor decked out in intricate crown molding and framed paintings of South Hikarian desert-scapes. Just before the end of the hall, he opens a doorway and nods. "There are coffee and pastries inside. Someone will be in shortly to escort you the rest of the way."

The green room might as well be a small palace. The walls' exquisitely crafted wooden paneling reflects the warm, incandescent lights embedded into the beams of the tray ceiling. Large

bay windows look out on the cacti and the rolling hills of the Sohi desert, around which are six handmade mahogany armchairs, tied together by a Persian rug and a matching coffee table. On the adjacent wall is a three-section bookshelf with fluted trim marking the divisions. Past the bookshelf hangs a Renaissance-style painting with four European men standing in a cobblestone street in doublet and hose outfits, plumed hats, and well-defined mustaches. At the other end of the wall, a large, flat-screen TV hangs between mirrors on each side and above a bar stocked with alcohol from around the world, each bottle costing some two to three hundred Hemrikan dollars. A tall island with tall bar stools stands a meter or so across from the shelf of top-notch booze. Behind the island, a plush down couch that probably sees little action, except for the occasional drunken escapade every couple of years.

On the island's countertop is a carafe of coffee, a handful of porcelain mugs, and small platters of breakfast wraps, fruit, and pastries. I pour myself a cup of coffee and scarf down a breakfast wrap, followed by a few pieces of pineapple.

By the time I'm reviewing my notes, there's a knock on the door. I place my laptop on the table and stand, surprised to see a White woman with a high-profile presence entering the room. She wears a red dress and heels, and her high cheekbones, matte skin, defined brows, full lips, smoky eyes and strong blush tell me right away that she's Mossok. Her Russian accent is as strong as their vodka as she says, "Sit, Dr. Castaneda. Your audience is coming to you."

"Casta-ñ-eda," says the man behind her—White guy, sharp blue suit, clean shaven, fifty-ish in the eyes but mid-thirties by skin. He's Alan Shattuck, tech tycoon and CEO of Impact.

The third to enter is another White woman—Hemrikan, judging solely by her thick-rimmed glasses, straightened hair, and mute lip gloss, as if she conducts all business in coffeeshops.

The fourth is a clean-shaven Black man with touches of gray in his hair. He's stout and muscular but not fat. The equanimity in his carriage signals that he's lived through hell and come back all the wiser.

"*The Long Game* was excellent, Dr. Castañeda," he says with a soft Freeman's accent as he shakes my hand.

"Thank you," I say, pulling my hand away after staring at him a few beats too long. As a student of history, I didn't expect an Azanian to be in this mix of desert elites.

The last to enter is Kaito Nakamura from North Hikari—tall and thin with skin and features like his Japanese ancestors. He's the founder of Nexura, the electric and self-driving car company that's expanded into military drones, solid-state batteries, and space pods.

Four of them situate themselves in the armchairs facing the bay window. Shattuck slips out of his black dress shoes and takes a seat crosslegged on the bay window cushion, a half a meter taller than the rest of us. Nakamura sits directly across from Shattuck—these two at either head of the proverbial table, just as expected.

"You're my audience?" I ask.

"We have to keep things like this under wraps, Dr. Castañeda," says Shattuck.

"The idea of big audiences tends to attract professor-types," explains the coffeeshop exec. "Giving a talk to five people doesn't really come off as consequential, you know?" She clears her throat and says, "I'm Shirley Kaplan. You probably know of Mr. Shattuck and Mr. Nakamura." She nods to each executive and continues, "To my left is Michel Girault and to your right is Kira Petrovna."

As Petrovna nods at me, I realize that she's the Director of the Ayotian Prosperity Initiative, Girault the CEO of Azania Investments and Kaplan the Director of APAC.

No wonder my undershirt is wet at the armpits and around the middle of my spine; my audience consists of the CEOs of the three biggest corporations in the world, the leader of a prominent neoliberal think-tank and the head of the most influential lobbyist in five countries. In the presence of five of the most powerful people on the planet, I guess I should be nervous.

Or should I?

“I’m pleased to give the talk to you five, but where will I present?”

I loosen my jaw in preparation for my best English.

“That won’t be necessary, Professor,” says Nakamura. He sits with his legs crossed, back pushed against the chair, one side of his mouth pulled back into an artful grin. “We’ve all been intrigued with how you’ve applied the lessons of Torinoco to the rest of the planet’s situation—market volatility, geopolitical instability, resource depletion, climate change.”

“Human behavior under stress,” adds Girault.

I raise an eyebrow at their fastidious comprehension of my work.

“Commodity price volatility,” adds Kaplan.

Nakamura nods at the additions and says, “Subjects that have been on our minds recently.”

