

The Dispossessed



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF URSULA K. LE GUIN

An American science fiction and fantasy writer, Ursula K. Le Guin was known throughout her life as “America’s greatest living science fiction writer.” Credited with revolutionizing the genre, she incorporated lyrical prose, Taoist influences, and themes of feminism, anarchism, and environmentalism into her many works. Le Guin’s name has become synonymous with the use of fictional worlds to examine the nature of reality, the issues at the heart of the human condition, and the possibilities and dangers that humans face as a species. Born in Berkeley, California to anthropologist parents, Le Guin studied at Radcliffe College and Columbia University, worked as a secretary and a French teacher, and eventually as a full-time writer of science fiction. Le Guin balked at being boxed-in as a sci-fi writer, and preferred to be known simply as a novelist. Nevertheless, her enduring influence on the genre inspired writers like David Mitchell (*Cloud Atlas*), Neil Gaiman (*American Gods*, *The Sandman*), Kelly Link (*Magic for Beginners*), and Jeff VanderMeer (*Annihilation*).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Dispossessed, published in 1974, tells the story of an anarchist, anti-capitalist society on Anarres, which has been struggling for over one hundred years against the legacy of its classist, capitalist twin planet Urras. Anarresti society embraces the Taoist principles of compassion, humility, and frugality, and operates within an anarcho-syndicalist structure in which food, possessions, domiciles, and work assignments are shared openly. Money and class do not exist, and the desire of the Anarresti people to be free from the bonds of capitalism and classism have, for all intents and purposes, been achieved—however, Anarresti society faces new ills and evils which threaten to upend the “utopia” that has been created on the desert moon of Urras. The countercultural movement of the 1960s has been cited by Le Guin as a major influence on the story of the two planets, and of the physicist who is desperate to bring them together once more in pursuit of a common good. The idealism and activism of the counterculture during the time Le Guin was writing the novel led her to imagine what it might look like to create a “utopia” that espoused the values of the global counterculture—and to push beyond the optimism of the movement to envision the hardships that such a utopia might face. Le Guin also peppers the narrative with references to the Stanford Prison Experiment, the Sexual Revolution, and the history of border control, further reinforcing the parallels and resonances

between the political events of her fictitious world and the political events swirling around her in the ‘60s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Dispossessed is set in the same universe as Le Guin’s Hainish novels; [The Left Hand of Darkness](#), one of Le Guin’s best-known novels, is also a part of this cycle of books set in the same fictional universe, and both *The Dispossessed* and [The Left Hand of Darkness](#) were praised in the science fiction community as well as in the world of literary fiction for their accomplishments in muddling the often stark lines between the two genres. Le Guin has stated in interviews that her inventive, often lyrical prose style was influenced by Charles Dickens, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Virginia Woolf, among others. The inspiration for the world of *The Dispossessed*, and the anti-capitalist, anarcho-syndicalist society of Anarres is rooted in Le Guin’s study of Taoism—a religious and philosophical tradition which emphasizes compassion, humility, and balance, as well as simplicity, frugality, spontaneity, and freedom. Le Guin’s study of the *Tao Te Ching* (Taoism’s fundamental text) and the teachings of its author (the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu) inspired the world of Anarres and the deep political, moral, and philosophical conundrums its utopian-minded inhabitants face.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Dispossessed*
- **When Written:** Early 1970s
- **Where Written:** Portland, Oregon, USA
- **When Published:** 1974
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Science fiction
- **Setting:** The twin planets of Urras and Anarres
- **Climax:** Shevek reveals that he has developed the science to support a technology which will allow for instantaneous, telephone-like communication between worlds far away from one another within the same galaxy.
- **Antagonist:** Egosim; capitalism; Sabul, the leader of Shevek’s syndicate
- **Point of View:** Third-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Destroyer of Worlds. The character of Shevek was, according to Le Guin herself, based heavily on the real-life figure J. Robert Oppenheimer. An American physicist who was among the scientists behind the Manhattan Project (the government

program to develop the first nuclear weapons during World War II), Oppenheimer famously quoted the *Bhagavad Gita* in order to describe the feeling of watching atomic bombs explode over Hiroshima and Nagasaki for the first time: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” In the novel, Shevek has a similar power as a physicist whose theories of time and simultaneity contain the potential for revolutionizing—or decimating—relations between his galaxy’s many warring worlds.



PLOT SUMMARY

A group of protestors gathers at the [wall that surrounds the Port of Anarres](#) as a spaceship docked there prepares for liftoff. As a man crosses the wall and walks through the barren field toward the ship, the protestors recognize him and begin to chase him. Members of the Anarresti Defense syndicate flank the man and hurry him to the ship as protestors begin throwing rocks, clipping the man’s shoulder and killing a Defense syndic. The passenger makes it on board and the ship doors close, and within a few minutes the angry mob disperses. Onboard the ship—a freighter called the *Mindful*—the passenger, a man named Shevek, is taken to his cabin and injected with several vaccines by a Urrasti doctor named Kimoe. In the days that follow, Shevek runs a high fever as a side effect of the various vaccines, and when he awakes, he finds that he is halfway to Urras—the Moon, twin, and rival planet of his home planet, Anarres. Through conversations with Dr. Kimoe, Shevek prepares himself for landing on the capitalist, deeply socially-stratified world of Urras. The *Mindful* lands and Shevek disembarks. He is met by reporters and paparazzi who photograph him and shout at him—he is “The First Man From the Moon” to them. A limousine arrives to take Shevek to the capital city of Nio Esseia, where he will be staying at the Ieu Eun University. His handlers—a group of five men—point out the sights to Shevek as the countryside flies by. At the University, Shevek meets with University officials and diplomats of the state of A-Io alike, and the Ioti President makes a toast to “a new era of brotherhood” between the Twin Planets. After the party, Shevek’s escorts bring him to his room at the university and help him to settle in.

In a flashback, the narrative transitions to the Anarres of Shevek’s youth. The novel transitions back and forth in alternating chapters between the “present”—Shevek’s journey to Urras—and the story of his past on Anarres. As an infant, Shevek plays with other children in an Anarresti communal nursery, unable to grasp that nothing—no toys, no objects—belong to him. Everything on Anarres belongs to everyone. Shevek’s father Palat has come to collect Shevek from the nursery in order to say goodbye to his mother, Rulag, who has been posted to a work assignment far away—Anarresti society functions in groups of Syndicates, and labor rotation

often splits up family units or forces people to make large moves at a moment’s notice. The narrative flashes forward a few years to Shevek’s school days. As an eight-year-old, he is uncannily bright and still decisively impetuous, and his teacher at the learning center accuses Shevek of “egoizing” as he attempts to explain a complicated math problem to his fellow students. Shevek is sent out of class and realizes he will have to wait for the day when others are interested in the same kind of problems as him. The narrative flashes forward again—a preteen Shevek and his friends are learning about the concept of prisons, which do not exist on Anarres. The boys, fascinated by the idea, decide to create a prison of their own. They lock up one of their friends, Kadagv, and leave him in a crawl space beneath the school for thirty hours. When they release him, he has soiled himself, and Shevek understands for the first time the violence of power over others. The narrative flashes forward yet again. Shevek is a student at the Northsetting Regional Institute—he is a teenager, and he and his childhood friends Tirin and Bedap carry on a speculative conversation about Urras. The boys recently saw some old footage of life on Urras during one of their classes, and were overwhelmed by the enormous gap between the destitute poor in the Urrasti nation of Thu, and the wealthy “propertied class” based in the prosperous nation of A-Io. The Odonian Revolution, which brought Urrasti anarchists to Anarres over one hundred and fifty years ago, has created a barrier between the planets which cannot be breached—except, the boys know, for trading of resources between the two several times a year via freighters, which are not allowed beyond the Port of Anarres. In yet another flash forward, the eighteen-year-old Shevek is off on his first work posting, doing manual labor in the dusty desert. Shevek embarks on a romantic relationship with a woman named Beshun, but it goes south when the two of them receive new work postings. Shevek returns to the familiarity of the Northsetting Regional Institute, and the tutelage of his physics teacher, the wise and old Mitis. Mitis forwards one of Shevek’s advanced papers to a physicist named Sabul in the big city of Abbenay, and Shevek receives an invitation to go and study with the man. Mitis warns Shevek that he will become Sabul’s property if he goes, but because no one owns anyone or anything else on Anarres, Shevek does not pay close attention to her advice.

On Urras, Shevek awakes in his room at Ieu Eun University. He is amazed by the size and luxury of his room there, and cannot believe he has it all to himself. Shevek looks out the window at the beautiful Urrasti landscape, and thinks that it is “what a world is supposed to look like.” Shevek meets his manservant Efor, though he doesn’t understand what it is to be served, and then welcomes to his rooms a group of Urrasti physicists who are meant to be his guides. Chifoilisk, Oiie, Atro, and Pae rejoice at meeting Shevek, who they have been communicating with through letters and radio broadcasts for many years. The men welcome Shevek “home” and present him with a solid-gold

statue—an award he won in absentia many years ago. The men ask Shevek how far along he is in his General Temporal Theory—the theory he has come to Urras to complete—and Shevek assures him that the whole thing is in his head. Shevek is delighted to find that he has encountered his intellectual and conversational equals at last, and explains to the men that he has come to their world not as an Anarresti ambassador but as a physicist following his own personal initiative. Shevek, confined to his room for several days while his vaccinations take hold, spends his time reading the books his handlers bring him—Urrasti science, history, and art, as well as newspapers which describe a growing unrest in the Urrasti state of Benbili. After three days, Shevek is allowed out, and his handlers take him all through the city and the country. At the end of his days of tourism, Shevek realizes he has been foolish in thinking he could bring the two vastly different worlds together—he feels he belongs to neither of them.

In the past narrative, Shevek arrives in Abbenay and makes his way to the Central Institute of the Sciences, where he is given a single room for the first time in his life. The following day he meets with Sabul, the physicist who will be his mentor. Sabul, a gruff and unpleasant man, tells Shevek that he must learn loti—the language of Urras—before he can be taught any real physics, as the latest developments in physics all happen on Urras and are written in lotic. Sabul warns Shevek not to share his loti texts with anyone, or to tell anyone he is learning the language. Shevek quickly learns loti after isolating himself in his rooms and studying hard. He only leaves to attend lectures in physics delivered by Gvarab—an elderly but brilliant woman who is not well-respected at the Institute by anyone other than Shevek. Shevek begins early work on a unified theory of time, and meanwhile writes criticism of Urrasti work which Sabul sends, via freighter, directly to the physicists back on Urras. Shevek is excited but nervous to communicate with the Urrasti—a major taboo on Anarres. Shevek eventually discovers that Sabul has been taking credit for his work while corresponding with the Urrasti, since in theory everything belongs to everyone on Anarres. Shevek falls ill with a fever and checks himself into a nearby clinic. When his fever breaks, he wakes to find a woman sitting by his side—she reveals she is his mother, Rulag. She asks about Shevek’s father, and Shevek reveals that Palat died many years ago. Rulag tells Shevek that her work always came first—she doesn’t quite apologize, but Shevek can see the pain and loneliness on her face. Rulag asks Shevek if the two of them can have a relationship at last, but Shevek refuses her, and Rulag leaves him alone and weeping in the clinic.

On Urras, Shevek settles down and gets to work as a new term begins at Ieu Eun University. He takes on some teaching duties and publishes some papers, but because he is not working on his General Temporal Theory he feels he is accomplishing nothing of value. Shevek goes shopping for the first time in his

life and purchases an expensive suit and shoes, which are tailor-made for him. In a meeting with Chifoilisk, a physicist from the socialist state of Thu, Chifoilisk warns Shevek not to let himself be “bought” by the loti, and warns him especially not to write down his General Temporal Theory even if he finishes it—the loti government will surely take it from him and seize it as their own property. Less than a week after their conversation, Pae informs Shevek that Chifoilisk has been called—or sent—back to his home country of Thu. In Chifoilisk’s absence Shevek develops a friendship with the renowned physicist Atro, who believes that Cetians—the race of the Urrasti and Anarresti people—are superior in the galaxy and the only form of humanity meant to prosper. Atro tells Shevek that when it comes time for him to release his General Temporal Theory, he should make sure that it is Cetians and Cetians alone who benefit from it.

In the past, after recovering from his illness, Shevek returns to his room at the Institute. He no longer isolates himself with his work, hearing his mother Rulag’s words in his ear and fearing to become a slave to his own egoism. Shevek begins writing his own letters to the physicists on Urras, but Sabul will not send them for him, vindictively refusing to transport any material that doesn’t deal directly with his own research. Shevek excitedly looks forward to the very few letters he receives from Urras each year. Gvarab dies, and Shevek is overwhelmed by feelings of futility. He reunites with his childhood friend, Bedap, and the two briefly pursue a romantic relationship. They argue frequently, though, and soon part ways. They remain close friends who discuss clandestinely the ways in which Anarresti customs are barriers to progress, change, free will, and the advancement of society and intellect. Bedap invites Shevek on a hiking trip with a group of friends, and on the trek Shevek meets Takver, a woman to whom he is instantly attracted. Bedap points out that Takver attended school with them at Northsetting, and Shevek is embarrassed to not have remembered her. After a few days of hiking, Shevek and Takver, alone for the first time, fall into a conversation about their mutual attraction and their shared desire for exclusive partnership—something of a rarity on Anarres. After the trip, the two of them move in together, and embark on a romantic relationship.

On Urras, as fall turns to winter, Shevek orders a new coat from a custom shop in Nio Esseia. When it arrives, there is a letter in its pocket. The letter urges Shevek to stop working within the power system that betrays his world, and invites him to join with his brothers. The letter is unsigned. Reading the letter, Shevek realizes that he has indeed been “bought” after all—he is closed off from the real people of Urras and kept entirely in the pockets of the loti upper classes. Shevek asks Efor, his manservant and the only person he has met on Urras who is not a member of the propertied class, to share stories of what life is really like on Urras, but Efor will not oblige him. On a visit

to the physicist Oiie's home, Shevek meets Oiie's sister, the alluring Vea—though they only spend a few hours together eating dinner at Oiie's, Vea asks Shevek to call on her sometime. Shevek reads more and more in the papers about the revolution in Benbili, in which rebels have overthrown a militaristic dictator, and learns that the Loti state is sending troops to silence the rebels and restore the dictator to power, while Thu is sending troops to support the rebels and keep the dictatorship at bay. As Shevek grows closer and closer to completing his General Temporal Theory, he worries that he has not seen enough of life on Urras, and is wasting his time there. Shevek takes a train to Nio Esseia for the day, where he calls upon Vea and goes out on the town with her. At a party at her apartment that night, Shevek becomes intoxicated for the first time in his life. After embarrassing himself by assaulting Vea and ejaculating on her dress, he is taken home by Oiie and Pae. Tucking Shevek into bed for the night, Pae pockets a paper from Shevek's desk, wondering aloud to Oiie whether Shevek is a fraud who will never deliver the theory to A-lo.

On Anarres, the worst drought in forty years has struck even the major city of Abbenay. As Shevek, Takver, Bedap, and their group of friends consider the growing inequities in Anarresti society—and the mounting control the PDC (the Production and Distribution Coordination, which oversees work groups and labor assignments on Anarres) has assumed over the lives of Anarresti citizens—people all over the planet suffer under new rationing procedures. Takver is pregnant, and Shevek is struggling at the Institute—Sabul has told him that his research is irrelevant, and refuses to print his latest paper. Takver suggests that Shevek cave and allow Sabul to take a co-writing credit to see if that changes anything, and soon his manuscript is published, though the work is attributed to Sabul as well. Shevek gives birth to a baby girl, Sadik, but by the end of winter, the drought still shows no sign of ending. Labor drafts have become more frequent and more urgent, and soon Shevek is called away on an emergency posting. While Shevek is away, he receives a letter from Takver stating that she, too, has been reposted, and will be leaving Abbenay soon. At the end of Shevek's rotation he heads back to Abbenay to find Takver and their baby girl gone. Sabul informs Shevek that he will not be reposted at the Institute, and Shevek realizes he has been shut out for good. Shevek goes to Divlab, the Division of Labor Central Posting Offices, and asks to be placed near Takver, but nothing is available. Rather than remain in Abbenay or follow Takver to a place where he will be of no use, Shevek requests a famine-prevention posting and is assigned indefinitely to a work-coordinating position in the desert region, the Dust.

On Urras, Shevek awakens the morning after Vea's party feeling sick, shaky, and embarrassed. He reflects on his mistakes, ashamed that he has effectively become the property of the Loti state—he feels he should never have come to Urras at all. He resolves that no more of his work will benefit the Loti

state or Loti intellectuals who only want to use his work for their own advancement. Pae arrives and tells Shevek that A-lo has assumed the upper hand in the state of Benbili, though Thu still holds Benbili's easternmost provinces. The two countries will now go to war against one another in Benbili, to keep the barbaric fighting out of A-lo's borders. Because A-lo is now officially at war, Pae says, Shevek should expect some new restrictions to come into effect—Shevek will not be able to leave the University campus without express permission from the Chancellor. Pae also informs Shevek that an Loti engineer has developed the plans for something called the ansible, a device which will allow for instant communication between any planets in the galaxy—and all the engineer needs is Shevek's theory, which will allow the device to work. After Pae leaves, Shevek asks Efor to turn away any visitors and tell them that he is hard at work. He gets down to work on the General Temporal Theory once and for all, finally experiencing a major breakthrough and realizing that his theory is at last complete. One night, after a disturbing visit from Atro during which Atro glorifies the war in Benbili and exalts the superiority of the Loti state, Shevek realizes he must get away from the University, which has essentially become a prison for him. Shevek and Efor hold a clandestine conversation in Shevek's bathroom while the water runs, in case the room is bugged—there is a microphone, Efor says, in Shevek's living room. Shevek shows Efor the note he found in his coat pocket, and asks Efor how he can get to its sender. Efor tells Shevek to seek out a man named Tuio Maedda in Old Town, and helps Shevek call a taxi which will take him away from Ieu Eun. Efor vows to cover for Shevek, and Shevek slips out into the night. Upon arriving in Old Town, he is overwhelmed by the poverty he encounters. He asks a pawn shop owner for directions to Tuio Maedda, and is taken to a grocery store where he finds Tuio at last. Shevek tells Tuio that he has something the state needs, and did not realize when he arrived on Urras that any theory he developed would become state property. Shevek knows that Tuio does not need his theory. Tuio is part of an underground Syndicalist-Libertarian faction, which works together with the socialists in Thu and which espouses many aspects of the Anarresti Odonian movement. Shevek volunteers to join a nonviolent demonstration scheduled for later that week, and Tuio agrees to shelter Shevek until the protest. On the day of the demonstration, Shevek gives a speech to the hundred thousand people gathered in the town square. He speaks of brotherhood, and assures the poor and downtrodden that revolution is possible. As Shevek's speech draws to a close, State helicopters swarm overhead and begin firing on the crowd. Shevek escapes, carrying a wounded comrade to a warehouse basement where he hides out for three days as police continue shooting people in the streets. When his companion dies, Shevek emerges from the basement to find the streets empty and quiet.

On Anarres, Shevek is leaving the Southwest region after having been stationed there—and separated from Takver—for

four long years. He has witnessed terrible suffering during the years of famine, and was repulsed by his job in the Dust, which was to make lists of who would eat while hundreds of people starved. Arriving in a city called Chakar, Shevek looks up Takver and finds her living in a domicile with a roommate. Their daughter, Sadik, is older now, and she does not recognize Shevek. All three of them tearfully reunite, and Shevek realizes that the famine has taken a toll on Takver just as it has on him. Takver regrets not having refused the posting that took her away from Abbenay, and expresses her desire to return to the city. Shevek and Takver talk about the breakdown of free will on Anarres, and realize that Bedap's warnings about the PDC's growing influence were right all along. Shevek echoes Takver's wish to return to Abbenay, and suggests that together they start a printing syndicate to encourage freedom of the press, and spend their lives unbuilding the walls that have cropped up in Anarresti society.

On Urras, in a city called Roddared, an hour away from Nio Esseia, a bloody and exhausted Shevek arrives at the Terran embassy and begs for asylum. The Terrans—once inhabitants of the planet Earth—grant it to him, and allow Shevek to rest and recuperate for two days before engaging the famous physicist in conversation. Shevek eventually meets with the Terran ambassador, Keng, who assures Shevek that he is completely safe, and that the loti government only suspects his whereabouts. Keng asks Shevek about life on Anarres, and his reasons for coming to Urras—she is perplexed by the loti government's decision to bring an Odonian anarchist to stay at their University when such civil unrest was gripping the planet. Shevek explains to Keng that he was a pet of the loti government, and was never meant to interact with the lower classes or become a part of the revolution. He warns Keng that his research was all along meant to be stolen in order to advance the Cetian—and the loti—agenda rather than bring peace and brotherhood to the universe. Shevek explains the idea of the ansible to Keng, and informs her that instantaneous communication across the universe would create a stepping stone for transilience—instantaneous transfer of matter throughout the universe, which he speculates the Urrasti would use for warmongering and evil. Shevek tells Keng that he wants to give his General Temporal Theory, which is at last complete, to the Terrans as a gift, since he knows that they will use it for the common good. Shevek then asks Keng for her help in returning him home to Anarres, and she agrees.

On Anarres, Bedap and Shevek, as representatives of their new syndicate—the Syndicate of Initiative—attend a PDC meeting where they defend their communication with Urras. The people of Benbili have contacted the Anarresti to ask if they can send some of their people, who identify as Odonians, to Anarres. The PDC is deeply against it—especially Rulag, who feels that allowing Urrasti to come to Anarres is not only a threat to security, but blasphemy. Shevek speaks up and asks if, since no

one from Urras is allowed to go to Anarres, whether someone from Anarres might be allowed to venture to Urras. Rulag says that anyone who leaves Anarres is barred from returning—if they attempted to, she says, he or she would be met with justice and perhaps even violence. Bedap withdraws the topic and the two leave the meeting. Shevek has been summoned to the Institute, and Bedap in the meanwhile goes over to Shevek and Takver's apartment, where he socializes with Takver and her and Shevek's new baby Pilun. Takver reveals to Bedap that Rulag is Shevek's mother, and Bedap speculates that Rulag is so vocal against their Syndicate due to her underlying guilt over abandoning Shevek. Shevek and Sadik return to the apartment, and Shevek announces that he just met with Sabul, who has offered him a full-time and autonomous posting at the Institute. Shevek, Takver, and Bedap all believe that the PDC is trying to force Shevek to remain on Anarres and dissociate from the Syndicate of Initiative by offering him a great job. After dinner, Shevek and Bedap walk Sadik back to the children's dormitory, but she refuses to go in—the other children are cruel to her, she says, and tell her that her family is traitorous. Bedap goes home, while Shevek takes Sadik back to the apartment, where Takver reveals that she too has been persecuted at work due to her association with Shevek. The two of them speculate how they can escape from their fellow Anarresti's scorn, but both agree that no matter where they went they would face threats and violence. At last, Takver tells Shevek that he should go to Urras. He will be able to conduct his research, he will be free of persecution, and she will be able to take the children to a small coastal town and live anonymously. Takver believes it is worth the risk that Shevek will be unable to return if he gets to fulfill his dreams and create something for the common good.

In the present, Shevek is on an airship heading back to Anarres from Urras. It is a Hainish ship called the *Davenant*, and is neither opulent in the Urrasti style nor austere in the Anarresti way. Shevek is silent and withdrawn for most of the journey, and feels as if he is a man who has just been released from prison. He speaks only when spoken to, though he briefly communicates with the Syndicate of Initiative back on Anarres to arrange landing protocol. The ship's first mate, a Hainish man named Ketho, tells Shevek that he will be the one to take Shevek back down to the surface. Shevek tells Ketho that there may be violence, but Ketho nevertheless expresses a desire not just to travel down to the surface of Anarres but to live there for a time. Shevek warns Ketho that he might not be well-received, but that he does not want to be a participant in building any more walls between Anarres and the rest of the universe, so Shevek agrees to let Ketho land with him, and informs him that he will be treated as an Anarresti as soon as he crosses the wall separating the Port from the rest of the planet. As Shevek and Ketho prepare for landing, Shevek looks forward to returning home to Takver, Sadik, and Pilun.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Shevek – An Anarresti physicist and the novel’s protagonist. Shevek is an idealist and a dreamer who longs to use his gifts as a physicist to reconcile the rival, twin planets of Urras and Anarres. As Shevek advances in his career, he begins to understand the ways in which the idealized collectivism of Anarres is not as perfect as it seems. His theories, to which he dedicates his life, are taken from him under the pretense of the idea that on Anarres, nothing belongs to anyone, and everything belongs to everyone. As a physicist, he begins to feel that his work can’t advance any further without the help of Urrasti scientists and their intellectual and physical resources, but he also has a personal longing to understand the world of Urras. As Shevek flirts with the prospect of traveling to Urras, he strains against the idea of Anarres as a free or utopic society, and begins to see how it is lacking. His disillusionment is further compounded when he is separated from his partner (Takver) and their firstborn child after Takver is sent far away on a work assignment. As Shevek is slowly shut out of his role at the Institute in Abbenay because his research is deemed nonessential, traveling to Urras becomes more and more alluring to him, even though his colleagues and Syndicate supervisors oppose the idea. On Urras, Shevek encounters a world that appears to be a utopia from the outside, but which is actually in a state of grave civil unrest. Moreover, Shevek realizes that Urras is not a safe place for him to explore and finalize his theories, either (for here, too, his work will be taken away from him, this time by the loti state). Thus, he seeks refuge in Thu—a socialist Urrasti state in the throes of a rebellion. In the end, Shevek gives his general temporal theory to the Terran embassy, in hopes that his dream of brotherhood throughout the entire galaxy will at last come to fruition.

