

Athena's Choice

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June 8, 2099

Chapter 1

Priority Message Received

The words appeared suddenly on the screen in a bright, blue font.

Priority Message Available

Blurry-eyed, the night-shift communications director slid her chair down a darkened aisle illuminated by the glow of computerized terminals. With a sideways glance, she peeked at the clock on the office wall — still ten minutes until the next shift change, far too much time to leave a priority message unopened. Her right hand reached up to tug at the collar of her crisp uniform, pulling at it near the point where it had begun to dig into her neck. Her index finger clicked into the air. The priority message opened.

As she scanned through it, the coms director quickly fell back into her chair. “What...the...?” she muttered faintly. Her eyebrows tilted downward. “Aasha!” she called out into the empty room. “Please connect me at once to Captain Valerie Bell.”

Seconds later, the captain’s gruff voice could be heard echoing against the walls. “What is it, coms? This had better be important.”

“Yes, captain. I know,” explained the Public Safety communications director. Her words trembled as they left her mouth. “I have a priority message for you. It’s about the stolen Lazarus Genome. It’s an order to bring someone in for questioning about it. Some girl from the Northern Woods. A teenager named Athena Vosh.”

“What?” Captain Bell groaned loudly on the other end of the call. “I don't have time for this. What are you talking about? Who the hell is Athena Vosh?”

Athena Vosh

November 20, 2089

Ms. Washington, 3rd Grade History Class

Report on Events of the 21st Century

Ok, so the first thing to know is that all the trouble started when the oceans got really high. Like when you're taking a bath and forget to turn off the water and it starts spilling out onto the floor. All this land that used to be land got covered up and all these people that used to have a place to live had to find somewhere else to go. The news called these people 'climb-it refugees.' I think because they had to climb to higher ground to get away from the water.

The big problem was that there were already people living on the higher ground and back then everyone used to be very bad at sharing. Some of the higher ground people even decided to kill the climb-it refugees in the name of selfish defense. Those people were called 'terrorists' and they were very bad.

So the terrorists were killing all the climb-it refugees and the old governments decided they had to do something. They made a special disease to kill all the bad people. It was special cause when you got sick you wouldn't know you were sick for a long time and you could keep passing the disease on just like rolls at Thanksgiving dinner. Lots of bad people got sick and then a bit later - poof - they were dead. The disease only killed men so they called it the Y-fever.

After the Fever worked so well the governments were really happy because they killed all the terrorists but this was a case of Be Careful What You Wish For. Pretty soon all the men everywhere and even some women too were getting sick and dying and no one could stop it. Ms. Washington says the last man on earth died in January of 2051. That was a long time ago. I've never seen a man in my whole life and neither have Eliz or Yara so yeah they're probably all still dead.

Things were really bad when everyone was dying cause the men kept fighting each other to the better end. My mom called it a fishes cycle. After that the Founding Mothers came along and they made new governments and new ways for in-semen-nation so that my mom could have me and so that other moms could have all the daughters they wanted. Then everything was better. Today we live in the best country on earth and that is the North American Union. That's what the Founding Mothers made from the old countries. Ms. Washington doesn't like it when I say we live in the best country ever but deep down I think she knows its true.

Educator Score and Notes: 10/10 for content. 6/10 for grammar.

Yes, Athena, while it's true the N.A.U. is a great place to live, we are only one country of many. All the modern nations strive together for peace, prosperity, and cooperation. Nationalism is a thing of the past. Don't be afraid to expand your horizons! ;)

June 8, 2099

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Thousands of kilometers from the excitement unfolding in the heart of Public Safety headquarters, Athena Vosh awoke in the pitch-black of her private bedroom. Her senses took their time in coming to. Seconds before, she had been immersed in a strange dream featuring talking animals and unusual places. Now awakened, however, the images slowly faded, and only the powerful memories of her excitement and fear remained. Eventually, the more familiar world around her came into focus, starting with a cool puddle of drool soaked into her pillow.

