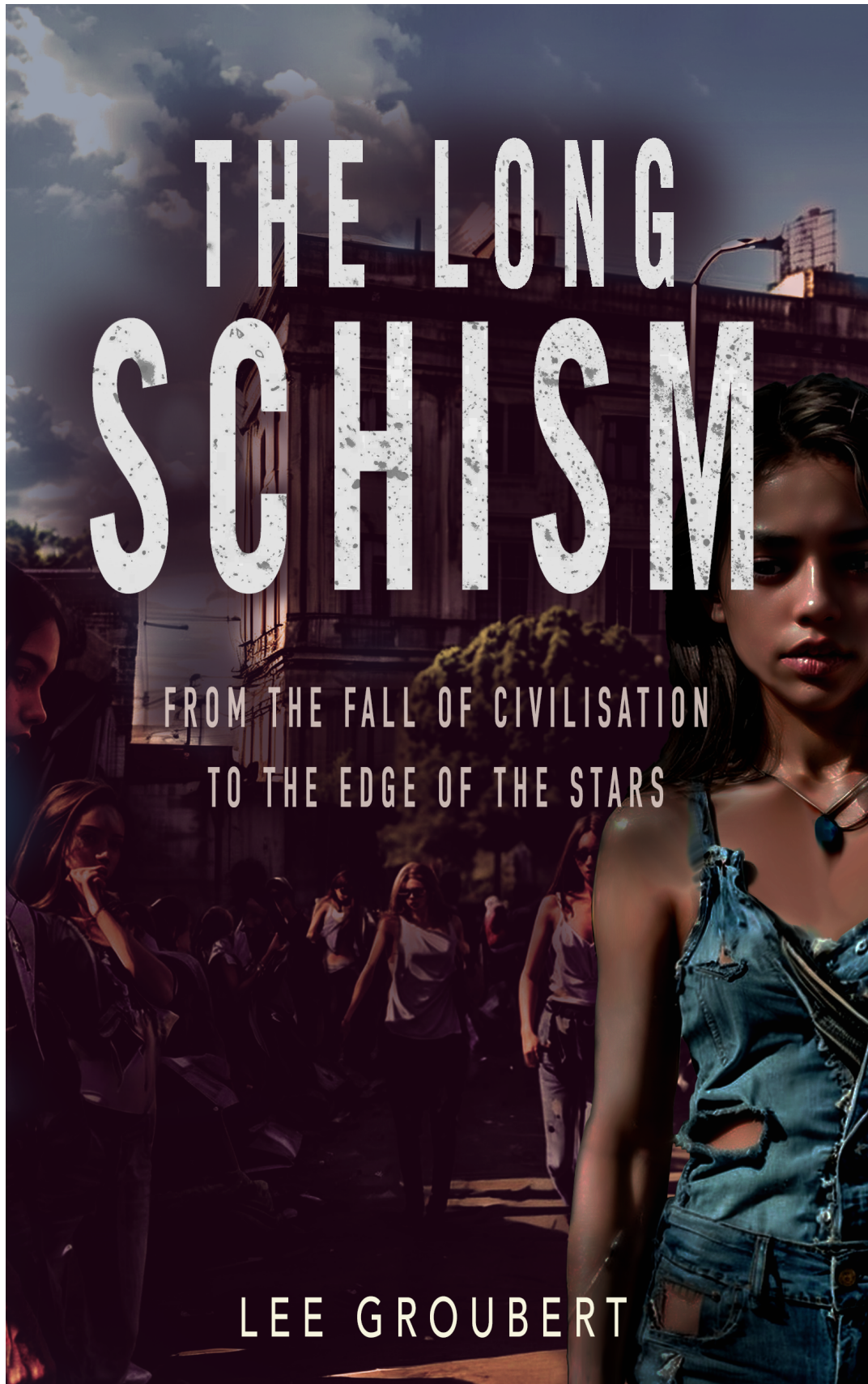


Teaser: THE LONG SCHISM



Why Is It Always the Same Pattern?

I had gone out that day to District IX, together with Elisa, Jorgina, Qalma, and a shifting handful of other grrllss. No grand plan, no declared purpose—just the shared itch to move, to breathe somewhere that wasn't the stale interior of the Malaka Bar.