Takver – An Anarresti woman who becomes Shevek’s romantic partner. Brilliant, empathetic, and practical, Takver works in a marine laboratory where she studies fish. Shevek admires her kind heart, her belief that “all lives are in common,” and her desire to “seek the experience of existences outside the human boundary.” After a chance meeting as young students, during which Shevek hardly paid Takver any attention at all and did not even learn her name, they reunite as adults who are brought together by mutual friends. Takver and Shevek experience an instantaneous connection, and reveal their mutual desire for monogamous partnership despite the nature of Anarresti society, which encourages experimentation and non-exclusive communal relationships. After the birth of their first child, Takver and Shevek are separated for four years by their different work assignments. When they eventually they reunite, each has remained faithful to the other during their separation, and they resume their partnership and have a second child together. Takver encourages Shevek to go to

Urras, supporting his dreams of bringing the two worlds into more productive communication and of finally being able to take credit for his scientific theories. Takver is a steadfast partner and an enthusiastic supporter of Shevek’s work and his ideals—even those that rub against typical Anarresti values of communal living and self-sacrifice.

Rulag – Shevek’s mother. After receiving a work assignment which took her far away from Shevek and Palat, she never reconnected with her family, and so Shevek grows up without ever knowing Rulag. When Shevek comes down with pneumonia during his time at the Institute in Abbenay, he wakes from a fever to find Rulag at his bedside. She explains that while sorting books for a library, she came across one of Shevek’s published theories and subsequently tracked him down. Shevek can sense Rulag’s loneliness and her pain at having not known him for so long, but he does not find her particularly sympathetic. Rulag has always believed that work comes first, and when she meets Shevek she uses that fact as an explanation for why she abandoned him and Palat. She tells Shevek that she wants to be in his life, but Shevek refuses and sends her away. In the wake of their meeting, Shevek begins to realize that he, too, will always put his work first, and believes it is his fate to be a solitary “egoizer.” A member of the PDC, Rulag is present when Shevek and Bedap present their proposal to reopen Anarres to likeminded Urrasti—however, Rulag is staunch in her belief that no outsiders, and especially no Urrasti, should ever set foot on Anarres. When Shevek suggests that Anarresti—specifically himself—venture to Urras instead, Rulag remains firm, and declares that any Anarresti who leaves is not welcome to return. Rulag and Shevek’s tense relationship is demonstrative of the unique way familial relationships function on Anarres: they are a byproduct of life, not the center of it, and there is not necessarily always a deep bond between parent and child. Rulag is yet another reminder of Shevek’s conflicted feelings, caught between the pull of isolationism and that of community.

Bedap – One of Shevek’s closest friends since childhood. From a young age, Bedap expresses a desire to learn more about Urras, and to understand what the planet is really like. After a brief period of being out of touch, Bedap and Shevek reunite as adults at the Northsetting Regional Institute of the Noble and Material Sciences. Shevek, frustrated with his studies, is depressed and vaguely suicidal at the time of his reunion with Bedap, which provides both of them comfort, and Shevek, knowing that Bedap is a homosexual and has always been attracted to him, consents to embark on a sexual relationship with Bedap. However, they soon find that neither strongly desires the other, and after a brief period of sharing a domicile, the two separate and go back to being platonic friends. The two remain close through the years, sharing a fascination with loti language and politics. They work together in the Syndicate of Initiative, and eventually, Bedap stands in solidarity with

Shevek as the two propose reopening communication, travel, and exchange of ideas between Urras and Anarres, despite the controversy it unleashes and the backlash they face.

Sabul – An Anarresti physicist at the Institute in Abbenay, and Shevek’s mentor. Based on the Anarresti principle of selflessness and no private property, Sabul co-opts Shevek’s ideas and attempts to keep him from communicating directly with Urrasti scientists. A slovenly man who is a hypocrite when it comes to the Odonian ideals of openness and sharing, Shevek detests Sabul, but understands that studying with him is the only way to open a line of communication with Urrasti physicists at all.

Atro – The foremost living physicist on Urras. A man of eighty, he moves and speaks with “the blunt self-assurance of one accustomed to respect.” Shevek and Atro have been communicating through letters for years by the time Shevek arrives on Urras, and the two are overjoyed to finally meet after so many years of exchanging ideas and theories. Atro is something of a mentor to Shevek during his time on Urras.

Chifoilisk – A Thuvian scientist on Urras. It is Chifoilisk who warns Shevek that he is being “bought” by the loti scientists, and advises him to be careful of Pae especially. Chifoilisk tells Shevek never to write down his precious General Temporal Theory, lest the loti government swoop in and snatch it away. In this way, Chifoilisk is an ally of Shevek’s. Both Chifoilisk and Shevek’s socialist ideals make them suspicious figures in the eyes of the loti government—and, as such, both Shevek and Chifoilisk are themselves suspicious of their surroundings and the loti scientists with whom they work at the university.

Kimoe – An Urrasti doctor who accompanies Shevek on his initial journey from Anarres to Urras. Kimoe provides Shevek with the necessary vaccines and medicine to make his transition to Urras easier. Kimoe is the first Urrasti whom Shevek meets, just like Shevek is the first Anarresti Kimoe has known. As such, the two carry on bewildered conversations throughout the journey as they excitedly—and with trepidation—learn about one another’s cultures.

Beshun – A woman with whom Shevek, while posted to a job at an afforestation project in the desert region at eighteen years old, has a brief but intense sexual relationship. Beshun helps Shevek to see that two people can never really possess each other, even if the intensity of their feelings for one another lead them to believe that they can (a fittingly Anarresti notion).

Mitis – The senior physicist at the Northsetting Institute. She is a compassionate and involved teacher, and attempts to warn Shevek about the possible pitfalls of working with Sabul: she tells Shevek that if he goes to work for Sabul, Shevek will be “his man,” making use of a possessive article which is nonexistent in Anarresti language.

Efor – The butler and servant assigned to Shevek during his stay on Urras. At first Shevek is baffled by Efor’s role and

laments the class divisions in Urrasti society that have put Efor in a place of servitude. After expressing an interest in Efor’s life, and the lives of the lower classes, Shevek wins Efor’s trust, and the two become companionable. When Shevek fears that the loti will steal his intellectual property, he seeks to escape the University where he has been staying—and it is Efor who helps guide him to the socialist enclave where he will presumably be safe.

Vea Doem Oiie – Oiie’s sister, a beautiful and alluring Urrasti woman who is fascinated by Shevek and takes him under her wing. Shevek describes her as soft but affected, and pursues a friendship with her spurred partly by his attraction to her. Vea takes Shevek out on the town, and the two indulge in decadent meals and a trip to the theatre before returning to Vea’s apartment. Her husband, who travels frequently for business, is out of town, and Vea has arranged a lavish and orgiastic party. Overcome by his attraction for Vea—and his warring desires to be a part of Urrasti life and to remain loyal to his Odonian values—Shevek assaults Vea, attempting to coerce her into sex. The drunken Shevek ejaculates on Vea’s dress and is escorted home from the party. He does not see her again during his time on Urras.

Tuio Maedda – A Urrasti anarchist whom Shevek seeks out when he realizes that his work will become a property of the loti State. A middle-aged man with a “strained, intellectual” disposition, Tuio is a self-described enemy of the loti government and a syndicalist working with the socialist Thuvian Workers Union towards change on all of Urras.

Keng – The Terran ambassador on Urras. Struck by the failure of Earth—whose population now hovers below half a billion—she sees Urras as a kind of paradise. Shevek tells her of his plans for the ansible, a device which will allow for instantaneous communication between the planets of the galaxy, in order to keep it from becoming property of the loti.

Ketho – A Hainish commander on the *Davenant*, the ship returning Shevek to Anarres at the end of the novel. Ketho expresses to Shevek his desire to return to Anarres with him and to live among the Odonians, learning about their world and culture. Shevek agrees to take Ketho down alongside him.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Palat – Shevek’s father, a sad-eyed man who raised Shevek alone from infancy. Palat died when Shevek was just a teenager while attempting to rescue children caught in the rubble of a building destroyed in an earthquake—a perfect model of Anarresti selflessness.

Gvarab – An Anarresti scientist and teacher at the Institute in Abbenay. An elderly woman whose life’s work has revolved around theories of time and simultaneity, her classes are not well attended, and only Shevek seems to revere her work and her ideas.

Saio Pae – A Urrasti physicist whom Shevek comes to see as his “enemy.” Duplicitous, opportunistic, and shady, Pae is loyal to the loti state but takes pride in his snakelike ability to find his way around rules and authority.

Demaere Oiie – A Urrasti scientist from the state of A-lo and one of Shevek’s escorts and guides during his stay at Ieu Eun University, Oiie welcomes Shevek into his home on several occasions so that Shevek can experience Urrasti home life, and introduces Shevek to his freewheeling sister, Vea.

Tirin – One of Shevek’s childhood friends, and one of the masterminds behind a cruel experiment carried out by their friend group. After learning about the concept of prison, Shevek, Tirin, and Gibesh lock their friend Kadagv in a makeshift cell and leave him there for extended periods of time.

Kadagv – One of Shevek’s childhood friends, and the victim of their friend group’s cruel prison experiment.

Gibesh – The youngest of Shevek’s group of childhood friends.

Desar – A mathematician and one of Shevek’s neighbors at the Institute in Abbenay. Though Desar is ordinarily aloof and unbrotherly, he helps care for Shevek in the wake of his brief illness.

Sadik – Shevek and Takver’s firstborn daughter.

Pilun – Shevek and Takver’s youngest daughter.

TERMS

Urrasti – The people of the planet Urras, a paradise-like world of plenty which is marred by deep social and economic inequality. The Urrasti upper classes enjoy lives of wealth and privilege, while the lower classes, brimming with political unrest and anger over social injustice, stage attacks and organize underground anarchist networks. Urrasti are forbidden from setting foot on Anarres, and so despite the desire of many Urrasti to defect from their world, they are firmly stuck.

Anarresti – The people of the planet Anarres, the moon of Urras. Anarresti defected to the desert-climate moon almost two centuries ago, shepherded there by their leader Odo, who envisioned an anarcho-syndicalist society free of the constraints of capitalism.

Pravic – The language spoken on Anarres, which is free of any possessive language. For instance, an Anarresti would never say “my head hurts”; they would say “the head hurts.”

lotic – The language spoken on Urras.

Odonians – Odonians, an anarchist group originally from Urras, formed over one hundred and fifty years under their compassionate and idealistic leader, Odo. Eventually the Odonians defected to Anarres, where they were able to develop and put into practice an anarcho-syndicalist society

built around the principles of communal living, humility, frugality, and compassion.

Propertarian – The Anarresti refer to the moneyed, land-owning inhabitants of their twin planet Urras as “propertarians,” and often use the word to speak derogatively or accusatorily about someone who has displayed an egoistic or selfish thought, sentiment, or action.

Syndic – A member of an Anarresti syndicate. In place of a government or specialized professions, Anarres is organized into syndicates which each are responsible for a different aspect of supporting Anarresti life. Anarresti rotate through many different syndicates, and everyone happily does his or her job.

Decad – An Anarresti unit of time measurement consisting of a period of ten days.

Holum – A kind of tree which grows on the desert planet of Anarres. Holum trees provide grain, wood, food, alcohol, and fibers for making clothing and paper.

Cetian – The race of the Urrasti and Anarresti people. Cetians are, from Le Guin’s descriptions, humanoid, but are hairier and taller than Terrans or Hainish.

Terrans – Terrans are humans from Earth. Their world has been largely decimated and plummeted into crisis, and the population, which peaked at nine billion, has dropped to less than half a billion.

Hainish – Another race within the galaxy of *The Dispossessed*. The Hainish are known throughout space as altruists, and it is due to their charity that the decimated populations of Earth—or Terra—were able to survive their failure as a species.

DivLab – The Division of Labor office on Anarres, which assigns individuals to syndicates and oversees rotation of roles.

PDC – The Production and Distribution Coordination, a coordinating system for all syndicates, federatives, and individuals who do productive work on Anarres. **Shevek, Bedap, Takver,** and their group of friends slowly begin to realize that though there is nominally no government on Anarres, the PDC exerts the control, influence, and coercion of a government, and the three of them—anarchists at heart—begin to wonder what a dismantling or reorganizing of the PDC would look like.

Archist – The opposite of an anarchist. **Shevek** refers to many Urrasti as “archists,” who attempt to stamp out revolution and contrarian thought.

A-lo/loti – A-lo is the capitalist state on Urras, and their people are the loti.

Thu/Thuvian – Thu is the socialist state on Urras, and their people are the Thuvians.

Ansible – A device envisioned by an Urrasti engineer which would allow for instantaneous communication throughout the

galaxy. The engineer releases the designs for the ansible in an academic paper, but does not yet have the necessary theory—the General Temporal Theory—to bring it into existence. When **Shevek** eventually completes the Theory, he hands it over to the Terran embassy in hopes of making the ansible a reality.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FREEDOM

The Dispossessed takes place over the course of forty years on two twin planets, Urras and Anarres, which are often referred to as each other's moons.

Nearly two centuries before the start of the novel, a faction of Urrasti people who called themselves Odonians—and who rejected the capitalist, “profiteering” values of their home planet—defected to Anarres, where they built a new society on the desert-like planet. Anarres, a hundred and sixty years later, is now a society governed by anarcho-syndicalist principles in which no one owns anything and every Odonian is, in theory, free from state rule, free from possessions, and free from capitalism. Over the course of the book, however, Le Guin complicates—and in many ways dismantles—the concept of “freedom.” Things on Anarres are not as perfect as they seem, and through her epic portrait of a utopian experiment in crisis, Le Guin argues that true freedom may not exist at all.

“To be responsible [for] one another is our freedom,” Shevek tells one of his university friends in the early pages of the novel. In this moment, Shevek and his friends are young and hopeful idealists, committed to the Odonian principles of frugality, humility, and compassion, and completely invested in the idea that the system of Syndicates which keeps Odonian society afloat has been put in place for the good of every Anarresti. Shevek and his friends, in their youth, derive their sense of freedom from enthusiastically participating in the machine of their society, and see the foreign Urrasti ideals of egoism, possession, and wealth as stifling and destructive.

As Shevek grows older, experiences the syndicalist system in practice, and advances as a physicist, however, his concept of freedom begins to change. Shortly after the end of his first labor posting in the dusty desert, Shevek is recommended for a post at the Central Institute of the Sciences in the capital of Abbenay to study under a physicist named Sabul. In Abbenay, Sabul makes Shevek study Urrasti texts and learn the loti language. As Shevek delves into his new work, he finds freedom

in isolation—though he is at first ashamed and worried that he is egoizing, eventually the “lack of physical labor, of occupation, of social and sexual intercourse [do not] appear to him as lacks, but as freedom.” In contrast to his earlier belief that freedom was responsibility for others, Shevek tentatively begins to believe that true freedom is found in responsibility for himself and his work alone. Here, Le Guin sets the stage for Shevek's eventual desire to experience a freedom different from that of Odonianism.

Over the course of the next several years, Shevek finds himself torn again and again between responsibility to his work and responsibility to his fellow Odonians, and encounters hypocrisy and subterfuge at several levels of Odonian society. In conversations with his partner Takver and his childhood friend Bedap, Shevek begins to realize that the anarcho-syndicalism which governs Anarresti society has in effect become a trap. Odonians are no longer truly free, as they are constantly pulled away from their jobs, lives, and partners to go off on rotating work assignments, and yet are prevented from ever finding true satisfaction in the work they do—Shevek is constantly told that his research in the field of temporality is egoistic and unimportant, and frequently has his research co-opted by Sabul. All of this compounding frustration and disillusionment builds up over the years, and eventually Shevek and Bedap form their own syndicate—the Syndicate of Initiative—whose goal is to establish communication with, and possibly offer asylum to, a splinter group of self-proclaimed Odonians trapped in the war-torn Urrasti state of Benbili.

When the council of Production and Distribution Coordination vehemently opposes Bedap and Shevek, Shevek suggests sending an Anarresti to Urras instead. His mother Rulag, a member of the council, warns him that if he leaves, he may not be welcome back, and if he attempts to return he will likely be met with violence. Shevek, however, knows that he needs Urras's resources to complete the General Temporal Theory which has become his life's work—and which he feels will be underappreciated or ignored on Anarres, though it could stand to revolutionize life throughout the galaxy. Urras, then, represents freedom to Shevek—the planet which oppressed his ancestors, and which seemed to him for so much of life to be the antithesis of freedom, is now his only chance at truly being free.

On Urras, Shevek does experience what he initially believes is freedom—he is given a luxurious private room, a bank account, custom shoes and clothing, and full access to all the resources and opportunities the leu Eun University in the Urrasti state of A-lo has to offer. Shevek teaches, works, reads, and explores Urrasti life, and marvels at how the loti are free from the demands of physical labor or forced occupational rotations. As Shevek contemplates the freedoms that the Urrasti enjoy, he begins to further doubt the truth of Odonian freedom. But as Shevek's stay on Urras nears a year, he begins to realize that he

has been “bought” by the loti state—he has been kept in a luxurious apartment and has had his every whim catered to, but he has experienced none of the “real” Urras, and has not had any contact with anyone who is not a wealthy intellectual or propertarian. One of Shevek’s coworkers, a scientist named Chifoilisk from the socialist state of Thu, warns him against ever writing down his General Temporal Theory or sharing it with any of the loti—Chifoilisk says that the idea will be snatched away. In conversations with his loti mentors, including the lauded physicist Atro, the loti men admit as much—they are desperate to prove the superiority of the Cetian race (the race of the Urrasti and Anarresti peoples) and the dominance of the capitalist state of A-Io.

As the war in Benbili escalates, and soon involves the capitalist state of A-Io and the socialist state of Thu, who are battling against one another in Benbili’s capital, Shevek is informed by one of the physicists at the university that he will no longer be permitted to leave. Shevek realizes that he has effectively become a prisoner in a foreign state, and with the help of his manservant Efor, he flees the university and joins a worker’s revolution in a neighboring city. At a demonstration in the loti Capitol Square, Shevek is raised up as the figurehead of the revolution, but loti helicopters arrive and fire on the enormous crowd. Shevek is now an enemy of—and a threat to—the loti state, and realizes that he was never truly free on Urras, either.

Shevek’s journey throughout the novel seems to be a journey that will end in the discovery of true freedom. In the end, however, Shevek despairingly realizes the opposite—true freedom, and the utopic idea thereof, is seemingly impossible to achieve. However, as he hands his General Temporal Theory over to the displaced Terrans—inhabitants of Earth who were forced to flee their decimated planet, and are now confined to spaceships gifted to them by the altruistic Hainish race—Shevek continues to hope that his theory will be used for good, and will foster free and open communication throughout the galaxy. He returns to Anarres optimistic despite the threat of violence upon his return. Though he has learned the difficult lesson that true freedom does not exist, he hopes against hope that he—and the whole of the galaxy—will be able to carry on anyway.



THE FAILURE OF UTOPIAN IDEALS

As the story of *The Dispossessed* unfolds, Le Guin—through her conflicted but hopeful protagonist, the Anarresti physicist

Shevek—highlights the ways in which utopia is a complex and perhaps unachievable ideal. Anarres was conceived as a utopia by its founders, and Anarresti society rests entirely on the collective belief that their utopian experiment has been a success. However, when Shevek visits Urras, he sees that the upper echelons of Urrasti society also consider themselves to be living in a utopia. The Urrasti idea of utopia—characterized

by wealth, luxury, and excess—is very different from the Anarresti ideal of a society founded on principles of equality, communal living, and rejection of the ego. As Shevek grows disillusioned both with his secret admiration of Urras and his preconceived notions about the society in which he was raised, Le Guin uses his internal conflict to show that there is, in truth, no such thing as utopia.

“This is what a world is supposed to look like,” Shevek says to himself while looking out the window on his first morning on Urras. Though skeptical of Urras, Shevek is bewitched by its outward appearance. As he begins to navigate Urrasti society, Shevek continually makes comparisons between the beauty of Urras and the desolation of Anarres. Though Anarres was founded with utopian ideals in mind, the reality of Shevek’s home planet is a harsh one, and Anarres’s many flaws when compared to Urras prompt the steady realization in Shevek that the Odonian utopian experiment has failed. Urras, though seemingly utopic, is revealed to be deep in the throes of a rapidly-worsening civil war. The two major states, Thu and A-Io, are rivals, and are fighting a proxy war in the revolution-torn state of Benbili. Although Urras has the appearance of an idyllic world, full of happiness and beauty, the reality is that its people are deeply unhappy and have begun fighting amongst themselves, and the luxurious life of the planet’s upper classes is only possibly because of the labor of an exploited underclass.

As Shevek begins to realize that Urras, too, is a failed utopia, he becomes more and more disillusioned, and longs to escape the trappings of his new life there. Eventually, Shevek grows tired of only meeting wealthy propertarians and members of the upper classes. With his curiosity piqued by a mysterious note left in the pocket of one of his fine, tailor-made Urrasti jackets, Shevek seeks out the “unpropertied” classes, slipping away from his guards and setting off by himself into the poorer neighborhoods of A-Io. He notices that the people’s faces there have “a certain sameness,” which he believes comes from their anxieties about money and class. Although his brief sojourn out into the city is cut short, Shevek again seeks to go out into the true world of Urras a few days later—this time, with the help of his butler and manservant Efor. In the slums of A-Io, running for his life after realizing that the University will seize his intellectual property upon completion of his theory, Shevek finds refuge and solidarity—as well as violence and discord. There is deep unrest and an enormous cleft in Urrasti society, and as Shevek becomes a voice of the downtrodden, his experiences (having been the only witness in over a hundred years to two failed utopias) allow him to identify the ills of both worlds, as well as the sacrifices that must be made in order to mend each.

Shevek, seeking asylum at the Terran embassy—Earth’s outpost on Urras—meets with Earth’s ambassador Keng. She confesses that to her, having witnessed the horrors of a declining Earth, Urras is “the most beautiful of all the inhabited worlds, the

world that comes as close as any could to Paradise.” Shevek implores her to understand that she only sees Urras that way because she is traumatized by her own people’s past and fearful of their future, so she sees Urras as a “rich, stable present” when really it is just as flawed and full of problems as earth, or Anarres, or any other world. Urras is the product of a miserable past, too, and it faces an uncertain future, and is no more of a utopia than anywhere else. The failure of utopia, then, is tied in with Shevek’s life’s work—the search for a theory of time and simultaneity. Utopia represents a perfect present, a present with no painful past and no fearful future. Because the idea of a perfect, stable present moment is a fallacy, “Utopia” is both unreachable and fundamentally unreal.

In the end, though Shevek recognizes the imperfections and the issues that are part of life on Anarres, he decides to return. His return signifies his acceptance of the impossibility of utopia. In this light, the novel’s title becomes more an absolution than an indictment of the state of being dispossessed. Shevek has been dispossessed of the damaging illusion that utopia is possible, and is now free to see his own world, as well as the world of Urras, through clear eyes. In attempting to create a utopia, both Urras and Anarres have both willingly and unwittingly sacrificed the safety and well-being of their peoples. Now, returning to Anarres with the knowledge that utopia is an impossibility, Shevek will hopefully be able to make his world—and the galaxy it’s part of—a better place without forcing utopian ideals upon either.



HUMILITY AND MODERATION VS. EGO AND EXCESS

A “good Odonian” has “empty hands,” Shevek tells his Urrasti hosts early on in the novel. With no money and almost zero individual material possessions, the Anarresti value restraint, frugality, and humility—real-life Taoist principles which inspired Le Guin’s conception of Anarresti values. Shevek’s “empty hands”—like the empty hands with which the Anarresti initially departed from Urras—are a recurring motif throughout the novel, and a metaphor for the anti-materialist values that drive Anarresti society. Meanwhile, on Urras, ego, luxury, and materialism rule the day. When Shevek arrives on the planet, he is bewildered by and suspicious of Urrasti commodities such as leather shoes, alcohol, and feather beds, though he ultimately indulges in the hedonistic and luxurious ways of the Urrasti upper classes. As Le Guin relays Shevek’s life story through the novel’s nonlinear timeline, she highlights the contrast between his utilitarian past and his extravagant present, suggesting that ego and excess can be just as damaging as self-denial and false humility. Shevek’s journey is one towards true humility—and it is one that requires him to find a balance between Urrasti and Anarresti ways in order to make a true change on either planet.

