



Prologue

In the beginning, Rubik created the Cube.

And the Cube was without form, and void; and darkness was upon its faces.

*And Rubik said, let there be light. And there was light. And Rubik saw the light, that it was good.
And Rubik divided the light into its colours.*

Red and white and orange and yellow and green and blue, He created them.

And Rubik saw all the colours that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.

Budapest, Hungary — 40 years later

“Oh, very good. Very good, indeed,” murmured Attila, marvelling at the cube brandished by his protégé.

Lara surveyed its well-worn corners, its wilted stickers and its faded colours with a muted awe. For Lara was a daughter of the Revolution, and she had not known a childhood of playthings and amusement and innocent fun. Sure, Attila, the museum curator, had regaled her of seditious stories of fun and games, and sure, she had allowed her wild imagination to humour the old man in these senile rambles, but did she really believe it all? No. Not really. At least, not until she had held that very Cube in her hands.

“C-C-CAREFUL!” hissed the old man, aggressively.

Lara looked up, startled. In all the time that she had known the museum curator, she had never seen him so worked up. Although, she now thought, it does make sense. The item that she was clutching onto held an immense amount of power — the power to vindicate this once-great historian, one whose reputation had suffered through a daily regimen of smears and slander. This flimsy wooden object, caked in dust and grime, mould and rot, had the power to maybe make things right again.

“Do you think this is really it? *The* original Cube?” she asked. To her, it still seemed unfathomable.

“Let’s see.”

She passed it up to Attila, who, letting go of the dusty bookshelf and leaning just on his cane, reached forward to grasp it. In his eagerness, however, Attila failed to notice that the bookshelf he was holding onto for support was about as unstable as he was, and, like a redwood that had lived and breathed and watched for a thousand years, gently plummeted to its demise.

“Ah, shoot.”



Attila mourned for the great tomes buried beneath the timber, lest they never be unearthed again. With a shrug of resignation, he returned to the task at hand, peering down and turning the Cube over and over clumsily in his arthritic fingers.

The museum archive room was effectively a repurposed basement, with boxes and shelves of what could only be described as “non-descript stuff” crammed haphazardly into the space, stretching from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling. The space was barely habitable, with all manner of smells and stains permeating a place that has felt the unforgiving passage of time.

And, yet, to Attila, it felt like home. A paradise. A temple of solitude. Mankind’s lasting tribute to their dalliance with fun. That is, Attila thought, until they find out about it.

Attila frowned. Not wishing to linger on such a distressing thought, he proceeded to study the Cube further. Colours were scattered randomly about its faces. The dim light of the archive room and the plumes of dust kicked up by his most recent ‘accident’ made it difficult for the old man to distinguish between the already-dulled stickers.

He sighed.

“Attila.”

“Attila!”

Lara’s warning cut through Attila’s reverie. Fully lucid once more, he glanced over at his apprentice, who was frantically gesturing for him to be alert, but silent.

There were voices. Their eyes darted upwards. The voices were drawing nearer. Heavy footsteps shook the ceiling and imparted life into the sleeping cobwebs, which, throwing off their dusty garments, danced mournfully in the darkness.

The boots came to a halt above them, and their owners spoke in that harsh utilitarian bastardisation of Hungarian.

Picturing his sanctuary being torn to the ground by these State-sanctioned thugs, Attila dithered frantically, drowning in perspiration.

“What should we do?” whispered Lara. She was slightly taken aback by the rapid evaporation of the old man’s confidence.

“Quick! You! Take it! Solve it!” croaked Attila, barely able to utter his words.

“Solve it? What? Why?” responded Lara, in kind.

“You’ve read the scripture. If this really is the Cube, then this might be our only chance.”

Lara stood in disbelief. Part of her wanted to escape, and to leave this zany old hermit to his fantasies. The other part of her wanted to give in to the pressure, and to just surrender. Only some long-forgotten fragment of her being wanted to partake in this hare-brained scheme for survival, and, yet, there she stood.



“But why me? This is your life’s work!”

Attila shook his head apologetically.

“I can’t. Not in time.”

Lara nodded dutifully and took the Cube.

“I’ve never...” she mumbled. “I’ve never actually solved one of these before.”

Attila squinted. Whether in concentration or in panic, she could not tell.

“Remember the lessons I taught you. Remember—”

Rifle butts hammered on the rickety floorboards above them, and commands rained down.

The cross! Of course! Lara jolted into action, and her trembling but nimble fingers turned the Cube this way and that, left and right and right once more...

The enemy pounded at the door. First, with insincerely polite knocks, and, as frustration grew, ever more violent thumps.

The white face was complete.

There was a momentary silence as the men at the door reconsidered their strategy.

Some edges locked into place, and the first two layers were complete. Attila let out a sigh of relief. The old man would normally have collapsed under the near-insurmountable stress, but pure adrenaline kept him upright.

BANG! BANG! RAT-A-TAT-TAT!

The tragic wail of rifles unloading was deafening for the pair trapped inside. Each shot, each pull of the trigger, decimating their dwindling resolve. Soon, the door was breached.