District IX had once been, well, neat. Stacked housing, little shops selling questionable taste, narrow service lanes, municipal blocks with names nobody bothered using anymore. But now? Facades shedding concrete like old skin, rust creeping down drainpipes, balconies stitched together with laundry lines, wire, and bad faith. The tram tracks were still there somewhere under the cracked asphalt. Everything smelled faintly of wet dust, piss, engine oil, and overheated plastic, as if the whole district had been simmering too long without ever quite catching fire.

Sad.

“Are we today seriously rotting here again?” Elisa had said, shoving her empty glass away. “I swear the air in here died three hours ago.”

Even the bar's failure was tired. The sign outside only lit up in fragments, so from the street it read *Mla..a* more often than not. The place sweated, sticky tables, warped floor from old spills and older leaks, nicotine-yellow walls beneath layers of half-scraped posters for concerts, and protests, and missing people and half-hearted graffiti. A fan turned lazily overhead, pushing the same dead heat from one corner to another.

“It's not air,” Alma muttered. “It's recycled regrets.”

“And bad decisions,” Jorgina added. “Mostly yours, Eli.”

“Cute,” Elisa shot back. “My only possessions: decisions.”

Someone must have suggested it, though later no one claimed authorship. It didn't matter. What mattered was motion, the illusion of choice. Sitting around for hours, nursing watered-down drinks and watching the same faces circle the same tired conversations had begun to feel like a rehearsal for a life none of us wanted.

“XXes need friction,” Elisa said as they stepped into the street. “Otherwise we rust out.”

“Rust?” Qalma snorted softly. “Grrll, we’re past rust. We’re mold.”

“Proud mold,” Elisa said.

Outside, evening had not cooled anything. The heat just sat lower now, trapped between the buildings and the sagging web of cables overhead. Water gathered in broken sections of pavement where pipes leaked underground, reflecting pieces of neon, sky, and ruin without ever making the place look cleaner. A municipal bin lay on its side with its guts dragged halfway down the block. Somewhere farther off, metal slammed against metal, followed by laughter too sharp to sound happy.

Maybe there were still a few well-behaved kids sitting at home, pretending to care about homework while secretly yearning for direction, purpose, and belonging.

But ever since December 12—no one spoke of it in detail anymore, not because it was forgotten but because it was too present—school had simply ceased to function. Closed indefinitely, they said at first, as though “indefinitely” were a manageable span of time.

“Indefinitely,” Jorgina said, dragging the word out. “Like, wow. Big scary word. Means absolutely nothing.”

“It means ‘don’t ask again,’” Alma said. “Which is basically never.”

"What did we learn?" she quoted.

"I don't know, madame," Elisa said.

and we all answered in unison:

We don't fracken know either. I guess we learned not to do it again."

And Alma finished:

"I'm fracked I know what we did."

THE STREET was quicker because it had no theory of itself. It learned through abrasion. By corners you learned not to turn alone, by checkpoints that came and

went according to moods you didn't control, by stairwells that smelled of urine and old smoke and sometimes hid a body for half a day before anyone bothered moving it. It taught by shortage, by rumour, by speed. In District IX, every route doubled as a lesson in what the city had stopped repairing.

Sometimes you laughed—not because anything was funny, but because thinking about it too clearly would have made everything heavier. You would have had to admit how thin the line had become.

What line?

I had shrugged. "Exactly."

That was how it was back then, I would later say. Primary socialization—family, school, all the careful scaffolding that once eased children into the world—collapsed both in importance and in duration. Childhood shortened, compressed into a few unstable years before dissolving into something else entirely.

Why?

"Like there's a big red button someone pushed," Elisa said. "Oops, society broke. Should probably unplug and plug it back in."

"Forgot to plug it back in," Jorgina added. "My bad." And kicked a can down the street.

The can clattered along the curb, skidding past a boarded kiosk and a bus stop with no bus line left to serve it. The shelter roof had partially collapsed; one of the plastic panels was missing, the other was covered in ads for products nobody in the district could afford.

Or needed.

Behind it, the upper stories of an office block stood black and empty, while the lower floor still hosted a pharmacy with steel shutters, plus a bakery that opened only three mornings a week, when there was flour and when there weren't fights outside.

In history books you would read that it began on December 12th, or in December, or as a consequence of the events following December 12th. In case history books were ever written again. But it hadn't been a *moment*.

Not?

No. It had been a process. Slow. Petty. Boring, even. Death by a thousand “yeah, we'll fix that later,” each one filed neatly under '*not my problem*' until — surprise — it was everyone's problem.