During his stay on Urras, Shevek accompanies a Urrasti

woman, Vea, throughout a day and night out on the town, and witnesses the extent of Urrasti hedonism and luxury up-close. For the first time in his life, he overindulges to the point of excess. Vea, an attractive, sharp, and witty woman, takes Shevek out to two rich meals, a performance at a local theatre, and then the two of them ride in a taxi back to Vea’s apartment. Vea makes Shevek pay for all of it, and the exchange of money for goods and services is startling and off-putting to Shevek. Nevertheless, he goes along, hoping to impress and ingratiate himself with Vea. When the two return to Vea’s apartment, guests begin to arrive in fine clothing for an orgiastic cocktail party. Shevek becomes intoxicated and assaults Vea, overcome by his desire for her. Shevek’s colleagues help him home, drunken and disgraced as he is, and as Shevek sees firsthand how destructive the Urrasti way of life can be, he understands for the first time the stringent moral stance against materialism his people have taken on, and why.

In a speech he gives during an Urrasti workers’ uprising, Shevek preaches the promise of freedom that awaits on Anarres. “If it is Anarres you want,” Shevek advises the rebels, “if it is the future you seek, then I tell you that you must come to it with empty hands. You must give yourself. You cannot buy the Revolution. You can only be the Revolution.” The Anarresti principles of humility and restraint, which Shevek began to fear he had forgotten during his time on Urras, resurge in him as integral aspects of his being and his philosophy. He can now understand the significance of “empty hands.” Being emptyhanded—free of ego, free of materialism—has the potential to be a selfless act, and a leap of faith—as long as it is a choice, and not an ideal forced upon a person, as it is on Anarres.

In the novel’s very last lines, Shevek prepares for his return to Anarres and his reunion with his partner and children. He wishes that he had brought home a souvenir for them, but notes that his hands are “empty, as they [have] always been.” Despite all he has witnessed on Urras, and the temptations he has faced, Shevek remains optimistic about the principles that govern his beloved Anarres. As he returns, empty-handed, to his homeland, he honors the message of humility his ancestors championed, but also recognizes that in order to give oneself over to a cause, there must be a self to give. On Anarres, Shevek for a long time made himself—and his work—smaller in order to appease the society he functioned in: a society that reviled egoism, possession, and individual gain. Throughout the course of the novel—and Shevek’s life—he has come to realize that by blindly engaging in self-denial, he has been wounding himself and preventing his people from achieving all they could. It is only when he has the choice to be either egotistic or “emptyhanded”—or both, in balance—that he can best enrich his own life and the lives of his people.



INDIVIDUALISM AND ISOLATION VS. COLLECTIVISM AND SOLIDARITY

On the anarcho-syndicalist planet of Anarres, where everyone is responsible for the well-being of everyone else and no one owns anything, “egoizing” is the ultimate sin. Anarresti are always calling one another out in moments of egoism as they strive to eliminate possessiveness, egocentrism, and self-interest from their society, their language, and their relationships. Meanwhile, on Urras, the self is of central importance, and the drive for self-advancement and self-aggrandizement defines every aspect of Urrasti society. As Shevek observes the differences between the two worlds, he is thrown into conflict and inner turmoil about the values of individualism versus collectivism, as well as the uses—and the moral implications—of isolation versus solidarity. Le Guin uses *The Dispossessed* as a vehicle for allegorically critiquing the virtues and failures of both capitalism and socialism. The radical collectivism of the Odonians is damaging in ways that are different from the compassionless and greedy patterns of capitalism, and neither system offers utopia, or even real freedom. Using Shevek as a guide, Le Guin urges her readers to evaluate the differing ideologies in Urrasti and Anarresti societies, ultimately suggesting that while neither planet is totally “right,” each has the power to redeem itself only by adopting—even in small part—the mores and ideals of the other.

Anarresti share everything—goods, food, living quarters, and even partners and children. Dormitories are the most common living arrangement, with single or double-room domiciles being reserved for those who are partnered—a small fraction of society. Shevek never knew his mother, who left him and his father when Shevek was still a child (though this is relatively common, as children do not necessarily “belong” to their parents, nor do parents “belong” to their children). Anarresti language has no possessive grammar—such that an Odonian would say “the head hurts” rather than saying “my head hurts.” The idea of ownership is so foreign to Odonians that it has been removed from the language they use to communicate, and though as a child Shevek struggled with a desire for possession, he soon came to adopt the Anarresti ethos of dispossession. Everything on Anarres is shared, and nothing is owned. However, this radical collectivism has its faults, and creates several problems for Shevek throughout the course of his life. On Anarres, Shevek—as a leading physicist—should have been able to be part of an institute of likeminded fellows able to engage with him and his work. However, due to the syndicalist nature of Odonian society and the prioritization of labor which most directly serves Anarresti society as a whole, Shevek was always told that his research was unimportant. His work was frequently co-opted by his mentor, Sabul, who insisted that Shevek did not deserve credit for the theory he developed because it belonged to all of Anarres. Moreover, due to the

taboo on communication between Urras and Anarres, Shevek was consistently isolated and cut off from the only others working in his field—Urrasti physicists. On Urras, however, he experiences the “revelation” and “liberation” of finally being able to work alongside his peers, and at last feeling as if his work is important rather than egotistical or isolationist. The desire to create a society completely allegiant to the values of solidarity and collectivism on Anarres ultimately failed Shevek, while on Urras, a planet noted for its isolationism and egoism, he is able to find the camaraderie he has long craved—at least for a while.

On Urras, Shevek is given the freedom and resources he needs to work toward his General Temporal Theory unhindered and unfettered. However, he slowly comes to understand that the loti only want his theory for their own advancement and prestige. The co-opting of Shevek’s hard work on Anarres brought him pain and sadness, and on Urras, he realizes that the same fate will eventually befall him. At least on Anarres he was working for the good of his brothers and sisters—on Urras, he is only working to stoke the egoism of the State. Shevek’s work is co-opted in both places, though on Anarres it was done in the name of collectivism, and on Urras it is being done in the name of deepening the individualist and isolationist agenda of the powerful loti government.

Many of the people of Urras, though they are regarded on Anarres simply as self-obsessed egoizers, actually long for solidarity and change. When Shevek, exhausted by and fearful of the Urrasti upper classes he has been consorting with since his arrival, ventures out into the “real” Urras, he encounters in the lower classes a burning desire for collectivism, socialism, and revolution. Shevek urges the rebels to consider what they want, and to approach change “empty-handed”—that is, free of ego or expectations. This, he warns them, is the only way forward.

Shevek’s journey from Anarres to Urras and back again is a lesson for him in the virtues and vices inherent in ideals of individualism versus ideals of collectivism. Shevek felt isolated on Anarres, but his isolation is compounded even further on Urras. A man caught between two worlds—and two worldviews—Shevek eventually comes to see the ways in which both societies fall short of their goals and their potentials, and ultimately returns to his home planet with the goal of broadening communication throughout the galaxy with the invention of a device which will allow instantaneous contact between far-away planets. In the end, the ansible—the physical manifestation of Shevek’s years of work on both Urras and Anarres—serves to further collectivism and solidarity throughout the galaxy and stands as a symbolic reconciliation and mediation of Urrasti and Anarresti ideologies, despite the deep flaws inherent in each.



THE PEOPLE VS. THE STATE

Anarchy and insurrection are major motifs throughout *The Dispossessed*, and on the planets of Urras and Anarres, people frequently question—or oppose directly—the systems that govern them. On Urras, where three vastly different states are controlled by three very different regimes, discord and unrest permeate the whole of the planet, and anarchy is seen as a thing to be quashed. On Anarres, which was founded on principles of anarchy and where there is, in theory, no governing or ruling individual, organization, or syndicate, anarchy is publicly hailed as the means by which Odonians were able to create a world for themselves, but when push comes to shove any questioning of the systems which have come to dominate Anarresti society is frowned upon. Le Guin argues, through her portraits of the twin worlds, that even in a world founded on principles of anarchy, a system of power will always rise up—and when it does, there will always be true anarchists and insurrectionists who speak and act out against it. In this way she argues that anarchy is the lifeblood of any society, anywhere in the universe, and that the anarchic clash between the people and their state is the only mechanism by which real change is possible anywhere.

On Anarres, Shevek and his family and friends go through their days operating unquestioningly within the framework of their anarcho-syndicalist society. People voluntarily follow postings from the PDC, the Production and Distribution Coordination, and the Divlab, or the Division of Labor office. Only Shevek's friend Bedap questions whether the PDC has become, effectively, the government of Anarres—though the Odonian leader Odo advocated for the destruction of the state and any governing bodies of any kind. As the novel progresses, Shevek and his partner Takver begin to take Bedap's musings seriously as they witness the extent to which the PDC controls the Anarresti. Odonians are moved around from job to job, prevented from pursuing certain lines of research, communications with the Urrasti, and beaten down or broken by seemingly vindictive or manipulative labor postings (after staging a play which is critical of Odonianism, Shevek and Bedap's friend Tirin is assigned hard labor position after hard labor position until he loses his mind, eventually being "posted" indefinitely to an asylum).

Shevek and his friends slowly recognize the insidious side of the PDC, and the hypocrisy of an organization that seeks to control its citizens while masquerading behind anarcho-syndicalist values. The final straw comes when Shevek and Bedap, in a PDC meeting, propose building a bridge between Anarres and Urras by welcoming self-proclaimed Odonian refugees from the Urrasti state of Benbili, which is controlled by a military dictatorship. The PDC refuses, stating the terms on which Anarres was founded—total exclusion of the Urrasti. Instead, Shevek proposes sending an Anarresti to Urras, and is

warned that any Anarresti who left and then attempted to return would be met with potentially violent justice. Lamenting that their planet is no longer truly representative of the anarchist values it purports to propagate, Shevek and his friends resolve to follow through with the ultimate act of insurrection—sending Shevek himself to Urras.

On Urras, Shevek is kept for many months in a cushy private apartment at Ieu Eun University, a college nestled in the wealthy Ioti capital, Nio Esseia. Though Shevek's handlers and fellow physicists take him on a "tour" of A-Io, Shevek is never allowed to encounter any members of the lower classes. The Ioti do this on purpose: they do not want Shevek to see the political unrest on their planet, or for their struggling "unpropertied" classes to get a glimpse of the Anarresti man who represents the potential that anarchy has to make a true change. News of the conflicts spreading through the world leak through, however, and Shevek learns that the capitalist state of A-Io and the socialist state of Thu are fighting a proxy war in the already ravaged state of Benbili. A-Io supports the reinstatement of the overthrown Benbili military dictator, while Thu supports the people's revolution, and the two more dominant states clash in a "third-world country" so as not to bring the "barbarism" of war to either of their states.

Seeing this unrest develop, coupled with his revelation that the Ioti state only wants his General Temporal Theory for their own advancement, motivates Shevek to leave the University and seek refuge from the state's machinations in the world of the lower classes. There, he is hailed as a hero and a symbol of the revolution, and invited to give a speech at a socialist worker's demonstration. The demonstration is attacked by the state police, however, and Shevek is forced to flee to the Terran embassy. There, he offers his General Temporal Theory to the displaced people of Terra, rather than offer it to the Ioti state, who will only use it to bring more pain and destruction into the world.

Written as an ode of sorts to the values of anarchy and insurrection, *The Dispossessed* doesn't ever champion one political ideology over another, but rather celebrates defiance and revolutionary thought and action in the face of oppression. Le Guin proudly dedicates the pages of one of her landmark novels to an unrepentant anarchist, and encourages the distrust—and the dismantling—of the power structures that allow governments to control and harm the people they are entrusted with serving.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE WALL

The unimportant-looking wall made of “uncut rocks roughly mortared” that surrounds the Port of Anarres functions as a symbol of Anarresti isolation—not only from their rival planet, Urras, but from the rest of the galaxy. “Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depend upon which side of it you were on,” the narrator remarks. Urras and Anarres are twin planets, though many refer to Anarres as the “moon” of Urras. Relations and communications between the planets are hindered by issues of perspective, as the Urrasti are barred from ever visiting Anarres and the Anarresti are more than wary of the Urrasti’s capitalist, materialistic society and values.

The novel centers around Anarresti physicist Shevek’s growing disillusionment with the isolationist lifestyle and politics on Anarres, and his subsequent search for something better. In the early pages of the novel, as Shevek boards the *Mindful*, a ship bound for Urras, he crosses the wall (he is the first Anarresti to do so in nearly two hundred years). All the while he is harassed and physically threatened by gathered protestors. Le Guin describes the wall as low enough that “even a child could climb it,” and in doing so she emphasizes how easy it would be for the two rival worlds to set aside their differences and come together in the name of common good, if only they would try. Le Guin also writes that the wall “did not look important”; the differences between the Anarresti and the Urrasti are similarly unimportant, though the citizens of each world have vastly exaggerated them, making reconciliation and peace impossible. Shevek, disillusioned with life on Anarres and hopeful that he will be able to find personal and professional fulfillment on the capitalist world of Urras, crosses the unimportant-looking wall and symbolically crosses over the physical, intellectual, and emotional boundary between the worlds, metaphorically preparing himself to no longer see the two worlds in an “ambiguous, two-faced” way, but from the more objective standpoint of a curious and open-minded traveler.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared. An adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. But the idea was real. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall. Like all walls it was ambiguous, two-faced. What was inside it and what was outside it depended upon which side of it you were on.

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

Le Guin begins the novel with a detailed description of the wall surrounding the Port of Anarres. The wall is a symbol of Anarresti isolation, and Le Guin describes it in terms that highlight how the idea of the wall is more important than the physical reality of it. The wall is short and easy enough for even a child to climb—this sentence is a metaphor for how even the smallest and weakest of the Anarresti could stand to change their isolationist ways, if only they would try. The boundary of the wall has “degenerated” and become porous, but still the realness of the idea of it—and its seven-generation-long history—keep its power alive in the mind of all who live on Anarres. Lastly, Le Guin states that the wall means different things to different people—to the Anarresti it keeps them safe from intruders from elsewhere in the galaxy, specifically their rival planet Urras, but to everyone who is metaphorically “outside” of the wall, the “utopian” society of Anarres is kept always at a distance and is always made inaccessible.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ The knobby baby stood up. His face was a glare of sunlight and anger. His diapers were about to fall off. “Mine!” He said in a high, ringing voice. “Mine sun!”

“It is not yours,” the one-eyed woman said with the mildness of utter certainty. “Nothing is yours. It is to use. It is to share. If you will not share it you cannot use it.” And she picked the knobby baby up with gentle hands and set him aside, out of the square of sunlight.

Related Characters: Shevek (speaker)



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Collins edition of *The Dispossessed* published in 1974.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In this early scene from Shevek's infancy, Le Guin shows us an instant in which his raw desire to possess something—in this case the sun—is an innate human want that has been eradicated from the Anarresti through generations of communal living. From earliest childhood, Anarresti children are taught that they cannot use anything that they will not share, as the socialist and anarcho-syndicalist principles of Anarresti society are rigidly enforced in children to the point that they become second-nature to all Anarresti adults. Shevek's desire in particular to possess something—here, the sun, in contrast to the desire he will develop in adulthood to “possess” Urras, the Moon—points to his rogue individualism. The other babies in the nursery are content enough to share, but Shevek stands out among them, both in his isolation and his ambition.

“I never thought before,” said Tirin, “of the fact that there are people sitting on a hill, up there, on Urras, looking at Anarres, at us, and saying, ‘Look, there’s the Moon.’ Our earth is their Moon; our Moon is their earth.”

“Where, then, is Truth?” declaimed Bedap, and yawned.

“In the hill one happens to be sitting on,” said Tirin.

Related Characters: Bedap, Tirin (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Urras and Anarres, though rivals and idealistic opposites, are, rather poetically, one another's Moons. The planets are twins, but from the perspective of each surface the other world seems small and satellite-like, as each is deeply unknown to the other. While Shevek and his friends have been raised to despise the “propertarian” values of the Urrasti and their capitalist way of life, the boys as teenagers experience a desire to know more about Urras, and a fell a flood of empathy as they consider the lives of their faraway fellow Cetians. Bedap's question about where Truth lies between the two planets is sagely answered by Tirin, who recognizes that the war of ideals between the planets is subjective. Each believes their way of life is the right one,

the good one, and the superior one, unable to see the flaws in their own systems and the benefits in those of their twin planet.

“We don't leave Anarres, because we are Anarres. But are we kept here by force? What force—what laws, governments, police? None. Simply our own being, our nature as Odonians. It's your nature to be Tirin, and my nature to be Shevek, and our common nature to be Odonians, responsible to one another. And that responsibility is our freedom. To avoid it would be to lose our freedom. Would you really like to live in a society where you had no responsibility and no freedom, no choice, only the false option of obedience to the law, or disobedience followed by punishment? Would you really want to go live in a prison?”

Related Characters: Shevek (speaker), Bedap, Tirin

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

In this impassioned speech to his friends, the teenaged Shevek describes their Odonian “nature” and its inescapability. In contrast to his childhood desire for possession, Shevek now finds “freedom” in the responsibility of collectivism. He decries the Urrasti way of life, declaring their society to be a prison. This speech will come back to haunt Shevek in the years to come, though he does not know it yet—in his adulthood, he will long to escape Anarres, feeling that the Anarresti ideal of freedom is flawed and in jeopardy. Once on Urras he will be bewitched by the planet and come to love the capitalist society he once railed against, but will then slowly discover that he has indeed allowed himself to become imprisoned by the Urrasti and the loti state. This speech is full of foreboding and irony, and Le Guin uses it as a jumping-off point for Shevek's character development.

☛☛ “Take care in Abbenay. Keep free. Power inheres in a center. You’re going to the center. I don’t know Sabul well; I know nothing against him; but keep this in mind; you will be his man.”

The singular forms of the possessive pronoun in Pravic were used mostly for emphasis; idiom avoided them. Little children might say “my mother,” but very soon they learned to say “the mother.” Instead of “my hand hurts,” it was “the hand hurts me,” and so on; to say “this one is mine and that’s yours” in Pravic, one said, “I use this one and you use that.” Mitis’s statement, “You will be *his man*,” had a strange sound to it. Shevek looked at her blankly.

Related Characters: Mitis (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

Shevek’s mentor at the Northsetting Institute, the wise woman Mitis, knows that her pupil is bound for great things. She recommends him for advanced study at the Central Institute of the Sciences in Abbenay, hoping that there he will have the room and the resources to achieve his potential. She sends him away, though, with a pair of warnings: to beware of centralization and the power structure that can form in a major institute or city, and to keep in mind that in going to Abbenay, Shevek will be conscripting himself into Sabul’s service. Pravic language, devoid of common possessive pronouns, prevents Shevek from fully understanding or grasping the depth of Mitis’s warning. The idea of being someone’s “man”—of belonging to someone and being subject to their will—doesn’t register with Shevek, and he looks at Mitis “blankly,” unable to foresee the trials and frustrations that await him under Sabul’s thumb.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛☛ [Shevek] had no right to tease them. They knew no relation but possession. They were possessed.

Related Characters: Shevek (speaker), Saio Pae, Demaere Oiie

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

As Shevek gets to know the Urrasti scientists he’ll be working with, the men carry on conversations about the vast differences in their respective societies. When the conversation turns to women, the physicists Oiie and Pae can only talk about women in terms of “possession.” They are taken aback by the way women are seen on Anarres—as equals who are given the same jobs and same weight in society as their male counterparts. Shevek is mildly disgusted by the Urrasti attitude toward women, but reminds himself to have empathy for these men and to go easy on them—they know nothing but possession, after all. Shevek is generous with the men who host him on Urras, making excuses and concessions for their behavior and their coarse words because he takes pity on them, in a way. The term “possessed,” then, takes on a double meaning. The men are “possessed” in that they have possessions and believe that those possessions will bring them joy—whereas Shevek is “dispossessed” of any such illusions about capitalism. The men are also “possessed,” perhaps, in a larger sense of the word, in that they are consumed and haunted by their worldly possessions and their capitalist way of life at every turn, unable to conceive of a world different from their own.

☛☛ When Shevek asked, with some diffidence, if he might see the place where Odo was buried, they whisked him straight to the old cemetery in the Trans-Sua district. They even allowed newsmen to photograph him standing there in the shade of the great old willows, looking at the plain, well-kept tombstone:

Laia Aseio Odo

698-796

To be whole is to be part;

True voyage is return.

Related Characters: Shevek (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after arriving at the University, Shevek is taken by car on lengthy and lavish tours of the luxurious loti capital city of Nio Esseia and the beautiful countryside surrounding it. These tours cause Shevek to fall in love with Urras, and have possibly been orchestrated carefully by his handlers to do so, so that Shevek will want to give over his General Temporal Theory to them upon its completion. On one of

these outings, Shevek asks shyly if he might be taken to Odo's grave. The storied Odonian leader never even made it to Anarres—she rotted in prison as a dissenter, trapped on Urras. At her grave, Shevek reads the inscription, which is made up of two twin lines competing with one another—mirroring the twinned but rival worlds of Urras and Anarres. The first line, “to be whole is to be part,” means that to be a part of a society like Anarres—a syndicalist society in which everyone is responsible for everyone else—makes one whole, fulfilled, or satisfied. The second line, “true voyage is return,” seems to foreshadow the arc of Shevek's journey to Urras. The “true voyage” is not his leaving Anarres in order to explore Urras, but will be his eventual return to his home planet.

The tone of surprise the narrator takes in describing how the loti so easily allowed Shevek to visit Odo's grave, and even took press photos of the event, reflects Shevek's own surprise at this “freedom.” He had expected that the capitalist loti would want to keep him hidden and secure, and certainly not advertise him visiting the grave of the most famous anarchist in history. What he comes to learn later, though, is that the press will then just make up fake interviews with him that maintain the status quo, and that the loti aren't afraid of Shevek traveling around the capital or among the upper classes, as his revolutionary beliefs would have no appeal to these people. They are only concerned about him finding his way to the exploited lower classes, who could be empowered by his presence.

☞ [Shevek] had come to love Urras, but what good was his yearning love? He was not part of it. Nor was he part of the world of his birth. The loneliness, the certainty of isolation that he had felt in his first hour aboard the *Mindful* rose up in him and asserted itself as his true condition, ignored, suppressed, but absolute. He was alone here because he came from a self-exiled society. He had always been alone on his own world because he had exiled himself from his society. And he had been fool enough to think that he might serve to bring together two worlds to which he did not belong.

Related Characters: Shevek (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 89-90

Explanation and Analysis

In his early days on Urras, Shevek feels that he loves the planet, and yet he understands that he will never truly be a part of it. Similarly, he feels like he's also not a “part” of

Anarres, disconnected from what he feels is a stifling and hypocritical societal organization. Shevek is deeply lonely as a result of his isolation from both planets, but wonders whether isolation is coded into his bones, as he comes from a society which has isolated itself from the rest of the galaxy. Shevek has felt alone for so long and is sick of it, but feels he is unable to escape his loneliness. In the depths of his misery, he berates himself for having thought that he could bring the worlds together—he feels ill-equipped for the task, and completely submerged in his isolation.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞ “The law of existence is struggle—competition—elimination of the weak—a ruthless war for survival. And I want to see the best survive. The kind of humanity I know. The Cetians. You and I: Urras and Anarres. We're ahead of them now, all those Hainish and Terrans and whatever else they call themselves, and we've got to stay ahead of them. They brought us the interstellar drive, but we're making better interstellar ships now than they are. When you come to release your Theory, I earnestly hope you'll think of your duty to your own people, your own kind. Of what loyalty means, and to whom it's due.”