I glance down at the coffee table to the slideshow open on my computer, knowing that I won’t be flipping through the deck any time soon.

Through an exchange of glances, Nakamura passes the baton to Shattuck. “Bitbucks or FlexCoin, Dr. Castañeda?”

I’m puzzled by the abrupt start but scurry for an answer. “Proof of Stake is more energy efficient with low barriers to entry, though security can be an issue. However, Proof of Work has a proven track record and gives an advantage to—”

Cutting me off, Petrovna asks, “Many Asian countries fared well during the Hemrikan recession a couple of years ago. How do you explain the discrepancies?”

“The financial sector is so closely tied to the housing market that fluctuations in home ownership or the mortgage market always reverb—”

“Professor,” interrupts Girault, “how do you explain the success of emerging markets in India and Vietnam but the failures of similar situations in Turkey and Sri Lanka?”

A hint of mischief lingers in Girault’s eyes. If he actually read my book, he would at least be familiar with the answer. But they’re not interested in the direct answer, though I’m not quite sure what they’re after.

I take my time to scan the faces in the circle, weighing my next move and dissolving traces of frustration. As Shattuck checks his phone, consternation rises on his face. “TSM dropped two points in two hours.”

“Terbium’s in short supply in Asia,” remarks Nakamura as if pleased.

“We got Tsai on that.”

“Call me when you’re ready for logistics,” says Petrovna.

In the coarse quiet that follows, the five of them turn their attention back to me. They’d never admit embarrassment, but the silence carries farther than rebuke. They don’t even remember the question.

“Dr. Castañeda,” says Kaplan, commanding the attention of the others, “South Africa performed well in the last decade, but its mining sector has produced environmental concerns for the rest of the Africa. How would you maximize the industry’s success while minimizing externalities?”

They're not testing my knowledge. They're gauging my values, and they don't give a damn about South Africa.

"If there are no other drivers of economic growth," I say, "the ideal solution would be to create a technology that can mitigate environmental damages." The brief smiles around the circle indicate it was exactly the answer they wanted. Conversations like this are like dating: you have to make them feel comfortable enough to stay but bring enough risk to perk them up. Peaks and troughs—always irresistible.

"Considering your work on climate change, Professor," says Nakamura, "which region will be least impacted by the Event?"

"By climate crisis," clarifies Kaplan.

The Event. Damn, Nakamura, don't show your cards all at once.

"Northern Mossok and New Zealand look pretty good according to climate scientists, though research on accelerated glacier melt is limited and any island is susceptible to rising seas."

They bristle at the response. Perfect layering of risk alongside the comfort.

"You've studied the isolation of highlands tribes in Torinoco," says Petrovna. "How might self-sustainability look in the face of extreme climate crisis? How long should one plan to survive without outside help?"

Seeing her on edge calms my nerves. Five of the most powerful people on the planet now cower before the wrath of Mother Nature while wearing their pomade and makeup and well-tailored disguises that say 'business as usual'. The irony almost makes me laugh aloud.

"If you've stockpiled water, food and seeds, you could survive indefinitely if air supply isn't an issue," I reply. "Groundwater contamination is also a factor, that and competing factions for control."

I pause and look past Shattuck out the bay window. “I noticed orange trees and dense topsoil in the some of the beds. Is this the place?”

Shattuck grimaces; I assume my read of the situation is rather accurate. “We’ve almost finished the bunkers out here. We got a team of scientists already working on air supply.”

“And security?” I ask.

Girault sits up in his chair. “Two dozen Vipers confirmed for the compound on our cue. The problem is—” He looks to Shattuck who nods in approval. “The problem is how do we pay them once crypto is worthless?”

“If the situation is bad enough and you control the food supply, they’ll have no need to take charge,” I reply. The answer is bad, but for now they need to know I’m working for them.

“Why wouldn’t they just obliterate us and drill into the safe?” asks Kaplan.

“Disciplinary collars with distributed control should take care of that,” concludes Shattuck with deep satisfaction.

“If we can stave off the Event for another ten years,” follows Nakamura, “we’ll have robots for guards.”

“Maybe,” rejoins Kaplan.

“This isn’t an economics argument,” I say, examining their exchange, “but if you invest in your security forces now, they won’t present problems in the future.” Puzzled looks ripple across their faces. “Pay for their kids’ college tuition, their daughter’s quinceañera, a down payment on their house. Your loyalty to them now will determine their loyalty once...you know.”

Shattuck grimaces again. Kaplan rolls her eyes. Girault furrows his brow. Nakamura studies Shattuck. Petrovna is the only one to whom it made a modicum of sense.

After a few moments of awkward reserve, Shattuck chuckles. “Pay for a couple of bar mitzvahs, and it all works out.” He throws his head back in ridicule of my suggestion.