The breakdown—if it still deserved that slightly dramatic label—started quietly, with the family getting... optional. Once, it had been the smallest fortress. Not a great one, not bug-free, but at least something resembling a structure. A place to huddle inside the padded cave of the state and pretend the outside wasn't already leaking in through the ceiling. Then the padding wore off. Then the ceiling followed. And people started cushioning.

At first it was subtle. Drinks earlier in the day. Pills passed around like breath mints. Something that took the edge off, and then something that reminds you why you took the first thing in the first place.

The adults called it coping. The kids didn't call it anything. It was just part of the operating system now.

It didn't crash things. It just addressed lag.

Reactions came a fraction too late. Conversations looped like broken audio files. Decisions got made somewhere between “maybe” and “eh, good enough.” You could practically see the loading wheel spinning behind people's eyes. Presence became optional DLC. Downloadable Content. Security update. Update now. Update tonight.

Later, the same logic scaled up. Different packaging. Same idea.

Little bottles. Tabs. Powders. Bright colors, bad chemistry, excellent distribution. The stuff that would eventually become DDDs—cheap, light, easy to move, easier to forget why you took them. Not good. Never good. But efficient.

Tradable.

Perfect for a world that had quietly switched from *quality* to *velocity*. It didn't have to be good. It just had to move. The faster, the better.

During that first year—if you can even call it a year, time was already freelancing by then—I'd later thought things were still manageable. Or at least interruptible. Like a system glitch you could still click away if you hit "cancel" fast enough.

Bodies were smaller. Tempers flared, but you could still pause them mid-animation. A teacher with enough nerve could step in, raise a voice, bluff a little authority, maybe negotiate like a tired diplomat trying to keep a war from happening during lunch break.

"Break it up," they'd snap, like it was still a command and not a nostalgic suggestion.

And weirdly? Sometimes it worked.

The classrooms held together too. Barely—but they did. Cracked walls, flickering lights, desks carved into abstract art, but still technically usable. Like a phone with a shattered screen that somehow still responds if you press hard enough and believe in it.

Authority hadn't vanished yet. It hovered. In tone. In posture. In that shared group hallucination of "this is how things go," even if nobody could quite remember why. But it was thinning.

You could see it in the micro-delays. The half-second pauses. The way a teacher would start a sentence and then... forget the middle part and just skip to the end like no one would notice. Everyone noticed. No one cared enough to say it out loud. By the time we hit what used to be called middle school.

Yeah.

Patch removed. Feature deprecated. Support ended. The building showed it first—because buildings always snitch. Sections sealed off with warped boards, ceiling panels missing like bad dental work, water stains spreading across the walls like maps of places nobody was going anymore.

"This place is a joke," Elisa said, watching a teacher fail in real time.

“My bad,” Jorgina replied, “I missed the punchline.”

The older students were bigger, faster, and significantly more interested in testing limits that technically still existed somewhere in a forgotten authority handbook.

Teachers aged like milk left out in the sun—fast, uneven, slightly tragic. Shoulders collapsed inward. Voices thinned out. Commands downgraded into polite requests, then into hopeful suggestions, then into nothing.

Some adapted. Some withdrew. Some just logged out, physically or otherwise.

And some were there, but not really. Running on background processes. Minimal interaction. Maximum drift.

And after that level? Nothing.

Nothing?

Sorry. I mean no next stage. No upgrade path. No hidden level if you pressed the right buttons. Just... blank. An empty menu screen with one option left:

Quit.

Corridors emptied in weird patterns—lockers hanging open like broken mouths, metal doors bent out of shape, entire stretches echoing like the building had already moved on and forgotten to take the walls with it.

“The street’s the real school anyway,” the headboy said once, way too proud of himself, like he’d discovered that fire burns.

“Yo,” I said. “No lunch breaks, though.”

"And, whoopee! No sports!" Elodie shouted.

How wrong she was.

None of us needed a college education. Or so we thought. We saw ourselves as *street-smart*.

That line stuck. The street of life. Half joke, half warning, fully accurate.

Parents were like present-ish. Physically there, mentally somewhere between exhaustion and chemical assistance. Worn down by work, by everything, by nothing specific enough to fix. And when they weren't working, they were unwinding. Aggressively.

"Look at them sitting at home! It reminds me of that comic...what's it called again?" Alma said.

"You can read?" I inquired.

"They're all wearing those connected super-3D glasses, that stream directly from the server to your synapses." Alma said.