Related Characters: Atro (speaker), Shevek

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

In a conversation with the lauded Urrasti physicist Atro, Shevek finds himself caught off-guard by the elderly man's sense of nationalistic, even racist pride in the superiority of the Cetians: that is, the Urrasti and Anarresti people. Atro looks down with scorn at the other races of the galaxy, and feels it is imperative that the Cetians assert dominance over them. A true profiteer and social Darwinist (believing only in “survival of the fittest”), Atro wants to use Shevek's General Temporal Theory—which has been his life's work—to both suppress and oppress the other inhabitants of the galaxy. Atro frames this desire through the lens of allegiance, loyalty, and valor, goading Shevek toward supporting his own “people” at the expense of countless others who could benefit from a comprehensive theory of Time.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☝☝ “We have no government, no laws. But as far as I can see, ideas were never controlled by laws and governments, even on Urras. You can’t crush ideas by suppressing them. You can only crush them by ignoring them. By refusing to think, refusing to change. And that’s precisely what our society is doing! Sabul uses you, and prevents you from publishing, from teaching, even from working. In other words, he has power over you. Where does he get it from? Not from vested authority, there isn’t any. He gets it from the innate cowardice of the human mind. Public opinion! That’s the power structure he’s part of, and knows how to use. The unadmitted, inadmissible government that rules Odonian society by stifling the individual mind... Government [is defined as] the legal use of power to maintain and extend power. Replace ‘legal’ with ‘customary,’ and you’ve got Sabul, and the Syndicate of Instruction, and the PDC.”

Related Characters: Bedap (speaker), Sabul – , Shevek

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

When they reunite as adults, childhood friends Bedap and Shevek have a lot of catching up to do. Much has changed in the years they’ve been apart, and both men have developed complex ideas about the world they live in. Bedap in particular has come to realize the chinks in the armor of Anarresti society, and the ways in which anarcho-syndicalism, though it purports to neither follow the will of nor lend credence to any power structure at all, actually has created a power structure of its own. Public opinion, and shame from being unable or unwilling to fulfill one’s “responsibility” to his or her fellow Odonians, is the mechanism from which power comes in Anarresti society. The PDC, Bedap believes, is at the root of this emergent power structure, as it is the council that coordinates all production and development on Anarres and oversees work assignments. Bedap’s ideas are in their nascent stage, but over the course of the novel he will home in more closely on the insidious forces within Anarresti culture that have contributed to a coherence of power in a society that is supposed to be exempt from the evil, danger, and oppression of following orders from any kind of governing body.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ It was difficult for him to distrust the people he was with. He had been brought up in a culture that relied deliberately and constantly on human solidarity, mutual aid. Alienated as he was in some ways from that culture, and alien as he was to this one, still the lifelong habit remained: he assumed people would be helpful. He trusted them. But Chifoilisk’s warnings, which he had tried to dismiss, kept returning to him. His own perceptions and instincts reinforced them. Like it or not, he must learn distrust. He must be silent; he must keep his property to himself; he must keep his bargaining power.

Related Characters: Shevek (speaker), Chifoilisk

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 228-229

Explanation and Analysis

On Urras, Shevek is coming to understand that all is not as it seems. In his conversations with his fellow physicists he has witnessed their greed, racism, and misogyny on full display, and realizes that the difference in values between the Urrasti and the Anarresti are not just their views on capitalism and socialism. Shevek’s life on Anarres has led him to believe that everyone everywhere will be helpful and dutiful to their fellow men, but on Urras he sees that greed, individualism, and proprietarianism reign. At the advice of Chifoilisk, a physicist from the Urrasti socialist state of Thu and seemingly his only ally on Urras, Shevek begins to learn distrust. Shevek himself is now thinking like a proprietarian—he is going to have to keep his beliefs, his fears, and most importantly his work, all to himself.

☝☝ “It is an ugly world. Anarres is all dusty and dry hills. And the people aren’t beautiful. The towns are very small and dull, they are dreary. Life is dull, and hard work. You can’t always have what you want, or even what you need, because there isn’t enough. You Urrasti have enough. You are rich, you own. We are poor, we lack. You have, we do not have. Everything is beautiful here. Only not the faces. On Anarres nothing is beautiful, nothing but the faces. We have nothing but that, nothing but each other. Here you see the jewels, there you see the eyes. And in the eyes you see the splendor of the human spirit. Because our men and women are free—possessing nothing, they are free. And you the possessors are possessed. You are all in jail. Each alone, solitary, with a heap of what he owns. You live in prison, die in prison. It is all I can see in your eyes—the wall, the wall!

Related Characters: Shevek (speaker)

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 228-229

Explanation and Analysis

While drunk at Vea's party, Shevek is asked by her guests—who are in awe of him, “The Man From The Moon”—what life on Anarres is like. In his drunken and depressed state, Shevek responds not with an idealized or even very loving view of Anarres. He is real and honest with the party guests—Anarres is a difficult, dreary, and often ugly place to live, and the socialist communal values, while nice in theory, create a visible and palpable lack in the lives of the Anarresti. On Urras, however, Shevek sees that while things are beautiful and plentiful, something is missing from the people. On Anarres people are free and live in solidarity—on Urras, people are “possessed.” As Shevek begins to realize that he has come to the prison he once vowed never to long for, he is seemingly stricken by a vision of the wall surrounding the Port of Anarres. He realizes, perhaps, that he has flung himself outside the bounds of the wall, and will never be able to cross it again. In other reading of his invocation of the wall, it's possible that Shevek has, in his disheveled state, at last come to see that both worlds are prisons in their own way, despite having just verbally singled out Urras as the true prison.

Explanation and Analysis

Shevek's distrust of Urrasti society comes to a head when he closes in on completing his General Temporal Theory. Against the backdrop of a worsening conflict between A-lo and Thu, which is unfolding in the state of Benbili, Shevek is warned that he will not be permitted to leave the University without express permission from school officials. Realizing that Chifoilisk's warnings have come true, and moreover understanding that the distrust he vowed to maintain was never enough to save him from becoming the property of the loti state, Shevek panics, realizing that no matter what he does now he is no more than a pawn of the capitalist state.

“Do you know what your society has meant, here, to us, these last hundred and fifty years? Do you know that when people here want to wish each other luck they say, ‘May you get reborn on Anarres!’ To know that it exists, to know that there is a society without government, without police, without economic exploitation, that they can never again say that it's just a mirage, an idealist's dream! I wonder if you fully understand why they've kept you so well hidden out there at leu Eun. Why you were never allowed to appear at any meeting open to the public. Why they'll be after you like dogs after a rabbit the moment they find you're gone. It's not just because they want this idea of yours. But because you are an idea. A dangerous one. The idea of anarchism, made flesh. Walking amongst us.”

Chapter 9 Quotes

“On Anarres [Shevek] had chosen, in defiance of the expectation of his society, to do the work he was individually called to do. To do it was to rebel: to risk the self for the sake of society. Here on Urras, that act of rebellion was a luxury, a self-indulgence. To be a physicist in A-lo was to serve not society, not mankind, not the truth, but the State. On his first night in this room he had asked them, challenging and curious, “What are you going to do with me?” He knew now what they had done with him. Chifoilisk had told him the simple fact. They owned him.”

Related Characters: Shevek (speaker), Chifoilisk

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 272

Related Characters: Tuio Maedda (speaker), Shevek

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

When Shevek escapes from leu Eun University after being told that he would be sequestered there indefinitely—essentially he would be made a prisoner and a guinea pig whose only value would lie in his ability to produce the General Temporal Theory—he seeks solidarity and refuge in the lower class neighborhoods of A-lo. There he finds Tuio Maedda, leader of a group of revolutionaries who are planning a massive demonstration for worker's rights. Tuio, at first perplexed by Shevek's presence, eventually admits to Shevek what his presence on Urras—and the far-away civilization on Anarres—has meant to loti revolutionaries over the years. Anarres has long been a beacon of hope, and now that Shevek has arrived on

Urras, he represents anarchy and revolution made flesh. Shevek has been imprisoned at the University because the loti officials know that he represents the possibility of change, and now that he has broken away from his imprisonment, he stands to make a real difference in the lives of the poor and the downtrodden.

Chapter 10 Quotes

“Neither of us chose [to surrender to Sabul’s authoritarianism]. We let Sabul choose for us. Our own, internalized Sabul—convention, moralism, fear of social ostracism, fear of being different, fear of being free! Well, never again. I learn slowly, but I learn.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Takver, a thrill of agreeable excitement in her voice.

“Go to Abbenay with you and start a printing syndicate. Print the *Principles*, uncut. And whatever else we like. Bedap’s [paper] that the PDC wouldn’t circulate. And Tirin’s play. I owe him that. He taught me what prisons are, and who builds them. Those who build walls are their own prisoners. I’m going to go fulfill my proper function in the social organism. I’m going to go unbuild walls.”

Related Characters: Takver, Shevek (speaker), Tirin, Bedap, Sabul –

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 332

Explanation and Analysis

When they at last reunite after over four years apart from one another due to disparate labor postings, Shevek and Takver resolve to remake their lives. They want to be beholden to no one and no authority, whether it comes from internal shame or external pressure. Realizing the ways in which they have allowed themselves to be made small or unhappy by Odonian society, they resolve to work together and take their lives into their own hands. Shevek in particular wants to “unbuild” the walls that have cropped up on Anarres, and have prevented his friends Bedap and Tirin—as well as he himself—from achieving their full potentials and expressing themselves to their fellow brothers and sisters. Shevek and Takver want to spend the rest of their lives dismantling the insidious structures and patterns that have taken hold on Anarres, and this begins by validating their own work and the work of their close

friends.

Chapter 11 Quotes

“There is nothing on Urras that we Anarresti need! We left with empty hands, a hundred and seventy years ago, and we were right. We took nothing. Because there is nothing here but States and their weapons, the rich and their lies, and the poor and their misery. There is no way to act rightly, with a clear heart, on Urras. There is nothing you can do that profit does not enter into. There is no freedom. It is a box—Urras is a package with all the beautiful wrapping of blue sky and meadows and forests and great cities. And you open the box, and what is inside it? A black cellar full of dust, and a dead man. A man whose hand was shot off because he held it out to others. I have been in Hell at last, [and] it is Urras.”

Related Characters: Shevek (speaker), Keng

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 346-347

Explanation and Analysis

Shevek, who has spent the majority of the novel questioning the Anarresti way of life and the hypocrisy of life there, now realizes that things are far worse on Urras. He believes that the Anarresti were right to completely divest themselves of Urrasti ways, taking nothing with them to the Moon as they left to build a new world. He sees now how degenerate and empty Urras is, and believes that because profit and possession control everything there is no way to be free, to be just, to be a brother or a sister to anyone else. Having witnessed death, totalitarianism, prejudice, and greed in full force since his arrival, Shevek now believes that Urras is Hell—not the paradise it appears to be at first glance.

“I only ask your help, for which I have nothing to give in return.”

“Nothing? You call your theory nothing?”

“Weight it in the balance with the freedom of one single human spirit,” [Shevek] said, turning to [Keng], “and which will weigh heavier. Can you tell? I cannot.”

Related Characters: Keng, Shevek (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 351

Explanation and Analysis

When Shevek offers Keng, the Terran ambassador on Urras, his General Temporal Theory—his life’s work—he knows he is putting it in the hands of someone whose values generally align with his. Keng and her people have also been displaced from their planet, and though she has a reverence for Urras and sees it as a paradise, she believes in the equality of the races of the galaxy. Shevek then asks Keng to help him arrange transport home—he has seen enough of Urras and longs to leave. When he apologizes for having nothing to offer in return for passage back to Anarres, Keng questions why Shevek believes his theory is “nothing,” and Shevek replies that it is impossible to say whether his theory’s worth can be measured against the worth of even just one human soul’s true freedom. Shevek’s true values are revealed—he believes in freedom for all, and knows that there is nothing more valuable than it. Not even his life’s work is worth more than freedom, and in saying so Shevek reasserts his true Anarresti spirit.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ “What we’re after is to remind ourselves that we didn’t come to Anarres for safety, but for freedom. If we must all agree, all work together, we’re no better than a machine. If an individual can’t work in solidarity with his fellows, it’s his duty to work alone. His duty and his right. We have been denying people that right. We’ve been saying, more and more often, you must work with the others, you must accept the rule of the majority. But any rule is tyranny. The duty of the individual is to accept *no* rule, to be the initiator of his own acts. Only if he does so will the society live, and change, and adapt, and survive. We are not subjects of a State founded upon law, but members of a society founded upon revolution. Revolution is our obligation. We can’t stop here. We must go on. We must take the risks.”

Related Characters: Shevek (speaker), Rulag, Bedap

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 359

Explanation and Analysis

In a meeting with the PDC, Shevek and Bedap express their Syndicate’s desire to welcome asylum-seekers from Urras. A group of Benbili citizens have proclaimed themselves Odonians, and long to escape their country’s tyrannical regime and join the people they see as their brothers and sisters—the Anarresti. Due to the official terms of Anarresti settlement, however, any Urrasti are barred from coming to

the Moon, and the members of the PDC—Shevek’s estranged mother Rulag included—vehemently oppose sheltering the Benbili. Shevek argues that freedom and solidarity are the “duty and right” of anyone who calls himself an Odonian, and opposes the acceptance of any rule, governance, or authority. Shevek attempts to get the PDC to understand that “revolution is [the] obligation” of the Odonians, and that to stop moving forward and pushing the boundaries of their society—to cease behaving like the anarchists they always have been—is to doom their world to the same authoritarianism and oppression they fought so hard and so long to escape.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☞ “Things are...a little broken loose, on Anarres. That’s what my friends on the radio have been telling me. It was our purpose all along to shake things up, to break some habits, to make people ask question. To behave like anarchists! All this has been going on while I was gone. So, you see, nobody is quite sure what happens next. And if you land with me, even more gets broken loose...Once you are there, once you walk through the wall with me, then as I see it you are one of us. We are responsible to you and you to us; you become an Anarresti, with the same options as all the others. But they are not safe options. Freedom is never very safe.”

Related Characters: Shevek (speaker), Ketho

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 384

Explanation and Analysis

Ketho, the Hainish first mate on the *Davenant* (the spaceship returning Shevek to Anarres from Urras) expresses his desire to land on Anarres with Shevek and live among the Anarresti. Shevek warns Ketho that things are “broken loose” on Anarres right now, and there is no telling how the two of them will be received or what society will look like, exactly, once they reenter it. Secondly, Shevek warns Ketho that the arrival of an outsider will surely—at least at first—compound whatever anarchy, revolution, or discord has already “broken loose.” He promises Ketho, though, that if he commits to the Anarresti way of life, he will be treated as an Odonian, and will be free in the way that all Anarresti are free—though, in a final warning, Shevek admits that the pursuit of freedom is never truly a

safe pursuit.

“I will lie down to sleep on Anarres tonight,” [Shevek] thought. “I will lie down beside Takver. I wish I’d brought the picture, the baby sheep, to give Pilun.” But he had not brought anything. His hands were empty, as they had always been.

Related Characters: Shevek (speaker), Pilun, Sadik, Takver

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 387

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his journey—the return portion, which is, according to Odo, the “true voyage”—Shevek wonders if he should have brought something back to offer to his family when he reunites with them. He has not brought anything back from Urras, though—in line with his earlier quote, there is nothing on Urras that the Anarresti need. Despite all he has been through, and all he has seen of the universe, Shevek holds fast to the value of empty-handedness which is central to Odonianism. He is going to return to his home planet and offer himself, bare and dispossessed, to his people—he has no ties to property or possessions, and nothing to give but himself and the insight he has gained in his travels.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The narrator describes an unimportant-looking **wall**. It is low and made from roughly-cut rocks mortared together somewhat haphazardly. The wall is easily climbed and is really just an “idea of a boundary,” but nevertheless the wall has made that idea “real,” and for seven generations the wall has been the most important thing on this world.

From one side of the **wall**, it appears to enclose a large, barren field called the Port of Anarres. There is a rocket pad, a garage, and a dormitory on the field. The dormitory is abandoned and is meant, the narrator says, to function as a quarantine. The dormitory and the landing field are enclosed by the wall and are meant to keep separate everyone who arrives from anywhere else in the galaxy. In this way, the wall “enclose[s] the universe, leaving Anarres outside, free.” From the other side, the wall appears to enclose the planet of Anarres—from this view, it is Anarres which is quarantined and squared off.

Today, some people are standing along the point where the road cuts through the **wall**. Often people come from the nearby city of Abbenay in order to excitedly observe a spaceship, but today there is a somber mood in the air. Members of the Defense syndicate seem to be on high alert, ready to stop anyone who might try to breach the wall from getting through, though nothing exciting or dangerous ever really happens at the landing field.

The captain of the freighter departing today—the *Mindful*—asks the female foreman of the Defense syndicate whether a nearby mob is after his ship. The foreman sees that a large crowd has gathered at the breach in the **wall**. The foreman replies in “slow and limited lotic” that the mob is simply protesting the passenger who is scheduled to leave today. The captain asks whether the mob will try to stop the passenger from boarding, or the ship itself from taking off. The foreman asks the captain whether he can look after himself, and he replies that he can. He then instructs the foreman to get the ship’s cargo unloaded and board the passenger quickly. He pats a phallic-shaped weapon holstered on his belt and tells her that he does not want any “Oddies” giving him and his crew trouble.

Le Guin begins the novel with a description of its main symbol for Anarresti isolation and the divisions that run deep throughout this galaxy. The wall, the “most important thing” on the entire planet, is first presented as a means of keeping the Anarresti experiment safe from outsiders.



Boundaries and binaries are important in this novel. Le Guin begins the book’s action by focusing on the implications of one of the most heavily symbolic physical boundaries, describing how the wall “quarantines” any visitors to Anarres and keeps them from ever even edging close to Anarresti society.



Though the wall is often a place where Anarresti can excitedly observe—albeit from a distance—rare encounters with other inhabitants of their galaxy, today tensions are high. This serious mood foreshadows the deep resentment that the Anarresti feel for the passenger departing today (later revealed as Shevek), and the betrayal his departure represents.



The tensions between the Urrasti crew and the Anarresti Defense Syndicate are apparent right away. The Urrasti are prepared to use force, which comes in the form of their phallic-shaped weaponry meant to assert dominance. The Defense Syndicate, meanwhile, sees protest as a natural and commonplace occurrence, and a demonstrative form of freedom. Moreover, the freighter captain uses a derogatory nickname—Oddie—to denigrate the Odonian culture as “odd.”



The foreman, angry at the way the captain has spoken to her, tells him that liftoff will take place at fourteen hours forty and then heads off to the **wall**, ordering her team to clear the road and make way for the trucks that will soon come through. The mob more or less complies with her orders—the mob, the narrator says, has little experience with actually being a mob—and there are “as many emotions there are there [a]re people.”

Some members of the mob have come to kill a traitor, while others have come just to catch a glimpse of him or to yell insults at him as he leaves. A few have brought knives, but no one has a gun. The mob expected that the passenger would arrive in an armored truck, and so they hardly notice him walking up the road alone and unprotected. By the time they realize who he is, he is already halfway across the field, flanked by Defense syndics. Some members of the mob hurl rocks at the passenger, clipping his shoulder and striking one of the Defense crew in the head, killing him instantly.

As the ship enters space, the passenger feels completely isolated, as if the world has fallen out from under him. He looks up at the stranger beside him, who is speaking to him in lotic—a foreign language, but one the passenger can understand. While the stranger fumbles with the straps holding him into his seat, dislodging them, he asks the passenger whether he was hurt by the rocks. The passenger answers that he is well. The stranger says that he is a doctor and urges the passenger to follow him. The stranger addresses the passenger as Dr. Shevek. Shevek insists that he is not a doctor—he is just Shevek.

The doctor is a short, fair, and bald-headed man. Anxious, he tells Shevek that Shevek should get to his cabin quickly—there is a high risk of infection now that Shevek, in the chaos surrounding the mob’s attack, has come in contact with individuals on board the *Mindful* other than the doctor. Shevek follows the doctor out of the crew lounge. He is dizzy, and his shoulder hurts. He is struck by the “awful, utter silence” onboard.

The doctor brings Shevek to a room with blank walls. Shevek, exhausted from lack of sleep the night before, recalls the events of the last few days. After seeing his partner Takver and their children off to a city called Peace-and-Plenty, he busily communicated with the people on the planet Urras, and also conferred with his Anarresti friend Bedap and other members of their syndicate about the “plans and possibilities” for Shevek’s journey there. Over the last several busy days, Shevek has felt that his tasks and errands have been in control, and that his own will—despite being what “had started it all”—has not been in effect.

The mob’s disorganization, despite the highly-unionized nature of Odonian society, speaks to the range of feelings present in the crowd on this day. It’s implied that though protest is never discouraged, the Odonian people do not have a great deal of experience as protestors, as their society is normally harmonious and well-oiled.



The outburst of violence from the mob, aimed at the mysterious passenger as he walks toward the Mindful, is characterized as uncommon for citizens of Anarres. Le Guin shows this through their haphazard approach to retaliation as well as their simultaneous lack of weaponry and ability to mortally injure a member of one of their planet’s own syndicates.



Shevek has been strapped down for takeoff, symbolically stripped of his freedom. As the ship enters orbit, Shevek’s disorientation mirrors the reader’s. He is on a foreign spaceship, totally alone, forced to communicate in a foreign language—his isolation is total, and the doctor’s confusion about Shevek’s title further foreshadows the ways in which he will be misunderstood by many now that he has left his home planet.



Shevek’s isolation is not just emotional or psychological, but now physical as well. As a passenger onboard a foreign ship, Shevek is susceptible to many Urrasti diseases, and must be quarantined to keep himself safe. The “utter silence” is another physical aspect of Shevek’s isolation, and a metaphor for the uncertainty he’s facing.



Shevek’s recollections of the last several days demonstrate how profoundly isolating this journey is for him. In the days leading up to it he has felt disconnected even from his own inner thoughts and desires. As Shevek reflects on all he has left behind—a family, friends, and a syndicate of coworkers and supporters—the depths of the isolation he faces are even more greatly magnified.



The doctor examines Shevek's shoulder—Shevek hardly remembers being struck at all—and then turns to him holding a large needle. Shevek tells the doctor, in Iotic, that he does not want the shot. The doctor insists that Shevek needs a measles vaccine. Though the disease it protects against is not present on Anarres, it is common on Urras, and potentially deadly. The doctor injects Shevek with the measles vaccine, as well as several others. Shevek silently submits to the injections, knowing deep down that he has “yielded himself up to these people,” and has abandoned his Anarresti “birthright of decision.”

In the blank room, Shevek finds himself in a “wretched void without past or future” that seems to last for hours or even days. Shevek aches from his injections and runs a fever. He sleeps a long, deep sleep, and when he awakes, is confused by the time on the clock near his bed. He wonders how, in between two worlds, it can be a certain time of day, eventually deciding that the ship must keep its own time outside the boundaries of either world, and he feels refreshed by his ability to figure this information out. He sits up and stands, testing his balance—he feels that the ship's gravity must be weak, and begins searching his room in search of a feeling of solidity.

Touching panels on the walls opens them to reveal a toilet, sink, desk, closet, and shelves. Shevek bathes and dries himself, and then gets dressed in a set of pajamas. Not knowing what the loose-fitting garments are, he wonders if this is how everyone dresses on Urras. He tries to leave his room but finds that the door is locked. Feeling a blind rage come over him, Shevek attempts to let himself out of his room. He activates an intercom panel and shouts into it, asking to be let out, and soon the door opens—the doctor is on the other side of it. The doctor explains that the locked door was a precaution meant for Shevek's own safety, intended to keep contamination and contagion out. Shevek says that to lock in and to lock out are the same thing, and that his safety is irrelevant to this fact.

As Shevek submits himself to the care of the Urrasti, he is isolated even further by his renouncement of Anarresti freedoms (which, it's suggested, are total). Shevek is now at the mercy of the Urrasti, and in order to live among them he must alter himself to fit in. The vaccines are a physical symbol of the ways in which Shevek has had to—and will continue to have to—make changes to himself to be accepted on Urras.



Shevek goes through a physical transition as an effect of his vaccines, showing how he is also mentally transitioning in preparation for his arrival on Urras. For now, he has the safety of the in-between space that the spaceship represents, but as his fever breaks and the end of his journey through space nears, he approaches his “new” life weakly but determinedly.



As Shevek finds himself locked inside his stateroom on board the Mindful, he experiences a violent rage at the idea that there are any barriers at all around him. On Anarres, the only barrier is the wall surrounding the port. Encountering a locked door for the first time in his life fills Shevek with anger and fear that he has made the wrong choice in even attempting to travel to Urras, where perhaps the barriers will be more common—and more impassible—than he realized.



The doctor suggests that Shevek get dressed. Shevek, indicating his pajamas, says that he is dressed already, and the doctor tells Shevek that pajamas are sleepwear. Shevek is puzzled by the idea of clothes meant just for sleeping and asks where his Anarresti clothes have gone. The doctor tells Shevek that he sent them out to be sterilized, and then opens a panel in Shevek's room to reveal his clothes hanging wrapped in green paper. The doctor removes the paper from Shevek's suit and tosses it in a bin. Shevek asks where the paper has gone, and when the doctor tells him that it is in the trash, Shevek marvels at the idea that paper is burned up and disposed of. As Shevek dresses, he notes the doctor placing his pajamas, too, into the bin. The doctor explains that the pajamas were service-issues, and throwing them away costs less than cleaning them. Shevek contemplates these words "the way a paleontologist looks at a fossil."