An intense silence follows, during which Girault shifts in his seat, looks to Petrovna and Nakamura, and composes himself to speak. “It doesn’t matter where we are,” he says, “the ecosystems of even the best bunkers are fragile. Solar panels and water filtration systems need to be replaced at regular intervals. Anyone of us can bring in disease at the moment of collapse. There’s no way to control for plague on our crops. Even the most fortified shelters are still susceptible to acid rain and radiation. Microplastics are already everywhere. Wouldn’t the best solution be to funnel funds into Nexura’s space pods and train security forces for”—he hesitates—“extraterrestrial survival?”

“Star Alliance is making rapid advancements on self-constructing biodomes,” Kaplan remarks. “In ten to twelve years, we should be able to sustain Martian terraforms.”

“Space pods are designed to connect to each other and Nexura’s orbital outposts,” add Nakamura. “We could manage eighteen months in pods and head to Mars if all else fails.”

“Would you take others?” I ask.

Nakamura sighs. “As many as we can, though space is limited.”

“Space is vast.”

“Dr. Castañeda,” quips Kaplan in request for compliance.

“How many?”

“Mmm, five thousand. Ten thousand if we’re lucky.”

“But the Lunar Ark has already preserved the DNA of 2 million species, with another 4 million in progress,” explains Kaplan. “We’d be able to recreate the vast majority of Earth’s species”—she pauses—“given the opportunity.”

“And everyone else?” I ask.

“We can’t save *everyone*, Castañeda,” scoffs Petrovna.

Shattuck, still crisscross on the windowsill, watches a backhoe carrying a load of black soil towards the backside of the compound. Betrayal bubbles up in his reddening cheeks, yet he swallows hard and turns back to face us wearing a synthetic smile.

“There would still be a lot of use for Sagehaven,” I proffer in attempts to assuage Shattuck. “As a terrestrial backup. You could use it to launch pods and train security if you do decide on extraterrestrial alternatives.”

A wave of mumbling curls through the room as the desert elite study their options. The cream of the capitalist crop brings in a Noqueño PhD who promotes circular economics and flirts with socialism to hear their open discussion about how to survive the Event that they’re absolutely sure will happen in the next ten years. You can’t make this stuff up.

Why did I placate Shattuck? Why assume the position of the detached consultant in the direst of circumstances?

Perplexity, shock, disbelief or a concoction of the three spawn swarms of inchoate concerns as I try to piece together the puzzle.

Like a MapReduce algorithm that splits operations into small chunks, processes them in parallel and aggregates the data for consolidated output, it occurs to me that each of the five is trying to evade an apocalypse of their own making. Shattuck’s server farms guzzle enough electricity in twenty-four hours to supply nineteen million households of four people each with a day’s worth of electricity. Kaplan’s APAC fuels Lusix’s rampant rainforest destruction, six trillion Hemrikan dollars-worth of arms manufactures each year and war campaigns across the Middle East. Girault’s Azania Investments is the parent company to the biggest factory farming operation

in the world, releasing tons of toxic chemicals into the air each year and causing thousands of premature deaths. Petrovna's Ayotian Prosperity Initiative has cornered the housing markets across the continent, jacking up prices and fueling unprecedented homelessness. Meanwhile, API has incited every conservative coup in Gonawi over the last thirty years, controlling which companies set up shop in those countries and where API's puppet governments send the continent's most prized resources.

As if the algorithm were spitting out results, my cheeks drop at the thought that it's not even a remote possibility for any of them to direct their efforts to forestalling the Event. They'd rather suck up all the wealth while they still can and let the system fuck itself in the ass than stand tall against their might of their own destruction.

My own daughter won't live to be thirty. They'll just shrug and board their space pods as billions perish. Humanity will eke out an existence in airlocked space stations and asteroid jumpers and never again breathe in the fresh air of a morning breeze.

Why don't I just say that? Why not take a crack at convincing them that they could be heroes instead of flight-ready cowards?

As I open my mouth to speak, Petrovna shifts towards me and asks, "Dr. Castañeda, as you can see, the situation is complex. As scarcity increases, we'll need to evaluate how markets adapt to shock and how to capitalize on the markets for food and water. We'll also need to assess Earth-bound and space-based solutions for survival and their respective economies under extreme conditions."

"I see that."

"What Mrs. Petrovna is saying," clarifies Kaplan, "is that we'd like to keep you on retainer as a consultant—to run simulations and make informed predictions."

Five of the most powerful and wealthiest people on the planet study me as I sit up straight and process their proposal. My hands are clammy. Sweat rises on the back of my neck. The silence is growing heavy now.

When the quiet becomes unbearable, Nakamura leans forward, squints at me and says, “Will you be left behind, Castañeda? Or will you chart the last frontier?”