Half-asleep, she swiped clumsily into the air with her left hand. In response, her digital contact lenses awoke. They displayed a wealth of information directly onto her field of vision: time, temperature, news, messages. In the top right corner of her display, a bright red asterisk glowed. Lazily, she double-tapped her index finger into the air, and the asterisk opened into a message. It read:

A,

I went for a run, so you're on your own for breakfast. You wanna do lunch by the lake when I get back?

-N

Athena swiped left and the message dismissed itself.

“Good morning, Athena,” called out a disembodied voice from within the walls. It spoke in a soft and soothing tone. “I see that you are awake. Would you like me to let in some light?”

“Noooooo,” Athena groaned. She grabbed her pillow and squeezed it tightly on top of her head. “It’s too early.”

“But you asked me to alert you at ten AM,” insisted the soothing voice. It belonged to Athena’s AASHA unit — her Advanced Artificially-Intelligent Scheduler and Home Assistant.’ “Do you no longer wish for me to wake you?”

Beneath her sheets, Athena brought her knees up to her chest. She curled tightly into a ball. “Gooo awayyyy,” she moaned. “It’s not morning yet.”

The lights in the bedroom increased slowly from zero to ten percent lux. Fruity perfumes released themselves into the air: citrus with a touch of mango. “I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Athena, but the sun has been up for hours. Do you wish to continue sleeping until noon?”

Safely under her covers, Athena opened her eyes and swiped right on her display to reveal the current time. The numbers glowed brightly green in the bottom right corner of her home screen: 9:57 AM. “Alright... alright,” she gasped, throwing off her sheets. “I’m getting up. I’m getting up.”

“That’s wonderful news,” replied the home computer. “Allow me to let in some daylight.”

Droplets of thick, purple pigment began to drain from out of the large window placed directly above Athena’s empress-sized bed. Simultaneously, late-morning sun poured into the room.

At forty square meters, Athena’s spacious sleeping chamber contained a wide array of clutter. Across from her bed stood a small wooden desk covered in used brushes and half-empty bottles of paint. Along the walls leaned dozens of canvases, each depicting something different and all at various stages of completion. Colorless self-portraits rested next to pastoral sunsets. Higher up on the walls hung a collection of famous prints: *The Starry Night*, *The Kiss*, *La Clairvoyance*, *Water Lilies*, and many more.

In the farthest corner of her room — taking up ample wall space that Athena believed could have been better used for more artwork — stood a massive, boxy piece of black furniture. Beside it, clumped into a pile, lay a mismatched heap of once-worn dresses, pants, blouses, and skirts.

Frequently, Athena swore to herself that she would get around to organizing that pile of clothes. She needed to decide which discarded outfits to keep for wearing a second time and which to dump back into the boxy, black clothing-printer so that they might be rewoven into something new.

Giving way to a giant yawn, Athena stretched out her limbs and felt the pleasurable sensation of life returning into them. She crawled to her feet, and gazed out of the large window above her bed. Outside, a view of idyllic wilderness greeted her. Tall maple trees, laden with owl and squirrels' nests, towered over a stone path leading down to a crystal-blue lake. At the edge of the lake, an empty easel waited in front of a chair that faced out across the water.

"Aasha?" asked Athena, still staring out of her window. "How much time do I have left?"

"You have approximately 95 minutes of ideal daylight remaining," replied the home computer.

Athena headed quickly in the direction of her en suite bathroom. Small, yet modern, the bathroom contained nothing but a mirror; a black sink; a smart-toilet, and an empty, rectangular space in which to shower. As Athena entered, she came to a stop in front of the full-length mirror and placed her thumb squarely onto its surface. In response, an attractive, disembodied face appeared off to the side.

"Please hold still," cooed Aasha, the owner of the face. "Your test results will be ready in approximately 12 seconds."

Athena nodded in response and yawned, while examining her own reflection in the mirror. The image staring back at her had been genetically-engineered at conception to meet all the definitions of modern beauty. She possessed large, almond-shaped eyes; shining, flawless skin; and high, distinguishing cheekbones. She looked like a goddess, brought to life — but she was not the only one.