The doctor, noticing that Shevek has no luggage, assumes that Shevek lost his belongings while running to the ship from the mob, and says he hopes that Shevek didn't have anything too valuable with him. Shevek tells the doctor that he brought nothing along with him on the journey, explaining that he is arriving on Urras as a "beggarman"—because there are neither possessions nor money on Anarres, Shevek is emptyhanded. The doctor assures Shevek that he is not a beggar, but an honored guest, and tells him that he will receive a fantastic welcome once he is on Urras. He promises Shevek that things will be "different" on Urras than they are on the ship, and Shevek tells the doctor he has no doubt things will be different indeed.

Though the journey between Urras and Anarres—known to the Urrasti as the Moon Run—normally takes about four days, the crew has given Shevek five days on board in order to adapt to his surroundings and allow his vaccinations to take effect. The captain of the *Mindful* orbits Urras begrudgingly, and each time he encounters Shevek onboard speaks to him with "uneasy disrespect." The doctor assures Shevek it is nothing personal—the captain is used to seeing all foreigners as inferior. Shevek tells the doctor that the onetime leader of the Anarresti, Odo, referred to this Urrasti phenomenon as "the creation of pseudo-species." Shevek confesses that he had hoped the many languages and nations of Urras, as well as visitors from other solar systems, would have made the Urrasti more tolerant, but the doctor—whose name has revealed to be Kimoe—explains that there are very few interstellar visitors.

In this scene, Shevek is introduced to Urrasti customs that are completely alien to him. The idea of a second set of clothes just for sleeping is a luxury to him—he does not even notice that his pajamas are "service-issue," and probably a low-quality fabric. He is shocked and seemingly a bit perturbed by the disposability of everything on Urras, and the idea that so much is wasted. Paper and clothing are more precious resources on Anarres, evidently, judging by Shevek's response to the doctor's actions as he helps Shevek get dressed.



Shevek has come empty-handed on his journey to Anarres, symbolizing his Odonian values of frugality and humility as well as his desire to receive all Urras has to offer with an open mind and heart. Though Shevek realizes that things on Urras are bound to be different from anything he's ever known, he comes to the planet as a humble representative of his planet, ready to explore Urras through eyes unclouded.



The idea that Shevek is being treated as a member of a "pseudo-species" is off-putting but seemingly unsurprising to him—he knows the history of Anarresti and Urrasti relations, and is well aware of the tensions that run between their two worlds. Despite this knowledge, Shevek retains a degree of hope and naiveté—even as he is being treated badly by the ship's prejudice captain, he hopes that on the surface of Urras that things will be different. The doctor's report that very few people from other planets visit Urras, though, speaks to the potential failure of the planet to open its doors to others, signaling the tensions that hang over not just Urras and Anarres as they relate to one another but also perhaps Urras as it relates to the rest of its solar system.



Shevek tells Kimoe that the Second Officer, too, has been regarding him with a kind of fear. Kimoe explains that the officer is deeply religious, and sees Shevek—who comes from the religion-less Anarres—as a “dangerous atheist.” When Shevek protests, Kimoe, flustered, explains that he meant there was no established religion on Anarres, not necessarily a lack of belief or spirituality. Shevek notes that the two are always flustering one another with their lack of understanding of one another’s societies, and with differences in their languages. All of their conversations are “exhausting to the doctor and unsatisfying to Shevek, yet intensely interesting to both.” Shevek sees Kimoe as his only way of understanding what truly awaits him on Urras, as there are no books on board and hardly anyone will talk to him.

Shevek asks why there are no women on board the ship, and Kimoe tells him that working aboard a space freighter is not women’s work. Kimoe asks Shevek if it is true that women and men are equals in Anarresti society in terms of social status. Shevek asks Kimoe to explain the concept of status, and Kimoe, unable to do so, presses him again and asks whether there is any distinction at all between men’s work and women’s work. Shevek asks what sex has to do with division of labor, and when the doctor asserts that men are physically stronger, Shevek counters that this fact does not matter when so much of Anarresti industry is aided by machinery. Moreover, Shevek says, it’s true that men can work faster and lift more than women, but women have longer endurance and more stamina.

Kimoe laments the loss of “feminine delicacy” and “masculine self-respect” when it comes to not dividing the sexes, and asks Shevek how the men of Anarres “constantly” pretend to lower themselves to the level of women. Shevek tells Kimoe that he is not pretending anything at all. Shevek then steers the conversation away from the topic of men and women, but continues to think about how concepts of superiority and inferiority must rule Urrasti life. He wonders if women on Urras consider men inferior, just as men consider them to be, and contemplates how this power dynamic might affect Urrasti sex lives.

Shevek wonders at the fact that he is now, on this new world, ignorant about all matters of sex. He considers the sensual pleasures of the softness of his mattress on board the ship, and the almost erotic smoothness of the curves of the furniture in his bunk. He decides that he will stop worrying about his ignorance until he gets to Urras, confident that he will figure out things there soon enough.

In this passage, Le Guin introduces the idea that Shevek is considered dangerous not only by the angry Anarresti he has left behind, but by the Urrasti as well. As Shevek and Kimoe attempt to understand one another, they can’t help but offend and upset each other. Nevertheless, their mutual fascination with one another is symbolic of the pull that exists between the Urrasti and the Anarresti, who otherwise overwhelmingly seem to hate and look down on one another’s society. It may be that their many similarities only strengthen their scorn for each other.



Shevek, used to an anarchist society, cannot understand the concept of social status, or any social division of any kind, while Kimoe is unable to see how the Anarresti operate in a world where there are no divisions at all. The deep ideological differences between Urras and Anarres are laid out for the reader through these conversations, and Le Guin also uses them to discuss gender through a more detached lens—the Urrasti are obviously sexist and over-attached to the gender binary, while the Anarresti seem to purposefully avoid connecting larger social ideas to gender.



Again it’s suggested that women on Anarres are equal to men, while on Urras there are vast differences between the sexes. The Urrasti way of thinking about gender difference mirrors the Urrasti class stratification and the prevalence of “concepts of superiority and inferiority.” On Anarres, there are no such divisions, but on Urras, as Shevek is beginning to see, these divisions and hierarchies are everywhere.



Sex throughout the novel will often be a metaphor for bridging the gaps between not just people, but worlds. Shevek’s sexual compatibility with those he knows on Anarres is vastly different than his sexual compatibility with those he meets on Urras, and his anxiety about being “behind” in matters of sex symbolically mirrors his anxiety about being distant and cut off from Urrasti culture more largely.



As Shevek prepares to strap in for descent, Kimoe comes to his cabin to check on the progress of Shevek's many immunizations. Kimoe gives Shevek a pill that will "pep [him] up" for landing, and then says farewell. He tells Shevek that it has been a great privilege to meet him, and to have been the recipient of Shevek's deep kindness. Shevek shakes Kimoe's hand, hoping aloud that the two will meet him again. Shevek calls Kimoe "brother" in Pravic, only realizing after the doctor has left that Kimoe does not understand the Anarresti language.

Once the ship lands, Shevek is hurried from his bunk and led down a ramp, and he feels a strange air touch his face as he disembarks the spaceship. He stumbles off the ramp onto the Urrasti earth, noting the "broad, grey" evening light all around him. The air around him is mild and fragrant, and he recognizes it as "the air of home." Shevek realizes he is being photographed and filmed, billed as "The First Man from the Moon." Newscasters ask Shevek for a statement, but before he can give one, he is hurried into a limousine waiting nearby.

As the car approaches the Ieu Eun university in the city of Nio Esseia, Shevek's handlers warn him that there are a great number of people waiting to meet him—the university's president, its chancellor, and many others. Shevek is rushed inside, where in a great hall he attends a gathering in his honor. Hundreds of people are in the room, all of whom are bald—even the women—and have adorned their totally-shaved bodies and heads with sumptuous clothing and ornate jewelry. The women's gowns bare their breasts, while the men's tunics and trousers are made of brightly colored fabric and cascading lace.

The President of the Senate of the Nation of A-Io makes a speech, toasting a "new era of brotherhood between the Twin Planets," and citing Shevek himself as the harbinger of this new era. Shevek is introduced to politicians, scientists, and innumerable people of high distinction.

When the party is over, Shevek's escorts bring him to a different building, where they show him a room which is his and his alone. Shevek, unfamiliar with the concept of possession, at first believes the room will be shared with roommates, but soon realizes that the entire giant space is just for him. Shevek tells one of his handlers that he does not know his name, and the man introduces himself as Saio Pae. Shevek recognizes the man's name, and tells him that he read some of his scientific articles back on Anarres.

Despite their great ideological differences, Shevek still feels a warmth for Kimoe, evidenced by the fact that he calls him "brother." There is still a gap between them, though. Literally it is a language gap, but Shevek also realizes that there is an ideological gulf that may never be crossed between them and, moreover, between their two worlds.



Though Shevek's journey on the Mindful was full of moments that made him feel trepidation, as he steps onto Urras and takes his first breath of Urrasti air he has the sensation of being home. Shevek is a man caught between two worlds, and the allure of Urras is undeniable. For the first time it seems as if Urras will be a place where Shevek will feel free and welcomed.



The lavish and resplendent affair that welcomes Shevek to Urras is an overload of sights, sounds, and sensual pleasures. In great contrast to the portrayal of the barren port of Anarres, Le Guin offers a lush and decadent description of Urras, using her language to mirror the competing feelings of overstimulation and allure that Shevek has for the Urrasti. Yet Le Guin also invites the reader to ask—at what cost does all this luxury come?



Shevek's warm welcome stands in stark contrast to the violent sendoff he received back on his home planet, so for now it seems like Urras is superior to Anarres in almost every way. Shevek's journey to Urras clearly means a lot to both planets—though it's becoming clearer that it means very different things to each.



Shevek is still adjusting to the idea that on Urras he will have things that are his and his alone. Coming to this world as a self-proclaimed beggar, Shevek has nothing to give, and seems uncomfortable and uncertain about the act of receiving as well. We also get more information on the nature of Shevek's work and mission to Urras—he is a scientist working on something important.



Pae brings Shevek a glass of water, while the other two men bring Shevek over to sit at the fireplace. While Shevek drinks from the golden-rimmed water glass, he observes his handlers, who eye him with a “protective, respectful, proprietary” attitude. Shevek smiles at the men and asks them what they plan to do with their anarchist now that they have him on their planet.

Shevek has a mischievous attitude toward the Urrasti physicists, and jokingly asks what they plan to do with him. Shevek himself is completely unsure of what to expect, and though he undoubtedly has a purpose for traveling to Anarres, he is uncertain what purpose the Urrasti have for him in return.



CHAPTER 2

In a flashback, the narration transitions to a sunlit nursery on Anarres. A group of children play together, but off in a corner, two babies have separated from the group. A fat baby plays with a peg board, and a knobby baby sits in a square of light and looks up at the sun. In the anteroom outside the nursery, the nursery matron talks with a tall and sad-looking man, Palat, who informs her that his child’s mother has been sent to work in Abbenay, and the child will need to be taken into the nursery full-time. The man himself will be moving back into a dormitory. The matron wonders aloud whether the man will soon be sent along after his partner Rulag, as they are both engineers. Palat explains that his partner is wanted by the Central Institute of Engineering, and that he is not as talented as she is.

Throughout the book, chapters will alternate between Shevek’s present visit to Urras and his past life on Anarres. The novel introduces early on the ways in which Anarresti society places emphasis on work and communal spaces rather than on the more exclusive relationships between romantic partners or parents and children. They seek to limit possessiveness and hierarchy at every level of the human experience. Palat’s sadness over the splitting of his family, however, belies an underlying desire in some Odonians for a different kind of life—a life in which family and partnership are more important than work rotations, and in which some relationships are prioritized over others.



Palat looks in at his child playing in the main room. The fat baby approaches the skinny one, pushing him out of the sunlight and into the shade. The knobby infant throws a fit, telling the fat baby to go away, and proclaiming that the sun belongs to him. The matron enters the room to separate the two children, warning the knobby one—a young Shevek—that “nothing” is his, and that if something cannot be shared it cannot be used at all.

The very young Shevek struggles with concepts of communality. The other children play nicely together, but Shevek is positioned as separate from the group both physically and emotionally. Importantly he longs to possess a celestial body—possession is forbidden on Anarres to begin with, but his desire for an object that inherently defies possession represents the lofty ambitions he will develop as an adult.



Years later, in a Speaking-and-Listening class at an Anarresti learning center, a lanky eight-year-old child stands up to offer his voice. The child is Shevek, and his instructor urges him to share his idea with the group. Shevek describes a complicated physics problem in which a rock being thrown at a tree “always has to go half of the way that’s left to go.” As the class animatedly asks questions and struggles to understand Shevek’s idea, the instructor interjects. He tells Shevek that he is “egoizing”—he is not sharing selflessly with the group. The instructor explains to the class that because Shevek cannot understand speech as a two-way function, he is disruptive to the group, and then he dismisses Shevek from the class.

In childhood as in infancy, Shevek is reprimanded for not sharing selflessly with his fellow brothers and sisters. Shevek is clearly a bright young child who has complicated questions on his mind even at an early age, and when he attempts to investigate those questions publicly, he is seen as a nuisance and an egoist. This theme will continue throughout Shevek’s life, as he constantly comes up against those who wish to silence him as he puzzles out larger questions about the universe that are seen as useless to the common good.



Shevek goes out into the hallway as his classmates begin telling a group story, taking turns to each share a part of it. Shevek stops himself from crying by thinking about an imaginary Square which functions like a complicated math problem, in which numbered rows on each side of the cube all add up equally. Shevek wishes he had a group in which he could talk about the kind of problems he's interested in.

Shevek decides that he can wait for such a thing to come about—he is good at waiting. He has been waiting for his mother to come back for years, and he regularly waits six decads—a period of sixty days—for his father to come take him away for a visit.

On one of these visits with his father, Shevek asks Palat if Palat has ever seen a book only made of numbers. Palat takes a mathematics workbook out of his jacket pocket and shows it to Shevek, explaining that the book contains logarithms. In return, Shevek explains his complicated, imaginary Square to his father. By the time the two are done exchanging ideas, it is late, and Palat rushes Shevek back to the children's dormitory for the night.

In his dreams that evening, Shevek runs across barren land toward a dark, dense, and high **wall**. He longs to cross it, but knows that if he does, he will never be able to go home again. Shevek hits at the wall and screams, but his voice comes out strangled and wordless. He hears his father's voice and senses his mother's presence, and together they tell him to look at a stone on the ground. The stone bears "the primal number that [is] both unity and plurality." He is filled with a "piercing joy," the sensation of which he remembers in the morning though he forgets the details of the dream itself. From then on, Shevek often dreams of the wall, but the dream is always "sullen and without resolution," devoid of that initial joy.

Some years later, in school, Shevek and his friends are reading the *Life of Odo*, a book of Anarresti history. The book mentions prisons, which do not exist on Anarres, but which Shevek and his friends imagine in great detail and with which they find themselves deeply fascinated. The boys cannot understand why people in prisons couldn't just leave, or how they could be sentenced to work during their incarceration. Shevek and his friends Tirin, Kadagv, and Gibesh want to know what prison must have been like, and decide to construct a makeshift prison in a crawl space beneath the learning center. Big enough for one person to lie down in, it is made of concrete, and the boys find another slab of concrete they can use to make a "door."

Though Shevek has been reprimanded and sent out of class, he continues to entertain his "egoistic" ideas. This shows his determination and commitment as well as his desire for personal and intellectual freedom, and sets him up as a character who will, throughout his life, go against the grain and push the envelope.



Shevek is patient and wise for a child, despite always getting into trouble. Shevek's life has been defined by patient waiting, showing how he is ahead of his time and able to see the rewards of biding one's time.



Palat indulges Shevek's desire for intellectual freedom, and gets swept up in the excitement of hearing his son's ideas. Palat represents freedom to Shevek, and shows Shevek that there are those who will eventually find his kind of thinking important, and will be able to see what he has to offer.



Shevek's dream of the wall symbolizes the boundaries he is coming up against, even at a young age, within Anarresti society. Though as a child the dream is a comforting one, as he grows older, the boundary becomes more of an imposing, fearsome structure. As Shevek gets older, the problems he faces become larger and have vaster implications, and it seems as if there is "no resolution" to the challenges that are constantly, ominously rising before and around him.



In yet another example of the dark pull between Urras and Anarres, Le Guin shows her young Anarresti characters both horrified of but deeply curious about the brutality and rigidity of other worlds. The Anarresti, whose society does not include prisons or punishments, are unable to conceive of restraining another person physically or denying them the freedom that is their birthright as an Odonian. The boys' dark curiosity spurs them to create a prison of their own, toying with the idea of isolating and subjugating one another.



Many of their friends volunteer to go into the “prison,” but it is Kadagv, a “serious, domineering” twelve-year-old, who wants to undertake the challenge most. When the other children ask him how long he would like to stay in the prison, Kadagv tells them that they, as his captors, must decide the length of his stay. As Kadagv crawls into the hole, the other children hope he won’t stay in too long, as they are all anxious for their turns as well.

After four hours, the children let Kadagv out. He tells them that he mostly napped, and that though he was a little bit hungry, being imprisoned was no big deal. Tirin asks Kadagv if he would go in again, and Kadagv says he would. Tirin asks Kadagv if he’d go in right now, without knowing when he’d be let out again, and Kadagv agrees. Realizing that in prisons, prisoners were given meals, Shevek urges two other boys to go get some leftovers from the cafeteria, so that Kadagv will at least be fed.

Tirin tells Kadagv to turn around and put his hands on his head. Kadagv asks why, and Tirin tells him that it doesn’t matter why—as guards, they can beat him whenever they want, because he is not free. Tirin pushes Kadagv into the cell, and Kadagv injures a finger landing on the hard concrete. The younger boys return with some food and water, and silently place it in Kadagv’s cell, then lock him in. Gibesh wonders where Kadagv will relieve himself, and Tirin answers that Kadagv will have to piss and crap in his own bed. The boys share a hearty laugh at this idea, aware that Kadagv, on the other side of the wall, can hear them laughing at him.

Back at their dormitory, Tirin and Shevek decide that they will force Kadagv to spend two full days in prison. The following afternoon, on a trip to work at the lumber recycling workshop, the lumber foreman asks where Kadagv is. The boys reply that he must have joined another work group for the day, and Shevek is full of an “inward and vile” kind of embarrassment. During his work shift, Shevek is unable to think of anything but Kadagv.

After dinner, Gibesh, who has been standing guard outside the “cell,” approaches Tirin and Shevek to tell them that he heard Kadagv calling out in an odd voice. Shevek wants to let Kadagv out, but Tirin insists on keeping him in the cell. Shevek defies Tirin and heads for the “prison,” where he opens the doors to set Kadagv free. Kadagv emerges from the cell, hunched and stinking. He has had a bout of diarrhea, and is covered in his own feces. He asks the other boys how long he was in the cell altogether, and they estimate it was about thirty hours. Kadagv hazily replies that thirty hours is a “pretty long” time.

Shevek’s friends and classmates clamor for their chance to experience “prison,” as a unique reversal takes place: the freedom they experience in their day-to-day lives now feels oppressive, and it is the foreign nature of true oppression that represents newness, excitement, and thus a different kind of “freedom” to them.



The children are uncertain of how to make a “real” prison, and grasp at approximations of one as they play at incarcerating one another. The prison they’ve constructed does not seem extreme enough, and they attempt to make it more hostile and dangerous as they test the limits of what they can inflict upon one another.



*For no reason other than the fact that they can, the boys experiment with pain and suffering. On Anarres, everyone supports one another, and this kind of cruelty and hostility is extremely rare. The boys are drawn to it because of its newness, and quickly slip into an excessively cruel and violent game that is in stark opposition to the utopian harmony they’ve experienced most of their lives. This “game” echoes the real-life Stanford prison experiment, which took place in 1971 (three years before *The Dispossessed* was published) and showed how quickly a prisoner/guard relationship can turn cruel and abusive.*



As the game continues, Shevek begins to feel a gnawing sense of deep guilt as he considers the magnitude of what he and his friends have done. The boys’ experiment with cruelty, isolation, and forcibly imposed solitude has exposed their darkest instincts, which go entirely against the sense of solidarity, compassion, and humility they have been raised to embody.



Shevek emerges as the most moral individual within his friend group, again demonstrating his status as an iconoclast and a bit of an outsider. The pain and humiliation he and his friends have inflicted on Kadagv is palpable, and the boys have discovered that the freedom to inflict pain on another person carries both a dark allure and a high price.



Shevek takes Kadagv to the baths to get cleaned up, and then goes alone to the latrines, where he vomits profusely. Shaking and tired, he returns to his dormitory and goes to bed early. None of the boys ever return to the prison, and none of them ever speak of the “episode” again—except for Gibesh, who tells the story to a group of older boys and girls, but when they do not understand, he drops the subject.

At the Northsetting Regional Institute of the Noble and Material Sciences, four teenage boys sit on a hilltop, looking out at the Institute and up at the Moon. Tirin comments that just as they are all sitting looking at Urras and thinking of it as their own moon, surely there are people on Urras right now looking up at Anarres and thinking of the planet as *their* moon. One of the boys, Bedap, asks what the Truth is, if both planets are each other’s moons.

The boys have come to the hilltop for some “masculine company,” despairing over their misery about girls. Whether they copulate with the girls around them or ignore them, it makes no difference—girls are everywhere. In history class a few days ago, the boys all watched footage of life on Urras. They saw footage of children’s bodies being burned during a famine in the nation of Thu, and prostitutes in the wealthy state of A-lo lying on the beach all day while they wait for the members of the “propertied class” to “use” them. Meanwhile, members of the “unpropertied” class served dinners to the prostitutes and their men. The luxurious world of A-lo and the disease-ridden Thu were shown side by side to contrast the inequality in Urrasti society.

The boys speculate that Urrasti society must be more or less the same now as it was in the footage, though it has been a long time since the Odonian Revolution, when Odonian Urrastis fled the planet and settled on Anarres. Tirin says that there is no way to tell what life on Urras is like now, since there is no communication between the two worlds. Bedap interjects, saying that the PDC keeps in touch with Urrasti freighters, as the two planets trade with one another and keep tabs on how much of a threat one planet is to the other.

Shevek is the most rattled, clearly, out of his entire friend group. Gibesh speaks glibly about the event at some unknown point in the future, but otherwise, the boys are shamed into silence.



Years later, the boys continue to consider Urras frequently, wondering what life is like there and what their world looks like to the Urrasti. Just as they struggle to make sense of how life on Urras has impacted life on Anarres, they struggle to understand their culture’s place and significance in the universe.



The boys are fascinated again by the cruelty and inequity that exists in Urrasti society. It is so foreign to them and so unimaginable that the lurid images they watch as part of their education remain with them long after the tapes have been shut off. The allure and the revulsion they feel for different aspects of Urrasti society is confusing, as it corresponds to a system of class and status that does not exist on Anarres—everyone is supposed to be the same on Anarres, but Anarres is also missing the extremities and the dramas of Urrasti society.



The only method of contact Urras and Anarres have is a very limited trade provision. Neither planet really knows what life is like on the other now, since contact has been lost for over a century. A deep sense of distrust and suspicion keeps each planet isolated from the other, combined with a disgust and contempt for the morals by which each society has chosen to govern themselves.



The boys talk disgustedly about Urrasti society, though Tirin wonders if all Urrasti are as bad as they seem to be from the hundred-and-fifty-year-old footage. Tirin tells the boys that they only know what they are told about Urras, and that there must be more to the planet and its society. As the boys discuss the value of hating or fearing Urras, Tirin wonders aloud what it would be like to go there, noting that the PDC wants to keep Anarresti from traveling to Urras at any cost.

Just as the boys as children were pulled toward the impulse to imprison one another, the allure of the unknown permeates their adolescence as well. Because Urras is forbidden, and because it is portrayed unilaterally as immoral and unequal, the boys wonder what it is really like there, and express the desire to learn more rather than to allow their elders to form their opinions for them. Le Guin also continues to drop hints that this supposedly “anarchist” society is also repressive in many ways, especially in limiting dissent or contact with outsiders.



If Anarresti society truly is superior to all other societies, Tirin argues, they should be able to go to Urras and help the Urrasti—however, they are forbidden to. Shevek argues that the word “forbidden” is not “organic,” and that no one on Anarres forbids anyone from doing anything. Shevek argues that Anarresti do not leave Anarres because they *are* Anarres, and that no true Odonian would want to travel to Urras to go live in a prison. Bedap says that though Shevek has a point, Tirin is also right—it would be useful to know the whole truth about Urras. Shevek asks who Bedap thinks is lying to the Anarresti about Urras, and Bedap replies by asking, “Who but ourselves?”