But Lara was so close, Attila thought. His eyes remained firmly fixed on the Cube and its rapid movements. Just a few more corners to go...

In they poured, dressed in military black, with blinding torches fixed on their rifle barrels.

“Slow. Too slow.” Attila muttered. He shook his head. Then, he turned away from his accomplice and closed his eyes, in seeming acceptance of his fate.

And, as the spotlights fell upon them, Lara, frantically, frenziedly, rattled and clacked away at the Cube.

So this is how it ends, she thought. How mundane. How... disappointing.



She glanced up. Attila had his hands atop his head, eyes closed, muttering a prayer of some sort. Ahead, officers in riot gear motioned for her to relinquish the Cube and drop to her knees. She gazed past them, and, in a moment that would forever be frozen in time, saw her future — damp and dark and suffocating. Disheartened, she glanced down again.

And yet, in her abrupt acceleration, Lara saw a different future. Away from the dingy little cell that she was destined for. Away from the shame and humiliation that she would feel, not only for herself, but on behalf of her loved ones. Away from the misery of this world, even. And it was just moves away.

The agents cautioned her again. Lasers danced on her chest.

“No!” she cried, bluntly. “Not today. Not like this.”

She held the Cube out in front of her with outstretched hands, and, in a final act of defiance, laid the finishing two twists onto the Cube, with the same conviction of a wordsmith punctuating the last sentence of their magnum opus.

At first, there was nothing.

But then, there was a click. And a flash, a blinding light, a peal of thunder.

And Attila and Lara knew no more.

—————

An incalculable length of time later, they awoke on a cold, damp tile, in utter darkness.

“Where are we?” asked Lara.

“Safe,” said a booming voice that seemed to come from all directions. Attila’s eyes widened. Light flooded into the space and they saw that they were sitting on the middle tile of nine large white squares. The roof was yellow. And as Attila took in the polychromatic walls, he whispered excitedly, “We’re in it!”

The voice boomed again, “You have done well. For years I have waited for this day. I—”

He paused.

“I am Rubik.” He said.

“Ever since my exile, many years ago, the enemies of fun and games have grown stronger and more assured in their dominance.

“First, as you know Attila, they banned games in public — board games, playground games, Monopoly, tag, chess, hide-and-peek... everything. Even school children — for you Attila were one of them — were made to walk soberly around the yard at lunch, their playgrounds having been demolished.”



Attila nodded along solemnly.

“And even before your birth Lara, a new government had declared games to be a needless distraction along the path to national glory. State officials made a point of purging their homes of the old amusements, as they were called, and soon, right thinking people joined in. A great nation demanded a serious populace, or so they said. In truth, they are scared — scared of the power of fun and games, scared of their ability to transport people to other times and places; indeed even beyond space or time. They are scared of bright imaginary worlds that would lick their dull real one hollow.

“So before long, the creeping fingers of the State had entered people’s homes, using telescreens that broadcast both ways and hidden microphones. Normal people had to get rid of their games too, or at least hide their use. But squads of secret police made their way door to door searching for and destroying hidden games, and arresting or shooting those that protested.

“Thus, a new monotonous world was ushered in — one of whispered jokes and hidden joy, of sober marches and empty conversation, of restrained laughter and stunted skipping. One could not play games with others. The risk was too great. All that was left, to a brave few, was my Cube. Alone, hidden in corners, out of the sight of prying telescreens, one could sit and solve the Cube over and over. And just be. The Cube was a symbol of resistance, and its image was painted by intrepid vandals on walls in deserted alleys.

“The one original Cube that I made forty years ago lay hidden, away from the unworthy. That is, until now!

“Lara. Attila.”

They stirred.

“You can fix this world.”

“How?” they asked in unison.

“In a moment, I will release you back into the archive room. The agents of the State will be unconscious, and the Cube will lie dormant once more. You must solve the Cube yet again. Except, this time, it will not be as straightforward.

“Each face represents a door to another world; worlds that our enemies would rather keep away from you. In these worlds a challenge awaits you. Complete a challenge, solve a face. Complete them all, and the forces of dullness will lose their power, and their hypnotic sway over our people will be gone. And fun and games will once more reign in the dominion of man.

“Go. Go forth, I bid you! And know that future of all our people depends on it!”

The Creator’s voice grew dimmer and the walls faded away and once again they were in the museum’s basement.



Prologue



“Did we—” Lara asked, voice quivering.

Attila blinked forcefully, eyes adjusting to the dim light of the archive room once more. Bodies clad in tactical armour were strewn in front of him. There they lay, pale and peaceful.

“We did.”

Attila glanced over at his partner in crime, who had already stooped down to pick the Cube up off of the unforgiving grit of the basement floor. She cradled the Cube with the tips of her fingers, and inspected it for the first time — properly, and not in mortal danger — rotating it gently, this way and that.

“And what do you suppose the Creator meant when He said that we needed to solve the Cube again? After all, it’s already—”