Some of Athena's particular facial features had been very popular in 2080, the year of her birth. In school growing up, she had often shared a classroom with two or three other girls whose nose or mouth looked exactly

like her nose or mouth. Like a grade with too many “Tiffanys” or “Brooklyns.” What set Athena apart from those other girls, though, were her mesmerizing gray eyes. They enchanted onlookers as they alternated between brighter shades of marble and those of a darker slate — like a rain cloud that couldn’t decide on the severity of its mood. In fact, her eyes were so remarkable, they were the reason for her being named Athena in the first place. Before her birth, Athena’s mother had planned to use another name for her only daughter. However, upon seeing Athena’s remarkable gray eyes for the very first time — and at the suggestion of the delivery-room doctor — the impromptu decision was made to name the newborn girl after the legendary gray-eyed goddess of wisdom: Pallas Athena.

“Your examination is complete,” announced Aasha. In the mirror, Athena’s reflection disappeared, and a full-scale illustration of her body took its place.

“I’m detecting,” continued the home computer, “the presence of some slight inflammation in your lower abdomen — here.” The illustration in the mirror zoomed in to show the area in question in vivid color and detail. “I’m going to add a new bacteria to your diet that should help reduce it. Also, you have the beginnings of an upper respiratory infection, but we can cure it before you experience any symptoms. Your implants are all operating properly. Your body fat currently stands at 13 percent, would you like to make a change to that number?”

“What?” replied Athena. She had not been paying attention. “Oh, body fat. Just whatever’s popular this week. I don’t care.”

The gray-eyed girl's night-shirt demagnetized and dropped to the floor. Lost in thought, she stepped nude into the empty, rectangular space. From out of concealed holes contained within the walls, pressurized jets of water appeared, rejuvenating her flesh from head to toe. Contained within the spray, specialized microbes ate away at pockets of bacteria on her skin, leaving in their wake a clean and pleasantly tingly feeling. Athena was oblivious to it all, however, as her mind remained elsewhere.

“Aasha, do you know anything about dreams?”

“Dreams can refer to a series of thoughts, images, or sensations which occur in a person's mind during sleep. They can also refer to aspirations which—”

“No, I know all that,” interrupted Athena. She tilted her head to avoid a spray of water pointed directly toward her mouth. “What I mean is, I keep seeing this strange building in my head when I close my eyes. I think it’s from a dream I had last night. I was standing in a field. And there was this building in front of me. It was stone and dark, covered in vines and falling apart. I’m awake now, but I can’t get the sight of that crumbling building out of my head. I don’t recognize it except it’s...somehow familiar. I feel like I’ve seen it before.” She dug the tips of her top teeth into the soft flesh of her lower lip. “I think I need to paint it.”

“That sounds like a wonderful idea,” encouraged Aasha.

When the shower ended, spurts of hot-air pulsed out from the wall, causing Athena’s hair to dry and detangle itself almost instantly. Long, brown strands fell lightly onto her shoulders. Next, she held out her arms to receive her daily outfit. Aasha had printed for her a new dress covered with large petals of overlapping violet, crimson, and turquoise colors. The swaths of bright fabric swooned together in a style reminiscent of Georgia O’Keeffe. Athena grabbed the dress with both hands and held it against herself, causing it to snap immediately into place. The magnetic implants located within her hips and shoulders ensured the garment fit snugly, but comfortably, in all the right places.

Cleaned and dressed, she headed out of her bathroom, ready to greet the new day.

Athena Vosh

January 29, 2090

Ms. Butler, 4th Grade Self-Awareness Class

What I Want To Be When I Grow Up

When my mom is feeling sad she likes to look at beautiful things like sunsets. She says that seeing the sky full of different colors reminds her that the world is big and beautiful and that her problems will all be ok. Sometimes though a person can't go and look at a sunset because its the wrong time of day. That's why people have art. Art is like a sunset you can look at anytime you need to.

That's why when I grow up I want to be an artist. I want to paint pictures that people can see anytime they want. I want to make things that are beautiful and that make people say "I can get through this trouble I'm in. I'm alright. Everything is going to be ok."

Educator's Score and Notes: 10/10 for content. 7/10 for grammar

That's wonderful, Athena. The world needs as many artists as we can get. I'll speak to the program office about enrolling you in some more visual media and painting classes.