The boys struggle to decide for themselves whether the fact that they do not question the “forbidden” nature of Urras is due to negative ideas about Urras that have been thrust upon them, or the result of their pure and true allegiance to Odonian values and love of Anarres. Bedap, as he will prove to be throughout the course of the novel, is the most subversive voice in any room, and argues that it is a mixture of internal and external pressures that keep Anarresti from seeking the truth about Urras and a deeper understanding of the twin world.



A forest has been constructed on Anarres, but the vast plains of the Southwest are uninhabited, and they make up a region called the Dust. Once the Dust was a forest of holms, but drought has killed the trees and dried the soil, creating a dust that covers everything. At eighteen years old, Shevek, now out of the Institute and stuck in the Dust on a work assignment, longs to get back to physics.

As the action transitions once again, we follow Shevek off on his first work assignment—he is not happy about it, but is doing his duty to Odonian society by venturing out into the Dust. If Anarres could be seen as a vague allegory for the Soviet Union, then the Dust would be something like Siberia—a vast and inhospitable wasteland where people are sent to “work” often as punishment.



Everyone living and working in the Dust suffers from the same cough. Shevek has a few friends, with whom he talks while passing the time working on planting a new forest, but mostly Shevek finds his coworkers dull. Shevek has been at the afforestation project for several decads, and passes the time writing to his friends back at the Institute. Shevek laments the fact that his friends were able to stay behind and work on physics, while he himself has been shipped out to the desert and is “wast[ing his] central function.”

Shevek spends over a month in the Dust, forlorn and is homesick the entire time. He feels as if he is wasting his time, knowing that his interests—and his worth—lie elsewhere. The seeds of Shevek’s questioning of his society and his place in it are planted with this first work assignment, and grow from his feelings of futility and displacement. At the same time, he still thinks of himself primarily as a small piece of a whole, and only wants to be as “functional” as possible for the sake of his entire society.



Despite his dissatisfaction, Shevek marvels at the happiness he achieves from completing tangible work in a group. One night, he propositions one of his coworkers, a woman named Gimar, but she refuses him, stating that she has a partner at home. Shevek tells Gimar that he thinks “life partnership is against the Odonian ethic” of sharing. Gimar argues that in an economy of sharing, nothing is more precious than sharing one’s days and nights with another individual. Shevek confesses that he’s worried he is not built for such intimacy, and Gimar comforts him.

Shevek embarks on a sexual relationship with a woman named Beshun. Eventually, Shevek’s rotation on the afforestation project comes to a close, and Shevek becomes emotional as he looks back from the truck bearing him away from camp and sees a “veil of life” over the desert terrain. Beshun, who is leaving camp as well, comforts him as he cries.

At a truck depot on his way back to the Institute, Shevek finds himself in a philosophical discussion with another man, Vokep, who asserts that “all women are proprietarians,” and women can only relate to men through the lens of owning or being owned. Shevek, who has recently broken up with Beshun, reflects on the lack of “proprietary idioms for the sexual act” in the Pravic language. Sex and intimacy are not about “having” or “owning,” he thinks, as no one possesses anyone else. After his brief but intense relationship with Beshun, Shevek thinks, he will never have another of its kind. Vokep urges Shevek to never let himself be owned by anyone, and Shevek assures Vokep that he won’t.

Shevek is delighted to return to the scenic and familiar Regional Institute. Though Shevek believes that “you shall not go down twice to the same river,” he is grateful to have returned to a place he loves, and finds that his relationship to the Institute is more complex now.

Shevek eventually gets over his ennui and dissatisfaction and begins to learn a lot about himself on this work posting. He discovers that he does derive joy from serving a common good, and wrestles with his feelings about partnership and commitment. His insecurities are rooted in his disparate family life and lonely upbringing, and he wonders whether partnership has any place at all in Odonian society.



Shevek is surprised to find that he is emotional when it is time to leave his first work posting, and not just because it means he might soon be separated from Beshun, who has been his first real relationship. He has created life where there was none in the desert, and has achieved a sense of purpose serving his planet and his people.



Shevek’s refusal to be “owned” by anything or anyone takes root in this passage as he reflects on the differences between men and women. In flash-forwards, Shevek feels that there are no differences between the two sexes, but as a young man confused by an unstable home life and a rollercoaster romance, he felt uncertain about the mechanics of heterosexual relationships and the aspects of partnership that seem to him proprietarian or egoistic.



In keeping with the novel’s motif of journeys away from and returning to home, Shevek finds that he loves the feeling of returning to a place he knows and finding his relationship to it renewed and reinvigorated.



Shevek feels he has grown up quite a lot in the year he has been away, and thinks that his male friends his age are stuck in childhood. Tirin and Bedap's lives revolve around copulation and self-centered egoizing, and so Shevek "welcome[s]" isolation. After a year of physical labor, Shevek is ready to return to intellectual work, and excited to explore the ideas he has been contemplating while far away in the Dust. The senior physicist at Northsetting, Mitis, is a wise and calm woman. In a meeting with Shevek, she reveals that she has forwarded one of his papers to a physicist named Sabul in Abbenay, and Sabul has written back with just a single equation. Shevek realizes that the equation is what has been missing from his work, and immediately begins scribbling notes to himself.

Mitis tells Shevek that Sabul will now want him to come to Abbenay to work alongside him. Shevek tells Mitis he does not want to go, but Mitis urges Shevek to seek out the best in his field in order to complete his research. Though Mitis wants Shevek to go, she also warns him to bear in mind that if he goes to study with Sabul, he will become "his man." In Pravic, possessive pronouns are used infrequently, and Shevek notes that Mitis's use of the words "his man" strikes him as odd. Nevertheless, Mitis tells Shevek that he has work to do, and he must do it. He interprets her urging him to "get to work" as her urging him to finish the equation in front of him, and will not realize until much later in his life that Mitis was urging him on to something even more.

The night before Shevek leaves for Abbenay, his friends throw him a party. They have pooled their resources to provide an enormous amount of delicious food and fruit drinks, and some students perform skits and songs. As the night winds down, some couples sneak off to private rooms to copulate, while Shevek, Bedap, Tirin, and three girls sit together and talk about everything, from the nature of happiness to temporal theory. One pretty girl with short hair and high cheekbones hangs on Shevek's every word.

As Shevek waxes poetic on the nature of suffering, he argues that no society, no matter how egalitarian or how utopic, can prevent suffering. He confesses to his friends that he is afraid of life, and afraid of encountering great pain as he grows older. He recounts a tale from his time in the desert, during which he saw a man caught in an automobile accident suffer for hours as his burns consumed him. Shevek has come to understand, he says, that no one can save anyone else. Brotherhood, he believes, begins in shared pain, though he admits he does yet not know where it ends.

Shevek is ready to move on from his childhood and begin his life's work as a physicist. He has embarked on his first work assignment, learned from it, and now feels justified in focusing on his own personal goals and problems. The idea that he will have the opportunity to flourish as a physicist excites him, and he turns away from the friends and habits of his adolescence in order to reach his full potential. Commitment to his own work is a luxurious freedom, and Shevek revels in it.



Mitis is full of hope for her young pupil's career, and urges him in the direction of greatness, toward the place where he will be able to achieve all he is meant to. She warns him, however, that with Sabul as his mentor Shevek will no longer fully belong to himself. Shevek, who does not even have the language to fully comprehend what Mitis is telling him, cannot understand all she is warning him against, but agrees to move forward in the direction of his dreams.



Shevek is preparing to move forward onto the next stage of his life, and his friends send him off in style, symbolically marking the end to his adolescence and his emergence into Odonian society. The night of revelry and celebration reaches its peak, and then Shevek and his friends sit together to hold deep and meaningful conversations about their pasts, presents, and futures.



Though Shevek has achieved so much, he is still afraid of what lies ahead—and what lies within. He wonders about whether true collectivism and true solidarity are even possible, and fears that the true nature of life is solitude and pain. As he works through this idea he considers that perhaps pain is the great equalizer from which hope, beauty, strength, and solidarity can emerge, but he is unable to see the full trajectory of togetherness bred from pain and suffering.



CHAPTER 3

On Urras, Shevek wakes late in the morning. His nose is stuffed and his throat is sore, but when a doctor comes to check on him he is diagnosed with hay-fever—a common allergic reaction to dust and pollen. The doctor advises Shevek to stay inside, and, after giving Shevek some pills, a shot, and a tray of lunch, leaves. Shevek explores his rooms, stunned by the silky and sumptuous bedclothes and the plush carpet. The common room is accented by a large fireplace, and Shevek is surprised to find that the bathroom is for his use alone. He bathes, luxuriating in the tub and contemplating how the planet of Urras, which is five-sixths water, is able to afford the luxury of warm baths and full toilets.

Shevek looks out the window of his room at the world outside, where a broad valley spreads out across the land outside his bedroom window. It is the most beautiful view he has ever seen, and he is transfixed by the views of the complex city architecture as well. Even the most beautiful parts of Anarres, Shevek thinks, are rendered ugly in light of this new view. Shevek thinks that Urras is “what a world is supposed to look like.”

There is a knock at the door, and Shevek shouts for the knocker to come in. A man enters, carrying packages. He is older with a worn face. Shevek calls the man “sir” and asks him to come in and sit down, assuming the man is meant to be his roommate; the man hurries off to the bedroom and emerges from the room a few minutes later, bowing to Shevek. When Shevek reenters the bedroom he sees that his bed has been made up.

Shevek dresses, and as he is putting on his shoes, there is another knock at the door. A group of men enter confidently, as opposed to the man with packages, who had slunk in hesitantly. The four men who enter now have shaved faces and gorgeous clothes, and seem “like creatures of an alien species” to Shevek. Shevek recognizes one of the men as Pae, and the others as men who he met last night, though he did not catch their names. They introduce themselves as Dr. Chifoilisk, Dr. Oiie, and Dr. Atro. Shevek is thrilled to meet Atro, and kisses the man’s cheeks. Atro embraces him, and as Shevek pulls away and looks into Atro’s eyes, he sees that he is very nearly blind. Atro welcomes Shevek “home.”

The chapter pattern begins to establish itself, as we return to Urras on the odd numbered chapters. Shevek’s first morning on Urras is marked by both luxury and discomfort. The allergic reaction is uncomfortable, but Shevek is quickly soothed by his beautiful surroundings, which are unlike any accommodations he has ever seen. This symbolic pull between discomfort and elation mirrors Shevek’s excited but uncertain state of mind as he settles in to life on Urras.



Shevek is completely absorbed by the views of the beautiful Urras—which are, again, like nothing he has ever seen on the dusty desert planet of Anarres. Shevek even finds himself thinking of his home planet as ugly, so taken in is he by the beauty of this new place.



There are no servants on Anarres—everyone is responsible for his or her own work, cleaning, and upkeep. When a servant enters his room, Shevek does not even know what the role of servant is, and is confused by the man’s deference. This begins to show the uglier side of Urras—where there is an upper class, there must also be a lower class.



As Shevek is introduced to his fellow physicists and the men who will be his guides and touchstones throughout his stay on Urras, he is overwhelmed by their resplendence and the confident air with which they carry themselves. Though they are all members of the same race, Shevek sees the Urrasti men as alien. In contrast, the men embrace Shevek as one of their own and welcome him home, implying that he is finally among his own kind. It’s unclear how much of this is an act, however.



Shevek gleefully recounts the years of letters he and Atro have sent back and forth, comparing ideas and “destroy[ing]” one another’s theories. Atro reaches below his billowing university gown and searches through his many pockets for a small yellow cube mounted on a wooden base—an award Shevek won nine years ago for his research. Atro tells Shevek that a sum of cash has been placed into his account, and as Shevek takes the award, he realizes that the cube is made of solid gold. Atro asks Shevek how old he was nine years ago, and Shevek replies that he was twenty-nine. Atro tells Sheven that he is officially the youngest recipient of this prestigious award in about a century.

Shevek has been communicating with these men for years, and through the innumerable letters exchanged he has come to know them well. Meeting in person at last is a joy, and the men seem just as thrilled to meet Shevek. When Shevek is presented with a handsome award, the men laud him for his prodigiousness. From this exchange it becomes clear that while there are many scientists on Urras, Shevek’s arrival represents something new and exciting to these men—there is no one quite like him on their planet. It’s also suggested that there are no awards given on Anarres, as that would imply inequality or egoism.



Oiie asks about Sabul, and what the relationship between him and Shevek is—Oiie recalls a period of six years or so during which Shevek never wrote, and Sabul kept in touch with the Urrasti scientists on his behalf. Shevek tells the men that Sabul is the senior member of the Abbenay Institute in physics, and that the two used to work together. Chifoilisk intuitively feels that Sabul was a jealous older rival who meddled with Shevek’s books and theories. Chifoilisk remarks that “human nature is human nature,” and even Odonians are not necessarily always peaceful.

The men receiving Shevek know that something must have been wrong or insufficient on his home planet for him to come to Urras, and they immediately try to intuit what this weak spot in Odonian society is. Chifoilisk catches on to the dynamic between Shevek and Sabul right away—perhaps as a method of reminding Shevek of all that was wrong on the seemingly-perfect Anarres, and all that is possible now on Urras.



Shevek sneezes, and complains of his allergies to his colleagues. He tells them that he does not have a handkerchief, and Pae remarks that soon Shevek will be able to buy himself anything he needs. Shevek describes himself as a beggarman, telling the scientists before him that he has come with “empty hands” and no gifts of money or material objects for the Urrasti as a way to pay them back for sheltering him at the University. Atro and Pae insist that Shevek is a guest, and Chifoilisk chimes in to note that the Ioti Government “foots the bill” anyway. Chifoilisk stares at Shevek with an expression that Shevek cannot interpret, though he senses it is either “warning or complicity.”

Though the men are doing their best of making Urras seem not just hospitable but picture-perfect, there are chinks in their armor. Shevek senses a diffidence or a defiance coming from Chifoilisk. The powerful and wealthy state is in charge, Chifoilisk implies, and wants for nothing—Shevek’s arrival is something the government has condoned and will willingly pay for. The question, then, is what they expect in return.



Atro notes that Chifoilisk is an “unregenerate Thuvian,” and then laments that Shevek has not brought along even papers or new work for the scientists to study and read. Atro asks what Shevek has been working on, and how far along he is with his General Temporal Theory. Shevek smiles and assures the men that the whole thing is safe in his head. The men discuss a relativity theory by “Ainsetain of Terra,” noting that though it is several hundred years old it contains plenty of “fresh ideas.”

The galaxy of the Urrasti and the Anarresti is also home to Earth (called “Terra”), and as the gathered scientists invoke the old but still fresh theories of “Ainsetain”—meant to be understood by Le Guin’s readers as the famous Albert Einstein—it’s implied that whatever Shevek is up to with his General Temporal Theory will be as groundbreaking—and as valuable—as Einstein’s theory of relativity.



Atro notes that no “offworlders” anywhere else in the galaxy can keep up with Urrasti physics. Atro warns Shevek not to let offworld theories sidetrack him, and urges him to focus on his own work first and foremost. He then invites Shevek for a walk in the Grove, but Shevek protests that his doctor has told him to stay inside for a few days to prevent his becoming infected with any Urrasti diseases. Atro and Chifoilisk leave Pae and Shevek alone to talk physics. Shevek is delighted to find that he has met his conversational equals for the first time in his life, though he is “in the realm of inequity.”

During his conversation with Pae and Oiie, which takes them through the halls of the University, Shevek tells Pae and Oiie that he wishes to ask them a question, but does not know how to do so without giving offense. Pae tells Shevek to ask away, while Oiie says that he doesn’t think Shevek knows how to speak without giving offense. Though Oiie is an evasive, secretive, and unlikable man, Shevek believes there is something trustworthy about him.

Shevek asks the scientists where all the women are. He notes that he met women at the party last night, but hasn’t seen any since. Oiie tells Shevek that the women at the party were the wives of scientists, not scientists themselves. Shevek asks whether there are any Urrasti women scientists at all, and the men state that women “don’t belong” in academia—they have “no head for abstract thought” and can only think with their uteruses. The scientists ask Shevek if he knows any women “capable of original intellectual work,” and Shevek cites his teachers Mitis and Gvarab. Odo, he says, was a woman as well. Instantly, Shevek can see that he has inspired “animosity” by bringing up women scientists. He thinks that Oiie and Pae, knowing no relation to women but possession, are “possessed” themselves.

Attempting to steer the subject towards something new, Shevek stands up and looks out a window, remarking on the beauty of Urras and expressing a desire to see more of it, even though he must stay inside for a few days. He asks the scientists to bring him books of history and Urrasti culture, stating that he wants to learn, not ignore, Urras’s past, because he believes that Urrasti and Anarresti civilizations must know one another.

Atro takes great pride in Urrasti accomplishments, and he sees the accomplishments of all other worlds and races as distractions—he may be brilliant, but he is also bigoted and narrow-minded in some areas. Shevek ignores this prejudice, as he is excited to have finally found intellectual equals in his field who are able to keep up with him. On Anarres he was isolated, but here he has found a community of individuals who at least share his education and intelligence, if not his ideals.



Shevek sizes up these men who he has traveled so far to meet, trying to determine who is trustworthy and who is not, though Shevek is completely at their mercy regardless. Shevek wants to learn more about Urras, but is also fearful of giving offense and alienating himself from his newfound companions.



Though Shevek has felt camaraderie with these men, when he brings up the division of gender, he is met with animosity and prejudice. Just as in his conversations with Kimoe back on the freighter, Shevek is disheartened to find that the men of Urras are so closeminded different from himself on this issue. Though he has felt kinship with them, he realizes that they are “possessed” by their entitlement to and sense of dominance over women, and recognizes this as a fundamental—and worrisome—difference between himself and the others. Even practically speaking, it’s disheartening that Urras has cut off half of its population from learning science and contributing to the body of academic knowledge.



In an attempt to soothe the momentary discord he has caused, Shevek generously expresses his desire to learn more about Urras. His belief that the two worlds have much to learn from one another is genuine and heartfelt, and now he has the freedom to learn about Urras—a freedom he never had back on Anarres.



Oiie asks Shevek if he has come as an emissary of Anarresti society, and Shevek replies that he has come as a syndic of the Syndicate of Initiative, an independent group which has established and maintained contact with Urras over the last two years. He clarifies for the men that he is not an ambassador for any Anarresti institution. The men then ask Shevek about Anarresti authority, and how society functions without a government. Shevek explains about the PDC, the Production and Distribution Coordination system, which coordinates all syndicates and individuals who do productive work on Anarres. Speaking of his own syndicate, Shevek notes that he and his fellow members are “mostly disapproved of,” as most Anarresti want nothing to do with Urras. Shevek has come solely of his own initiative—the only initiative, Shevek says, he has ever acknowledged.

Over the next couple days, Shevek entertains a host of scientists who come to visit him. He reads books of Urrasti history, and gazes out his window, listening to the songbirds just outside. Noting that he expected to feel strange and alien on Urras, Shevek concedes that though there are many things about this place he does not understand, he does feel rather at home. He is pleased to find that the Urrasti are not “gross, cold egoists,” and believes that Urras is truly his race’s home world, and that “all its beauty [is] his birthright.”

Atro brings Shevek a stack of newspapers, but after Atro leaves the room, Pae tells Shevek to throw them out and to never believe anything he reads in them. On the front page of one of the newspapers, he sees a photograph of himself beneath a headline reading FIRST MAN FROM THE MOON! The featured article quotes Shevek describing his joy at having arrived on Urras, and his hopes for fostering a good relationship between the Twin Planets. Shevek exclaims that he never said anything the newspaper is quoting, and Pae again tells Shevek that the newspapers will print anything they want to say.

Shevek picks up another newspaper, written in a language and alphabet he does not know. The newspaper is from Thu, and there is yet another from Benbili, a nation far away in Urras’s western hemisphere. Pae explains that censorship in Thu means that only government-approved things get printed, whereas in A-lo, where there is complete freedom of the press, people can say anything they want in the media.

The ungoverned nature of Anarresti society is foreign to the Urrasti, who cannot conceive of a world without hierarchies and centralized control over its citizens. Shevek explains that while there is coordination and organization, there is no government—nonetheless, however, there is still an overhanging, nebulous sense of “authority” which comes from the approval or disapproval of one’s fellow citizens. Shevek’s desire to travel to Urras has alienated him from his fellow Anarresti, but still the choice is his and his alone, and no one back on Anarres has the power to stop him from doing what he wants to do.



Having just revealed that his fellow Odonians are dissatisfied with him, it makes sense that Shevek feels a sense of peace and freedom on Urras, where he is a celebrated, honored, and warmly-welcomed guest of the Urrasti. He sees Urras as his “birthright,” demonstrating conflicting feelings for his home planet of Anarres and a questioning of where he truly belongs.



The newspapers on Urras, though often factually incorrect, are widely-read and serve as a major source of news and community. Newspapers will become a major source of connection for Shevek, who is mostly isolated from the rest of Urras but desperate to connect with Urrasti people and to understand Urrasti society.



The three major nations of Urras have very different ways of interacting with their citizens. In A-lo, where things seem free and often frivolous, the press prints whatever they want. In the socialist state of Thu and the far-off nation of Benbili, things are more regulated, and the government has more apparent control.



Shevek tells Pae that a group from Benbili sent his syndicate a message not too long ago in which they called themselves Odonians. Shevek asks if any anarchist groups exist in A-Io, but Pae denies it. Shevek suddenly thinks of the **wall** surrounding the Port of Anarres, and accuses Pae of being afraid of him because he represents “disproof of the necessity of the state.”

After three days, Shevek is finally allowed out of his rooms. His escorts lead him around the university and hire cars to take him out to see the countryside. Back on Anarres, Shevek was taught that Urras was a “festering mass of inequity and waste,” but through his travels across the countryside he comes to see that people on Urras are well dressed, well-fed, pleasant, and industrious. Shevek understands, for the first time, the “lure and compulsion of profit.” Though Shevek longs to talk with some of the “common” Urrasti people, there is never enough time to do so, and his escorts are always hurrying him off to the next important thing.

Though the large cities of A-Io are too distant to be seen in a day, Shevek does get to explore Nio Esseia, an enormous metropolis of five million people which is just a few miles from the University. He attends receptions held in his honor there, many at lavish palaces. Shevek’s escorts take him to see all the city sights, including museums, schools, the High Court, and several new housing developments. Shevek asks to see the place where Odo was buried, and his escorts bring him straight to the cemetery to pay respects to her grave, which is inscribed with the words, “To be whole is to part; true voyage is return.”

After weeks of “the tourist life,” Shevek becomes anxious to settle down and begin his work at the University. On his final day of touring, he asks Pae to take him to the Space Research Foundation. There, he is impressed by the “greatness of the enterprise,” noting how difficult it is on Anarres to construct freight barges, let alone spacecraft. A technician at the Foundation agrees that their arsenal is impressive, but tells Shevek that they are all waiting anxiously for him to provide them with the key to transilence, a method of travel faster than the speed of light. Shevek tells the technician that he is dreaming, and asks to be taken back to his escorts.

After leaving the Foundation, Shevek asks to make one last stop at the Fort in Drio, where Odo once spent nine years imprisoned. Pae and Chifoilisk tell Shevek that the fort has long been torn down. As they drive past the ruins, Shevek feels like the dark walls of what used to be the Fort are saying, “I have been here for a long time, and I am still here.”

As Shevek puts the pieces of this foreign world together, he is curious about the differences in Urrasti and Anarresti brands of anarchism. Shevek announces for the first time that he is aware of what his presence means to the Urrasti, and that he represents a kind of danger to them.



Shevek is charmed and pleased by what he sees of the Urrasti countryside, but is aware of the fact that he is only seeing what his escorts from the University expressly want him to see. Nevertheless, he is deeply affected by seeing for the first time in his life the comforts and pleasures that profit can buy, and the ways in which life can, seemingly, be greatly improved by possessions.



Shevek’s handlers take him all over, showing him the beautiful sights and making him feel warmly welcomed. The inscription on Odo’s grave offers Shevek two pieces of advice which he seems to be ignoring right now—one relating to the “wholeness” of being part of a society, and the other asserting that the only true voyage is return to that which has been left behind. Both pieces of wisdom seem to be pointing to that which Shevek has left behind on Anarres.



The engineer at the Space Research Foundation reveals the truth of what it is that the Urrasti want—the ability to send people and things through space faster than the speed of light. Shevek thinks this is impossible, and doesn’t seem to see how his work on temporality would help to accomplish this goal—or he is being withholding, attempting to keep the depths of his research and the full range of what it could make possible under wraps.



The ruins of the prison where Odo spent a large chunk of her life—and a large part of the reason why she never made it to Anarres to see her dreams and her teachings in practice—seem to call out to Shevek ominously, reminding him of his people’s history and how it is inextricably intertwined with the history of Urras.



