

The Empty City - Chapter 1 - Early Summer

by Berit Ellingsen

1: Early Summer

The apartment building was nineteen stories tall with six identical faces, each presenting three rows of balconies with gleaming glass railing. It was one of five towers constructed on reclaimed marshland north of the city. The area had been too wet for development, but modern draining and construction techniques made the towers possible, creating much needed living space for the city. To make the overpriced apartments more attractive, a train line was built to the towers. Every day the trains transported the young and successful and the not so young and less successful who belonged to the five buildings.

Brandon Minamoto left the train station and started on the path to the honeycomb towers. The glare from the bright light and the steel surfaces of the station faded in the evening darkness. The serpentine footpath was lit by white, swan-necked lamps. Nocturnal insects flew up from the moist grass and into the artificial light. The sound from the motorway and the city was a distant song in the humid air.

He drew in the scent of mowed lawn in the park, exhaust fumes from the motorway and rotten water from the surrounding marsh. What a quiet and beautiful night! His body was soft and pliant, even his shoulders and neck, after a long day at work.

Steps of dark granite led up to glass doors framed in polished steel. The front and sides of the foyer were all glass. The granite in the stairs continued on the floor inside. The building admitted him with a sigh.

The foyer was empty. He only saw people there during rush hour in the morning. Then his neighbors looked faint and distant, as if they weren't real. The recessed lights in the ceiling illuminated the foyer with a golden light. All four elevator doors were open, their call panels shining green. Next to the elevators, a wide staircase led up into the building. He disliked the greedy gape of the stairs and turned away as he passed it. He entered the far left elevator and pressed button number eighteen.

The elevator opened to a long hallway in the east corner of the building. The floor had a burgundy carpet patterned with white and gold. The walls were as red as the carpet. White glass funnels cast a bright light into the ceiling and down onto the floor. He followed the hallway north. Behind the deep red walls, bodies were sleeping, dreaming. He found that knowledge very uncomfortable. His own bed stood along the outer wall instead of the corridor.

Last fall he had crossed the mountain massif north of the city on foot. It had felt like the stone and the sky cared about him. The sun warmed his back and the stiff mountain grass whispered when he waded through it, as if it knew he was there and appreciated his presence. He missed that kindness and awareness from the walls at home. But the dead glass and concrete couldn't afford what he wanted, so he remained disgusted by the bodies that dreamed too close.