"Watch out, or I'll get directly to your synapses," said a senior bloke leaning against a broken locker. At Alma's sidelong glance, he hastily moved away.

"Yo! Necromacer!" Elisa exclaimed.

"Necrocaster. The comic was called 'Electric Land' or something," I said.

"That wasn't a comic, that was art," Elodie exclaimed.

At home...

Home?

Apartments carried the smell—sweet, burnt, synthetic, fermented. Bottles stacking. Tabs dissolving. Screens glowing like they were doing the thinking for everyone else.

"Just stay out of trouble," my mother would say, eyes still on her screen.

"Define trouble," I'd mutter before I left.

"You just learn: life's a bitch," I said the other day.

"And then you die," Qalma added.

"Optimism," Elisa said. "Love it."

We clocked something early, though.

Numb doesn't move well. Slow doesn't survive. And lag gets you deleted. So we didn't lean in. Not like that. We dipped in, sure—but controlled. Edges, not escape. Enough to take the sharpness off, not enough to blur the map. Because out there, timing mattered. Angles mattered. Reaction speed mattered. And nothing kills timing like a brain running on delay.

Meanwhile, whole sections of the city were drifting—soft focus, slow reactions, people moving like the world would politely wait for them to catch up. But it didn't. It never does. No one felt like a victim. Not then. Not me, not Elli, not Jorgy, not Qalma. That word came later, packaged nicely for people who needed explanations. For us, things just... were.

"I'm thinking: hasn't it always been like this?" Elisa asked once, almost serious.

I shrugged. "Avoid thinking, bitch."

By eight or nine—or ten, give or take, who was counting—I was already part of a loose gang. We moved through half-ruined districts like it was normal—broken stairwells, exposed rebar, rooftops that actively discouraged standing still.

Back then, the gang wasn't about territory or reputation. Not yet. It was about flow. Move. Take. Don't get stuck.

Food first. Always. Anything small, tradable, vaguely edible. Canned stuff, protein bars, those fake energy drinks that tasted like melted plastic with ambition. Later, tools. Knives, cutters, wires, batteries. Things that made the next run easier. It wasn't random. It just looked like that if you weren't paying attention. There were patterns. Routes. Blind spots. Systems pretending to work. We learned fast.

Construction sites got stripped clean—copper first, always copper, then tools, then whatever hadn't been bolted down by someone optimistic.

"A generator," Elodie said, gazing longingly up at a massive thing hanging from a crane high above us.

"Good accessory for one of the real-world haciendas in District XXI," I said.

"Good thinking. Best you can do: climb up there, cut the shit off, and I'll catch it," said Alma Qalma.

"I can easily carry it in my ass pocket, no problem," said Jorginina.

Realism.

Abandoned apartments—forced doors, half-emptied rooms, the quiet question of who'd been there before you. That meant risk. Fewer of the residents or owners. Because other groups were out there too. Not organized—yet—but close enough. Same hunger, same logic, same bad timing. Most encounters ended in nothing. A look. A pause. Silent math under broken lights. Sometimes you walked away. Sometimes you didn't.

"Not worth a bloody nose," Elisa would say.

"Depends on who's hanging by the nose," said Alma.

And we'd move. But not always. Sometimes it tipped. Fast. Messy. Over before it made sense. No rules beyond "don't lose."

Later, we got smarter.

"Boring. Why are we always hitting the same spots?" Jorg asked.

"Because they restock, Einsteinia," Elisa said.

"Predictability rulez," I added.

"Where do you steal your beautiful words?" Jorgina asked.

Predictable meant exploitable. Supermarkets absorbed losses. Slow systems. Delayed reactions. Small shops didn't. So we stayed away.

Sometimes we took from people directly. Not often. Not preferred. But it happened.

"Drop that shit," Alma said once.

"No," the man replied just before Alma kicked him out of his Chenoussi suit.

Afterwards, no one talked about it. Split the goods. Move on. That was the rule too.

No dwelling. No storytelling. No emotional side quests. Just function. What we built — without naming it — was a system: movement, extraction, dispersal. Repeat. Not about winning.

“Feels like a game,” Shelisa said once.

“You're kidding,” I replied.

“Games have a reset button,” Jorgina added.

Over time, we got better. Faster. Quieter. More deliberate. What started as grabbing turned into taking. What started as reacting turned into planning. And somewhere in that shift, the gang stopped being a loose group of kids.