Back in his room, Shevek sits by the fire and listens to the sounds of music echoing from a nearby chapel. He considers the history of the room he sits in, which is four hundred years old, and which has housed generations of scholars. The room, too, seems to be saying to Shevek: “I have been here for a long time and I am still here. What are you doing here?” Shevek has no answer for the room, and feels he has no right to “all the grace and bounty” of Urras. He feels he does not belong, and though he has developed a love for the planet, he is aware that he is not part of it—and neither is he anymore part of the world of his birth, Anarres.

Shevek believes himself foolish for having thought he could bring together two worlds when he belongs to neither of them. As the sun sets and the Moon rises, he recalls all the times in his life on Anarres he has watched the Moon rise from there, and he considers how each planet is each other’s Moon—so similar, and yet so different. As Anarres rises high into the sky above him, “the light of his world fill[s] his empty hands.”

CHAPTER 4

Shevek wakes on an airship bound for the city of Abbenay, the night of his farewell party already “half a world behind him.” He looks out his small window to the ground below, catching a glimpse of the Port of Anarres. Though Shevek thinks Urras is despicable, another world is another world, and Shevek is desperate to see a ship from another world. The Port, though, is empty of ships today.

Freighters that arrive eight times a year from Urras are considered a necessary evil by most Anarresti. The Urrasti bring fossil oils, petroleum, electronics that Anarresti manufacturing cannot create, and other goods. They take back with them mercury, copper, tin, gold, and uranium. In the Council of World Governments, the Free World of Anarres is considered nothing but a mining colony of Urras. Each year, the PDC argues for the end of trade with the “warmaking proprietarians” of Urras, but Anarresti know that if they broke their trade agreement the Urrasti would retaliate with force.

Shevek looks down on the green splendor of Ans Hos, the Eden of Anarres. Centuries ago, when Anarres was still a mining colony that had not yet been settled by the Odonians, the first town, Anarres Town, was built at Ans Hos, and miners lived there under two or three year contracts. It wasn’t until the year 771, when the Urrasti government collapsed, that the Council of World Government gave the Moon—Anarres—to the Odonians to prevent them from forever undermining “the authority of law and national sovereignty on Urras.”

Shevek’s sense of displacement, which has been at the edge of his thoughts since his arrival on Urras and was only briefly pushed away by the lavish reception he received, comes back in full force as he sits alone in his room. He is overwhelmed by the history of Urras, and the history of his people’s exile and search for something more. He is torn between two worlds, and his isolation is more profound than ever.



The twin worlds are visible from one another, and no matter how hard he tries, Shevek cannot escape Anarres—it is always visible to him when it rises in the evenings. He is reminded of the “light” of his world, and its beauty, and the fact that he has abandoned it to live empty-handed on a foreign planet that does not recognize the grace in humility and prioritizes only possessions.



Shevek is headed off to a new city, and the pull of the unfamiliar reaches even farther than the “capital” city of Abbenay—it is Urras Shevek is really curious about, and the forbidden nature of learning about it calls to him more strongly than ever before.



Anarres must sacrifice some of its isolationist values to reap the benefits of trade with Urras. More embarrassing for the struggling Anarres than for the thriving Urras, the trade agreement is clearly not ideal for either world, and the tensions between the two planets remain palpable beneath even the most hands-off, diplomatic formalities.



It is revealed that the Moon was given to the Odonians so that they did not further contribute to the disruption or destruction of society on Urras. They were bought off, so to speak, with the chance at building their own world, as long as they stopped threatening the power and status quo of the Urrasti state.



Eventually Anarres Town grew to hold a hundred thousand people and was renamed Abbenay. Odo, the leader of the Odonians, envisioned Anarres as a planet of many towns and settlements connected by physical and intellectual networks through which natural resources, manufactured goods, and intellectual property would be shared and spread. However, the arid climate of the desert-like Anarres made it difficult for the growing communities to sustain themselves, let alone support another far-off town as well. The Anarresti persisted, begrudgingly allowing a central distribution and organizational center to develop in Abbenay despite fear of power cohering to the center. The Anarresti remained vigilant to ensure their anarcho-syndicalist ethos would remain intact.

The airship lands, and Shevek sets off into the streets of Abbenay, the largest city on Anarres. The streets are wide and clean, and the low, spare buildings do not create shadows. There is a vividness and a clarity to things, Shevek thinks, though Abbenay has been built and structured plainly and efficiently just like any other Odonian community. Odo always said that “excess is excrement,” and the cities built according to her teachings reflect that ideology. Abbenay is bare, accessible, and everything is laid out plainly: “Nothing [is] hidden.”

The city is busy, and Shevek takes in the sounds and sights of people talking, working, gossiping, and playing as he roams the streets. He enters a park at the end of the main thoroughfare and walks among green leafy holium trees. Soon he comes to a bench, upon which sits a stone statue of Odo. He sits down beside the statue, and contemplates the fact that though Odo is the lifeblood of Anarres, she never stepped foot on the planet during her lifetime.

As it grows dark, Shevek leaves the park and heads for the Central Institute of the Sciences. At the entrance, Shevek asks a registrar if there’s an empty bed in one of the dormitories. The registrar points him in the direction of the dorm, and hands him a note from Sabul, which instructs Shevek to meet Sabul at the physics office in the morning. Shevek follows the registrar’s instructions to the nearby dormitory, and is surprised to find that all the rooms are singles, rather than rooms of four to ten beds. Alone in a single room surrounded by books for the first time in his life, Shevek hesitantly shuts the door and goes to sleep.

Abbenay is not officially a capital city, though it functions as a center of intellectual and organizational life on Anarres. The Anarresti fear the coherence of any power structure that might enforce rules, laws, or other oppressive forces on their people, and strive at every turn to keep such structures from emerging. The Odonian commitment to decentralization and communal living in every aspect of society is strong, though in practice it is imperfect.



In contrast to the luxurious cities of Urras, Abbenay is built in an Odonian image—reserved, modest, and balanced, and free, open, and accessible to all. Shevek is impressed by the city’s layout and atmosphere, feeling that it is truly an embodiment of these Odonian ideals. At the same time, a lack of privacy can be stifling for more introverted types like Shevek.



Shevek contemplates the unfair fact that Odo envisioned and helped to create a society that she never even got to be a part of. Her ideals and visions persist to this day, and are the tenets by which all Anarresti organize and live out their lives, yet Odo herself was never able to live by the codes and practices she preached—she was never free.



Things are different in Abbenay—Shevek will have a room of his own and a sense of individuality and freedom that is new to him. He is uncertain and hesitant to accept this new way of life, his Odonian fear of excremental excess and egoizing shining through, but quickly he allows himself to indulge. This passage can be seen as a stepping stone to Shevek’s eventual, reluctant adoption of Urrasti customs and “propertarian” ways.



In the morning, Shevek meets Sabul—the physicist who is to be his mentor. Sabul is squat and slovenly, dressed in grimy clothing. He speaks abruptly and coarsely. He tells Shevek that he must learn lotic, the language of Urras, in order to read the major works of Urrasti physics—no one has translated them into Pravic yet. Sabul hands Shevek a book of loti grammar and an loti dictionary, and the two argue about which lectures Shevek should attend. Shevek wants to attend the courses of a woman named Gvarab in order to learn more about Simultaneity, but Sabul insists that Shevek has already surpassed her, and that Simultaneity is “profiteering crap.” He orders Shevek to “drop the mysticism and grow up,” urging him to learn lotic quickly, and to only seek him out again when he is able to read a book of Urrasti physics.

As Sabul prepares to leave, he tells Shevek not to share the Urrasti texts with anyone. Shevek is confused by the directive to acquire knowledge which he is not meant to share, but Sabul insists that the books are “explosive.” Sabul leaves, and Shevek holds the Urrasti texts in his hands as if they are dynamite—“with revulsion and devouring curiosity.”

Shevek sets to the task of learning lotic, isolated in his room from the rest of the Institute and the city. He is used to being isolated, as all his life he has known that he is unlike anyone else. For the first time ever, though, Shevek soon begins to treasure his privacy, independence, and isolation, leaving his room only for meals and short walks, and assigned community labor one day out of every ten. He is learning lotic quickly, and is soon able to understand the physics textbooks Sabul provided him with. He admires the Urrasti physicists, who are far ahead of anyone on Anarres.

As Shevek delves deeper and deeper into the Urrasti texts, he grows more and more hermitic, neglecting all social and communal aspects of life at the Institute. Despite all this, Shevek never misses a single one of Gvarab’s lectures—he has been attending her course on Frequency and Cycle despite Sabul’s disapproval. Attendance at Gvarab’s lectures is sparse, but the elderly Gvarab takes pleasure in being able to share her ideas with Shevek, who hangs on her every word and whose attention redeems her life’s work.

It is clear right from the get-go that Shevek and Sabul are very different men. Sabul’s disheveled appearance and gruff, even cruel demeanor establish him as an adversary, and he shows himself to be uncaring about the work of others through his rejection of Shevek’s desire to take classes with Gvarab. Indeed, Sabul seems more like an Urrasti than an Anarresti. Sabul wants Shevek to have a certain set of skills, and will only mentor him once he has acquired them. Sabul is egoizing, in a way, and attempting to mold Shevek into a certain form or image, thus threatening Shevek’s freedom—his birthright as an Odonian.



The communal nature of every aspect of life on Anarres leads Shevek to grow confused when Sabul instructs him not to share the knowledge he’ll gain from the Urrasti texts, but he also feels the truth of Sabul’s statement that the texts—and even the idea of engaging with any material that comes from Urras—are perhaps too explosive and controversial for just any Anarresti to handle. This also hints again at a sense of communal repression in Anarresti society, where dissension is discouraged and even punished.



Though Urrasti texts are frowned upon, and harboring any kind of admiration for anything Urrasti goes against Odonian ideals in a massive way, Shevek finds himself enjoying the texts, the language, and the solitude that he has submerged himself in. Though all these things go against his Anarresti upbringing, he commits to them passionately and enthusiastically.



Shevek knows that there is much he can learn from Gvarab, and even though he is falling headlong into the world of Urrasti science he remains connected to those he respects on Anarres. He is drifting away from his Odonian values in some respects, but adhering to them even more carefully in others.



After half a year at the Institute, Shevek presents Sabul with a critique of the Urrasti physicist Atro's work. Sabul orders Shevek to translate the paper into lotic, so that it can be sent straight to Atro himself on the next freighter bound for Urras. Shevek is startled to find that ideas and letters are traded back and forth just like petroleum and mercury, and though he is alarmed by the idea of communicating with a propertarian, he is also excited.

In addition to the communication with Urras, Shevek finds his ideals tested in other ways. The fact that he must learn lotic but keep it to himself goes against the ideology of sharing he has lived by his whole life. His single private room, too, is a "moral thorn," ordinarily a symbol of someone who is an egoizer or a disgrace. Human solidarity is a privilege, and in a communal society such as the Anarresti one's privacy has little function. Shevek soon realizes, though, that his work is made easier through his solitude, and tells himself that because the job he is doing will someday be important to his society, he is justified in luxuriating in his privacy.

As Shevek works toward a theory of Simultaneity, he struggles with his desire to also research and develop a unified theory of Time. As Shevek's work intensifies, he sleeps less and less, dreaming vividly for only a few hours a night. He has visions of holding time itself in his hands.

One day, Shevek stops into the physics office to see if any letters have arrived, and he runs into Sabul. Sabul holds out a book to Shevek—it is Shevek's critique of Atro's work, retranslated into Pravic and credited to both Shevek and Sabul. Shevek is caught off guard and upset that Sabul has taken the credit for his and Atro's ideas. When Shevek asks if he can publish his own work under his own name on Urras, Sabul says that the PDC will not allow any unapproved written materials to leave Anarres.

The two men argue, and Shevek at last realizes that Mitis's warning has come true: he is indeed Sabul's man. Nevertheless, Shevek acknowledges that he needs Sabul if he wants his ideas to get sent to Urras. He decides that going forward he will work with Sabul rather than against him, and as Shevek walks home in the rain, he begins feeling ill. In his single room, Shevek succumbs to a fever, and takes to bed.

A new world of communication with Urras is opening up for Shevek, and he is thrilled and excited by it. He harbors some reservations, but has already gotten in so deep with his studies of Urrasti texts and his intellectual engagement with Urrasti scientists that communicating directly is the logical next step.



Shevek is torn, enthralled by the Urrasti texts and the loti language but fearful that he is bringing shame upon himself and betraying the ideals which have shaped his whole life up to this point. He recognizes the benefits of Odonian life, and does not want to turn his back on them. However, he cannot help but see the benefits of the "propertarian" pursuits of isolation, specialization, and furthering of one's personal pleasure and individual knowledge.



Shevek dives deeper and deeper into his own work, embracing Urrasti values of isolation, ego, and even excess. His dreams of holding time in his hands represent a possessive and egoistic subconscious, and a desire to be validated for his intellect and achievements.



Sabul takes his control over Shevek a step further in this passage, as he begins crediting himself with Shevek's work and hiding behind the "bureaucracy" of the PDC, using their approval as a smokescreen for his own pride and greed. Again Sabul seems like the worst kind of Anarresti, using Odonian language and systems to hide Urrasti values.



Shevek has allowed himself to become someone's property—worse, he has allowed his ideas to become someone else's. He nonetheless realizes that this is the price that must be paid to ensure that his work is seen and heard. The weight of this tradeoff seems to make him physically ill.



After several days, Shevek realizes he is not getting better, and he checks himself into a local clinic, where he is diagnosed with pneumonia. Shevek, like most Anarresti, feels it is shameful to be ill, and attempts to refuse medical help, but eventually allows a doctor to inject him with medicine to bring down his fever. Shevek falls asleep, raving in lotic and Pravic about physics and time.

When Shevek wakes up again, he feels well at last. A woman sits at Shevek's bedside and asks how he feels. When Shevek asks her who she is, she replies, "the mother," and Shevek confusedly wonders if he has been reborn. As Shevek looks at the woman more closely, he realizes that she is Rulag, his actual mother. Shevek, horrified, shrinks away from her. Rulag explains that she found him while sorting books for the engineering library on a work rotation—she discovered his and Sabul's book and tracked him to the Institute, then to the clinic.

Rulag asks if Shevek is still in touch with his father, Palat, and Shevek tells her that Palat has been dead for eight years, and was killed trying to rescue children trapped in rubble after an earthquake. Rulag accepts the news wearily, but without displaying much emotion. Rulag asks Shevek if he is angry at her for not having kept in touch, and Shevek replies that he cannot be angry with her, as he does not know her, and never did. Rulag attempts to explain how she and Palat were separated by work postings, but Shevek tells her that none of it matters.

Rulag explains that work has always come first for her, but that Palat was the more parental one in their partnership. Rulag offers to help Shevek find his way in Abbenay—she is well-connected, she says, and would be happy to advise him in the "dominance games" that take place at the Institute. Shevek can see the pain and loneliness on Rulag's face as she speaks, and he resents it. He feels she has no right to swoop in after so many years and uproot Shevek's loyalty to his father's memory, and he rejects her offer. Rulag concedes that they are not really mother and son except biologically, but hopes that they can connect as brother and sister. Shevek tells her that he is uncertain of whether he can do so. Rulag solemnly leaves, bidding Shevek farewell, and Shevek begins to weep.

Shevek's Odonian reluctance to admit to any illness or impediment which could infringe upon the common good is tested, as he is seriously ill with a high fever.



Shevek's estranged mother Rulag reappears in his life at his lowest, most vulnerable moment—that is, the most vulnerable he has been since her initial abandonment when he was a child. Rulag is excited to have found her son, but Shevek is jarred and profoundly upset by her presence.



Shevek answers Rulag's questions, but does not seem at all invested in the fact that she is finally sitting right before him after so many years away. The two are strangers, and Shevek has been through enough, including the death of his father, to be able to realize that fact. He is uninterested in hearing her excuses, though he is not angry with her—he is just removed from the relationship.



Rulag attempts to justify her absence from Shevek's life by citing the plain facts of the differences in personalities and priorities between her and Shevek's father. Rulag seems enthusiastic about reconnecting with Shevek, and when he rebuffs her, her pride seems hurt. It pains Shevek to turn her away, as evidenced by his tears, but he already knows what she has just told him: they are not really mother and son in any true, resonant sense, and Shevek, having been alone most of his life, chooses to continue on that way.



CHAPTER 5

On Urras, Shevek is relieved to no longer be a tourist. As the new term begins at the University, Shevek is excited to settle down and get to work in Paradise. Shevek takes on teaching duties, and admires the young “anarchists” who have joined his course. He finds that his students are intelligent, superbly trained in physics, philosophy, and mathematics, and are able to focus intensely in class because none are tired from physical labor or rotational duties.

Shevek has a surplus of free time—he has not had so much since his early years at the Institute in Abbenay, and even now he has more because life at this University revolves entirely around creating the “complete leisure to work.” Everything is taken care of so that students and faculty can focus only on academia. Though this is “paradise indeed” in Shevek’s mind, he finds himself unable to get down to his own work and feels he has lost his flair for sensing where the important problems in it lie. Though he writes several papers, he feels he has accomplished nothing of true value.

Shevek is paid for his published papers and receives a salary from the university. He understands how important wealth is to Urrasti life. He finds the exchange of money banal, though, and even frightening at times. After shopping for custom clothes and shoes and becoming overwhelmed while out shopping for luxurious, needless items, Shevek suffers nightmares which take place in the shops. When Shevek’s custom-ordered clothes and shoes arrive, he tries them on in his apartment, and when he looks at himself in the mirror he thinks that he looks very much like his mother, Rulag.

Over the mid-autumn holiday, Shevek gives himself a bit of a break. He sleeps, walks, reads, and tries to remind himself that he is still adjusting to life on Urras. One night, leaving the dining hall after dinner, Shevek runs into Chifoilisk, who asks if he has some time to spare for a conversation. The two walk together to the library, and Shevek asks why the two of them never work together. Chifoilisk, in response, asks Shevek whether or not he is aware of what he is doing on Urras, and whether or not he realizes he has been bought by the “capitalist, plutocratic-oligarchic State.”

As Shevek begins teaching, he finds that higher education is yet another way in which Urrasti society is seemingly superior to Anarres. Because the students do not have to spend their days working or serving others, they can focus entirely on their studies and commit to their own personal growth and self-improvement. He sees that this isn’t inherently egoistic or excessive, as he has always been conditioned to believe, but that focus on the individual can be a positive thing.



With so much free time and lack of other burdens or obligations, Shevek could potentially have complete freedom to work. Instead, though, he feels trapped and insufficient, unable to connect with the problems or solutions in his own work the way he could back on Anarres. Something is missing from his process, but he is unsure of what that is yet.



Shevek is being tempted by the machinations of capitalism. He has money and is participating in an economy for the first time in his life, and has access to luxury items that did not even exist on Anarres. When he tries on his “excremental” new belongings, he feels he looks like his mother—he thinks he has become something he hates.



Shevek has seen Chifoilisk—a socialist from the state of Thu, and thus also an outsider in A-lo—as an ally since his first day on Urras. As he talks more deeply with Chifoilisk, he realizes that Chifoilisk is looking out for him. Chifoilisk’s warnings that Shevek has been “bought” resonate with Shevek, who has just spent his money on luxurious and superfluous clothing that has only made him question and detest himself.



In his home state of Thu, Chifoilisk says, the people are socialists, just like the Anarresti. Shevek argues that Thu is centralized, though, even moreso than A-lo, and they have a money economy to boot. Chifoilisk invites Shevek to come to Thu to see how “real socialism” works, and Shevek retorts that he is aware of how real socialism functions. Chifoilisk tells Shevek that he has no desire to play games, and asks Shevek outright to come to Thu. Shevek says he cannot, as all his work is in A-lo, as well as the Council of World Governments. Chifoilisk tells Shevek that the CWG is in A-lo’s pocket, and that Shevek is in danger.

Chifoilisk warns Shevek against Pae, who is a “loyal, ambitious agent of the loti government,” and who reports regularly to the Department of National Security concerning Shevek and Chifoilisk. Chifoilisk also warns Shevek against approaching everyone in A-lo solely as an individual, urging him to understand the unseen, authoritarian powers that are at work behind each individual. Chifoilisk tells Shevek that both of their rooms at the university are bugged. Shevek asks Chifoilisk if he is an agent of the Thuvian government, and Chifoilisk concedes that he is. He proclaims that he will never be “bought out” by the loti government, and has faith in his government and his country.

Shevek counters Chifoilisk’s warnings that he is a “child among thieves” and a victim of loti profiteering by revealing that he came to bargain with the loti, in order to get his people to come out of exile. In Thu, he explains, he knows people are afraid that Odonians might bring back the old revolution, which the Thuvians gave up on before it was complete. In A-lo, Shevek argues, the loti have forgotten the revolution, and so they fear him less, and might be more open to lowered **walls**, human solidarity, and free exchange between Urras and Anarres. Shevek is aware of what the loti want from him—his General Temporal Theory—and he intends to use it as a bargaining chip.

Chifoilisk asks Shevek if he has written the theory down yet, and when Shevek tells him that he hasn’t, Chifoilisk urges him not to, unless he wants the loti government to take it for their own. Chifoilisk quotes Odo, stating that “where there’s property there’s theft.” Chifoilisk also tells Shevek that if Shevek had written down the theory, Chifoilisk himself would be attempting to steal it and return to Thu with it in order to serve his country and keep it out of the hands of the loti.

As the two scientists engage in a debate of ideals over what constitutes true socialism, Chifoilisk offers Shevek the chance to travel to Thu. It’s implied that Shevek will be something of a refugee—he will be escaping the nefarious mechanisms of the loti government. Not only that, Shevek might be even more widely hailed as a hero and an inspiration in Thu, where the people admire and respect his anarchist values rather than seeing them as an anomaly, a threat, or a circus act.



Chifoilisk explains the deep, pervasive subterfuge happening right under his and Shevek’s noses. There is a “cold war” between Thu and A-lo, and Chifoilisk and Shevek are pawns in that war. Chifoilisk knows that he is being used, though, and so is able to keep himself from ever truly selling out. In explaining to Shevek what’s really going on and warning him to be distrustful of the people and situations around him, Chifoilisk is attempting to give Shevek the same tools he has, and the same advantage against being taken for a fool by the loti.



Shevek, however, insists that he is not as naïve as he seems—he, too, has an agenda on Urras, and is slowly biding his time as he puts it in motion. Shevek has purposefully come to A-lo because he believes his ideas will be able to take root and have more influence here than in the already-idealistic Thu. Shevek sees the “bargaining chip” of his General Temporal Theory as a means of keeping himself free, rather than as a yoke tying him to the loti and threatening his mobility on Urras.



Chifoilisk reveals the lengths to which he would go in order to ensure the survival—and the prosperity—of his people, and in doing so warns Shevek further against trusting anyone, no matter where they come from or what they profess to believe. Chifoilisk cements the value of the General Temporal Theory, allowing Shevek to see, perhaps, just what a dangerous game he has been playing.



Chifoilisk implores Shevek to come to Thu once he is finally able to see what is going on in A-lo, warning him that he has “picked the wrong people to try to make brothers of.” He urges Shevek to give his theory to the Thuvians or even the Anarresti—anyone but the loti. Shevek tells Chifoilisk that he has already tried to give his own people what he has to give, and that they did not want it.

Less than a week later, Shevek is informed by Pae that Chifoilisk has been summoned back to Thu. Pae wonders what it is that Chifoilisk did wrong to be called back by his government.

Shevek finds a comradeship in Atro—he visits the man’s home a couple of times a week, and the two discuss physics, genealogy, and history. Atro recalls the first time Cetians—the race of the Urrasti and Anarresti people—who had contact with the Hainish people, humanoid aliens from far away in space. Atro worries that Shevek has not learned, on Anarres, how to discriminate, and he warns him against letting aliens such as the Hainish convince him that the entire galaxy is one brotherhood. Atro believes that existence is rooted in survival and competition, and he feels that the Cetians are the only kind of humanity meant to prosper. Atro asks Shevek to consider allegiance to the Cetian people when it comes time for him to release his Grand Temporal Theory—it is not money Atro wants, but merely for the Cetian mind to be recognized as superior in the galaxy.

Atro asks Shevek about his research, and when Shevek tells Atro he is working on gravitational theories, Atro becomes irritated and asks to know when Shevek is going to get down to the “real thing”—meaning his General Temporal Theory. Though Shevek feels affection for Atro, he decides against discussing his temporal theory with the man, remembering Chifoilisk’s advice to keep his research to himself.

Chifoilisk implies that giving the theory to the loti would be disastrous. Anyone, he tells Shevek, is more deserving of the theory than the loti. Shevek has suspected this, but also feels he has hit a wall when it comes to benefiting his own people—even knowing what is truly going on in A-lo, he still feels distrustful of his home planet as well.



Chifoilisk’s abrupt removal from A-lo signals that something is afoot between the nation of Thu and the loti government—tensions may have increased.



In Chifoilisk’s absence, Shevek seeks company elsewhere, finding a friend in Atro—though he soon realizes that Atro’s backwards thinking, racist ideology, and commitment to the advancement of A-lo at any cost is a major, major red flag. Atro’s belief that people of different races, creeds, and origins will always be at odds with one another, and that the answer lies in prospering one race over another rather than seeking common ground or collective good, runs completely counter to everything Shevek has ever been taught on Anarres. Atro is essentially a social Darwinist, believing only in “survival of the fittest.”



Shevek tries to keep the truth of where he is in his research from Atro as Chifoilisk’s words echo in his head. Shevek respects Atro’s theories greatly, but cannot trust him in light of both Chifoilisk’s warnings and Atro’s own admissions that he wants to further the Cetian advantage over the rest of the universe no matter what the cost to its other inhabitants.



Each day Shevek is invited to numerous parties and formal receptions around the capital, and he goes to several in pursuit of his mission: urging the idea of brotherhood between the two worlds. When he discusses his mission with his fellow guests at the parties, they agree with him. Shevek begins to wonder why the loti government is letting him speak about peace between Urras and Anarres so freely—he talks “pure anarchism,” and yet no one has tried to stop him. He considers that because he is talking to the same kind of people over and over again—wealthy Urrasti who are perhaps outside of his sphere of influence—the government has no need of intervening, as no one will really listen to Shevek’s ideals anyway. Shevek begins to hate the parties after this realization, and stops going.

Feeling that he is profoundly out of touch with anyone or anything on Urras, Shevek asks his fellow scientists if he can learn a bit more about how they live. Oiie invites Shevek to come spend the weekend at his family’s home in a nearby village. Oiie lives in a “modest middle-class house,” decorated in a functional and minimalist style. Shevek admires the grace Oiie has achieved through restraint, in contrast to the luxurious and excessive aesthetics of many Urrasti.

Shevek is introduced to Oiie’s wife, and feels grateful to once again be able to converse with a woman. At dinner, Shevek regales Oiie’s wife and children with tales of Anarres—it is the first time on Urras that he has been asked about his home planet with such interest. He does not propagandize or editorialize life on Anarres, but rather describes daily life in simple terms.

That night, sleeping in Oiie’s home, Shevek dreams of Takver. In his dream, they are on the Moon together, and they are walking through a deadened desert in the direction of “something flimsy and shiny, a remote **barrier**.” They both move toward the nebulous object with fear and trepidation.

CHAPTER 6

After spending ten days in the hospital on Anarres recovering from his pneumonia, Shevek returns to his room at the Institute. His neighbor, Desar, comes to visit him, and brings the two of them dinner from the cafeteria. Desar does this every night for several days until Shevek is well enough to go out again. Desar, a mathematician, is aloof and unfriendly, and Shevek is surprised that Desar is behaving in a brotherly way. Shevek resolves, however, to stick to Desar—his illness has forced him to realize that if he isolates himself like he did before, he will eventually “break down altogether.”

Shevek, still naively believing that he can advance his own agenda and enact real change in A-lo even after his revealing conversations with Atro, is disappointed to find that no one on Urras really listens to anyone else. His ideas have no value to the wealthy, propertied classes of A-lo, and thus Shevek does not constitute a threat to anyone here. They will never be moved by his ideals, since they are on the “winning” side of capitalist inequality. They have much to lose and nothing to gain from anarchism, so he will never get anywhere with these people.



Shevek’s desire to see more of Urras leads him to Oiie’s house, where he sees that in small pockets of society, moderation, restraint, and family values are still extant. This refreshes in him the hope that perhaps loti society still has some kind of conscience, despite all the apathy, racism, and insidiousness he has recently encountered.



Finally, Shevek encounters people who will actually listen to him, and are curious about life on Anarres in a genuine and open way. He has felt insignificant and patronized as of late, and speaking openly with Oiie’s family mitigates that feeling just a bit.



Shevek’s dream symbolically represents his longing for his partner Takver, and their simultaneous journey toward something neither of them have yet encountered. Yet this thing is also a kind of wall, albeit a “flimsy” one, perhaps representing Shevek’s goal of breaking down walls and furthering solidarity and brotherhood.



Shevek’s unlikely connection with Desar symbolizes the solidarity present on Anarres even between those who might not ordinarily like one another or get along. Every Odonian is responsible for every other Odonian, and this collectivism benefits the weak and the sick while fostering communality and the erasure of barriers between individuals.



Shevek divides his time between physics and committee work in Institute domicile management, restricting himself from working himself to death for his research. He studies biofeedback and brain-wave training with a group, and starts sitting at communal tables in the cafeteria. He attends festivals, museums, and concerts, and falls in love with music. Despite all these efforts, Shevek makes no close friends and has trouble finding joy in the few fleeting sexual encounters he has with women. He wonders if solitude will be his fate, and he hears his mother's words in his ear: "Work comes first." Shevek feels he is born to be alone, and is, in his heart, an egoist.

Though Shevek recommits himself to his work, he feels it is going nowhere. He cannot get any nearer to his Theory of Simultaneity, and so enrolls in two philosophical mathematics courses and begins avoiding Sabul. He attempts to grow closer to Gvarab, but age has taken its toll on her, and many days she can hardly recognize Shevek. Nobody else at the Institute can keep up with Shevek or discuss his interests with him. As a result, Shevek begins spending his time writing letters to Atro, the Urrasti physicist, as well as other mathematicians and scientists down on Urras. Many of his letters are confiscated by the PDC and don't get through, and so Shevek turns to Sabul to send the letters for him—however, Sabul vindictively refuses to approve any letters that do not deal with his own research.

A few times a year, Shevek receives a letter back from Urras—occasionally from Atro, and sometimes even from other scientists in both A-lo and Thu. The letters bolster Shevek's spirits when they arrive, but his happiness fades shortly thereafter every time.

At the end of his third year at the Institute, Gvarab dies, and Shevek speaks at her memorial. During his eulogy, he laments the fact that Gvarab and her work were not adequately respected in her lifetime, and after the service Shevek goes for a walk in the city, consumed with rage and grief. Shevek feels he has accomplished nothing in his three years at the institute other than "five or six unpublished papers and a funeral oration for a wasted life." He feels like nothing he does is meaningful, or even understood—meanwhile, his work serves no necessary social function and makes no aspect of communal Anarresti life better.

Shevek stops in front of the Music Syndicate to read the posters for the upcoming decad, and there he runs into Bedap. The two embrace, overjoyed to see one another. Shevek is surprised by his own emotions, as he recalls feeling disconnected from his and Bedap's childhood friendship during their last year at the Regional Institute. Still, his love for Bedap in that moment "flame[s] up as from shaken coal."

Shevek's recent illness—and his subsequent encounter with his birth mother Rulag—have both instilled in him a fear of overworking himself to the point of illness again. He does not want to be like his mother, who prioritized her work above everything else and has now ended up alone and desperate for connection. He sees his past behavior of isolating himself in the name of his work as egoistic, and wants to avoid it, though he fears it might be his destiny.



Shevek's professional frustration mounts as he encounters a series of setbacks. He feels there is no one on Anarres who can help, guide, or support him in his work. When he attempts to work with Gvarab he sees only sadness, decay, and futility, and when he attempts to connect with Sabul he comes up against bureaucratic red tape, vindictiveness, and jealousy. Even his attempts to communicate with Urras are thwarted, and Shevek feels he has no avenue for personal advancement or self-expression.



Urras becomes the one glimmer of hope in Shevek's world—only there are people doing the kind of work he is doing, and knowing this brings him both joy and further sadness and isolation.



Shevek does not want to waste his life, fearing the slow fade into obscurity and decay that he watched Gvarab's life become. He is frustrated with his lack of options, and the refusal of Anarresti society to see the ways in which his work is not at all egoistic but rather the height of collectivist aspirations.



Shevek's reunion with Bedap comes at a low moment in his life, and provides him with a bright spot and a resurgence of the feelings of his youth—confidence, camaraderie, anarchy, and a sense of purpose.



The two men walk and talk, catching up and enjoying each other's company. Eventually, they return to Shevek's room at the Institute. Bedap looks through Shevek's notebooks, and asks why Shevek's notes are written in code. Shevek tells him that they have been written in lotic. He tells Bedap that no one on Anarres can understand what he is researching, and no one wants to try. Shevek confesses to Bedap that he worries he is in the wrong field, and is considering asking for a reposting away from physics at the end of the quarter.

Bedap tells Shevek that the problem is that Anarresti society is designed to stifle the individual mind. Bedap sees the PDC as an archist bureaucracy, which has contributed to the spiritual suffering of many Anarresti. After sitting in silence for a few moments, Shevek concedes that there is a problem in Anarresti society—poverty. Anarres was never built to hold such a large civilization, especially one whose only resource is human solidarity. Bedap agrees, believing that cooperation has become obedience, and that social conscience has become a machine rather than a true impulse. Bedap worries that because it's "easier not to think for oneself," the Anarresti have settled into a "nice safe hierarchy," and have lost their anarchist roots.

Bedap tells Shevek that he has not shared any of his ideas because he does not want to end up like Tirin—their childhood friend who has been set to an asylum. Tirin, who had always been theatrically inclined, put on a play which some saw as anti-Odonian. As a result, he was posted to job after job which required intense physical outdoor labor, and Bedap believes that the PDC drove Tirin to insanity on purpose to keep him from making "anarchist" art. Shevek tells Bedap that he is just spouting conspiracy theories, and Bedap stands up to go home. Shevek insists that it is too far and too cold for Bedap to head home, and invites him to stay the night. Since there is not an extra blanket and no rug on the floor, Shevek and Bedap share a bed, and hold each other in the night.

The next evening, Shevek and Bedap meet up again, and have a conversation about whether or not they should partner together for a time. Though Shevek is heterosexual and Bedap is homosexual, Shevek knows that sex is an important part of connection between partners, and the two move into a single domicile downtown for a decade. Once the ten days are up, neither feels a particularly strong sexual desire for the other any longer, and they move back to their separate rooms. They continue to see each other almost every day and argue fiercely about politics and society.

Shevek has been prevented from sharing his work with anyone who cares about it, and the chance to share it with Bedap gives him the opportunity to vent his frustrations and hopefully encounter some solidarity and compassion from one of his closest friends. Shevek wants Bedap to talk him down off the ledge of quitting, perhaps, or otherwise to confirm that Shevek is right to abandon his studies and devote himself to traditional Odonian values and pursuits.



Bedap's inflammatory thoughts speak to the fact that Shevek is not alone in his frustrations with the Anarresti way of life. Though it is taboo to say the things he's saying, Bedap is strong in his convictions and in voicing his suspicions about the growing trend toward homogeneity, obedience, and silence in a once vibrant and anarchist society. Bedap fears that the ease of surrendering to public opinion or influence will mar Odonianism forever and erase the truths that Anarres was founded upon.



Bedap's fears run even deeper—he believes there is a conspiracy to silence those who notice the changes happening in Anarresti society, and cites the harmful pattern of forced physical labor assignments that were given to their friend Tirin. Though any Anarresti can refuse these assignments, doing so results in isolation from society and from the collective striving toward the common good, and is greatly frowned upon. Shevek is overwhelmed to hear all of this, both frightened and relieved to have his own suspicions about the darker side of Odonianism confirmed.



The concept of partnering on Anarres is fluid, and because Shevek and Bedap have experienced an outpouring of relief at reconnecting and being able to share their fears and ideals with one another, it makes sense that some of that excitement translates to a desire to be closer to one another. After the flame has run its course, the two remain close, continuing to hack away at the mysteries surrounding the heart of their shared fears and suspicions.



Shevek is still getting nowhere with his work, and has more or less abandoned temporal physics entirely. He has finally been given a course to teach in mathematical physics but derives no joy from this either. Shevek spends time with Bedap and Bedap's group of friends, finding their independent thought and eccentricities interesting. One of Bedap's friends, a composer, complains that there is no room for him in any Syndicate—the music Syndicate doesn't like his compositions, and so he takes unskilled labor jobs one after the other. His strife mirrors Shevek's—he is even working on a piece of music called *The Simultaneity Principle*. Neither music nor physics are of great import to the Anarresti, and so both Shevek and this composer languish in obscurity.

Shevek accompanies Bedap and some of his friends on a hiking trip—three men and three women are on the journey altogether. When Shevek introduces himself to one of the women, she tells Shevek that she knows who he is, though he is embarrassed to realize that he does not recognize her at all. Bedap reprimands him for not recognizing the woman, Takver, who attended the Northsetting Institute with them. Takver forgives Shevek for not remembering her, and the group starts up into the mountains.

On the fourth day of the hike, weary from the physical exertion, Takver and Shevek take a break together, relaxing on a grassy knoll. Shevek tells Takver that he has never been as drawn to a woman as he is to her, and Takver asks him why he hasn't proposed copulating. Shevek tells her that he isn't sure if that's what he wants—he explains his struggles with his work and his struggles with forming relationships, outlining how the two are related. Takver confesses that what she wants out of a relationship is a real bond and a lasting partnership—nothing else and nothing less. Shevek realizes that this is what he wants, too, and they agree to embark on a partnership.

After the hiking trip is over, Shevek and Takver move into a double room on the north end of Abbenay. Both Shevek and Takver have very few things to move in—clothes, papers, shoes, and small handmade knickknacks. As they settle in together they have a passionate but occasionally volatile relationship, as both have become used to solitude and are overwhelmed by the joy and anxiety of cohabitating with another person. Shevek realizes that his “wretched” last few years have been preparing him for his “present great happiness,” and understands—as a temporal physicist—that everything that has happened to him in the past is also part of what is happening to him now, with Takver.

As Bedap and Shevek spend more time together and Shevek expands his social circle, he sees that he is not alone in his frustration with the embargo of sorts on independent thought and work. He sees his strife mirrored in the plight of a musician who desires to create beautiful art that can be shared by all, and understands finally the ways in which Odonian society is engineered against individual pursuits, even when they are intended for eventual use by the community.



Shevek's reconnection with Takver just shortly after his reconnection with Bedap is symbolic of the emotional return Shevek is going through to the feelings from his past. After so long isolated in Abbenay with only Sabul, his work, and his fears, he is finally able to break through to the livelihood, hope, and anarchy of his youth, and the resurgence of people from his past heralds that renewal.



Shevek and Takver have an instant connection, and realize through this conversation that they both want the same things. Shevek has been afraid to really get down to the truth of what he wants out of life, but with Takver at his side, he is finally able to see past the veil of societal expectations, personal frustrations, and fear of failure both in his work and his relationships.



Shevek feels that his partnership with Takver was fated from the beginning—that his whole life has been leading him to her, and now that they are together he can see how each trial he encountered in childhood, in school, in Abbenay, and in his work has prepared him for the commitment of partnership and the devotion to another individual.



Takver's schedule at the laboratory where she works studying fish populations is demanding, and Shevek spends a lot of time alone in their room making notes and calculations. He slowly begins to build the structure of his Principles of Simultaneity. When Takver arrives home at the end of her days she often finds Shevek shaky and fatigued, and must help him to relax and calm down from his intense work.

One night, lying in bed, Shevek and Takver watch the Moon rise. Takver remarks on how beautiful Urras looks, though she knows the planet itself is full of warmongering proprietarians. She does not understand how Urras still seems so peaceful and happy from the outside. Shevek tells her that things always seem beautiful from afar—distance and interval allow one to see far-off worlds as perfect, and the span of one's life as beautiful and whole. As Takver and Shevek fall asleep holding one another, Shevek confesses that he is afraid, though he does not say what it is he is afraid of.

CHAPTER 7

In Urras, at the turn of the season, Shevek orders a custom-made winter coat from a shop on the high street. When it arrives, there is a letter in its pocket. It is unstamped and is not enclosed in an envelope. Shevek opens the letter and reads it—there is no name signed to it and no return address, but it asks why, if Shevek is an anarchist, he chooses to work within the “power system betraying [his] World.” The letter asks if Shevek has come to Urras to bring hope to those suffering from injustice and repression, and invites him to “join with [his] brothers.”

Shevek is taken aback by the letter, and feels a kind of panic set in. He knows that there are revolutionaries as well as poor men on Urras, but has not seen or met any in all his time there. He realizes that he has, indeed, been bought, and has allowed himself to be kept far away from the reality of Urras, just as Chifoilisk warned him. Shevek wonders how he can break down the **wall** between himself and the “real” Urras.

Shevek asks Efor, his manservant, if the two of them can have a talk. Shevek tells Efor that he sees him as his equal and his brother, and wants to know about his life. He tells Efor that Efor is the only person on Urras he has met who is not an “owner,” but before he can finish his thought, he sees that Efor's face is full of contempt, and Shevek feels like a “patronizing, prying fool.” He apologizes, and tells Efor to forget what he has said, though he realizes that he has missed out on his only entry into the world of the unpropertied classes of Urras.

Shevek and Takver remain absorbed by their own work despite their intense relationship, signaling their reluctance to depart from the Odonian values of hard work and service of the greater good just because they have found satisfaction and happiness in their own lives.



Shevek fears the failure of his own work, of his personal relationships, and of the Odonian society as a whole. He knows that things can appear lovely from the outside but actually be full of misery and pain up close, and while he has long thought this observation was mainly true of the beautiful Moon of Urras, he now sees that it is perhaps true of his own beloved Anarres as well.



Shevek, who just months ago was disgusted by his participation in capitalism and the luxury economy, now has become inured to the idea of ordering a fancy custom suit. As if to remind him of his roots and warn him against being “bought” any further, a mysterious note urging him to remember the oppressive nature of wealth and power appears.



The note serves its purpose—Shevek has a huge reality check as he considers how deeply he has sunk into Urrasti ways and capitalist obsessions. Realizing his foolishness, Shevek resolves to reconnect with a forgotten reason he came to Urras—to foster a dialogue, to spread Odonian ideals, and to seek out those who want or need the help of Anarresti society and its values.



When Efor reacts skeptically to Shevek's request for access into Efor's “class” of people, Shevek realizes that he has drifted further from his anarchist roots than he realized, and has become totally disconnected from any part of Urras other than the ivory tower of the university and the upper classes.



During the break between winter and spring terms, Oiiie invites Shevek to spend a week at his home. While Shevek is at Oiiie's, a heavy snow falls. Shevek, never having seen more than an inch of snow, plays outside with Oiiie's children, throwing snowballs and building fortresses of snow. Oiiie's sister Veia arrives for a visit while Shevek is out playing in the snow, and when he comes in, he introduces himself to her. Shevek is deeply attracted to the provocatively and lavishly-dressed Veia, and is saddened when she reveals that after dinner she will be returning to Nio Esseia by train—Shevek fears he will never see her again.

Oiiie's wife asks Shevek if he will bring Veia to the train station so she doesn't have to walk alone in the snow—Oiiie has a cold. On the walk to the station, Veia flirts with Shevek and tells him that he is much too polite to be a real anarchist. Veia tells Shevek that she thinks his journey to Urras is "romantic," as he has come without a coin in his pocket to plead on behalf of his people. Shevek deflects her ideal of him as a poor revolutionary, stating that he has been showered with luxuries since his arrival on Urras. Veia remarks that Shevek cannot possibly have seen real luxury in a University dorm, and pities him for not having experienced the true Urras.

When the two arrive at the station, Veia asks if Shevek has a wife and a family. He tells her he has a partner and two children, and Veia asks why his partner didn't accompany him to Urras. Shevek explains that Takver had work to do back home on Anarres—moreover, he wanted to keep her safe, and he worried that if she travelled with him to Urras she would face the same kind of anger and ire upon her return that he inevitably will. Veia asks Shevek if the two of them can meet again. She asks him to promise that he will call upon her when he is in Nio Esseia, and he agrees to.

The following day, the newspapers have printed a story about the revolution in Benbili, stating that the country's dictator has fled and rebels have taken over the capital. Curious about the relatively obscure nation of Benbili, Shevek researches it, and finds that it is a large but underpopulated and very poor country run by a military dictatorship. Shevek regrets not being able to go to Benbili. As he reads more about the insurrection there, he is filled with hope to see an actual revolution taking place on Urras, but is saddened by the news that comes days later—A-lo is sending troops to quell the revolution and support the Benbili dictator's return to power.

Despite the realization that he has been conned and edged out of his mission on Urras, Shevek still finds joy and refuge in the connections he has made with his colleagues. Shevek is charmed by Veia, and is somehow unable to see—or unwilling to admit—that she symbolically represents the persistent allure of materialism, luxury, and excess. In surrendering to his desire for Veia, Shevek will be surrendering to his desire for the ease of loti capitalism.



Veia attempts to romanticize Shevek as a revolutionary hero, but Shevek insists that he is not the face of any movement or revolution (and Veia certainly wouldn't enjoy a real revolution, as it would mean overthrowing people like her). He self-deprecatingly asserts that he has become mired in his desire for Urrasti luxury and excess, but Veia insists that he hasn't even seen the tip of the iceberg—there is so much more than Shevek could ever imagine just waiting around the corner.



Veia's seduction is complete. Though she has reminded him of his commitment to Takver and his love for her, Veia continues to exert a pull on Shevek, and gets him to agree to meet with her again in the center of the Urrasti upper class--the wealthy capital city of Nio Esseia, where delight and temptation no doubt await him.



Just as Shevek seems to succumb to the pulls of capitalism, luxury, and excess, he is reminded of the very real conflict going on in the background of everything. Shevek is captivated by the idea of true revolution on Urras, and for a moment he believes that perhaps Urras could support an overthrow of the power structures which govern its states—but his hopes are crushed as he sees the influence of the loti state's power. This "proxy war" in Benbili echoes the proxy wars of the Cold War, in which the capitalist U.S. and the communist U.S.S.R. supported different sides in wars fought in other (often poorer) countries.



On the way to class one morning, Shevek decides not to go, and instead boards a train to Nio Esseia. While on the train, he distantly considers fleeing to Benbili, but knows that no matter which country he goes to, he is still trapped on Urras. As the beautiful countryside whizzes past his window, Shevek feels a kind of anger at the beautiful spring day, wondering what Urras has done to deserve such beauty when his own people have none. He realizes that he is “thinking like a propertarian,” and that beauty cannot be earned. Outside the window, Nio Esseia comes into view.

After exiting the train station, Shevek finds himself feeling directionless, unsure of what to do, and a little overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of the city. He passes a shop that sells newspapers and sees a headline reporting on the revolution: THU SENDS TROOPS TO AID BENBILI REBELS. As Shevek wanders the city, he comes to an art gallery and goes in. He sees a painting which costs 4,000 Urrasti dollars, and tells a gallerist working there that that sum could feed two families for one year in Nio Esseia. After arguing with the gallerist, he runs out of the gallery, unsure of where to go. Suddenly, he is struck by the idea of calling on Vea, and he goes into a nearby shop to use their telephone.

Shevek and Vea meet up at a nearby garden. They eat lunch at a restaurant in the park, and Shevek is astounded by the amount of “extraordinary” food. Shevek picks up the tab, and then the two, feeling uncomfortably full, go for a walk. As Shevek observes Vea, he thinks that she is what Takver calls a “body profiteer”—a woman who uses her sexuality as a weapon in power struggles with men. Vea is ornately dressed, and has an expensive glittering jewel hanging by itself on her chest. When Shevek asks how it stays put, Vea reveals that there is a magnet beneath her skin, and Shevek is mildly disgusted.

Shevek and Vea attend a matinee at a local theater, and then go for dinner downtown at yet another opulent restaurant. Shevek drinks heavily, and because he has run out of money over the course of his expensive day with Vea, is forced to write a check to pay for the meal. After dinner, the two take a hired car to Vera’s apartment—she is hosting a party later on that evening—and Vea makes Shevek pay the driver with a check as well.

In the wake of his depression over realizing the impossibility of true revolution on Urras, Shevek succumbs to the seductive draw of Vea and all she represents. He hasn’t contacted her directly, but he goes to Nio Esseia knowing that it is a wealthy enclave and a fortress against the worries of the common people. Shevek longs, on some level, to annihilate the parts of him that compete with Urrasti ways of life.



Even in Nio Esseia, Shevek finds that he cannot escape the news of the discord in Benbili. As news breaks that Thu will be aiding the rebels, Shevek is reminded of the seeds of revolution which remain no matter how often or repeatedly they are stomped upon. His encounter in the art gallery shows him leaning away from the pulls of capitalism and railing against the excrement of excess, but, overwhelmed by the confusion of it all, he relents and calls Vea, symbolically caving to the allure of wealth and the ease it brings.



Vea’s physical beauty is undeniable, and she has taken drastic measures to make sure it is on display. Her commitment to luxury and excess is offputting to Shevek, and he hears Takver’s derisive comments about women like Vea echoing in his mind. Nevertheless, he is still drawn to her, and all that she represents.



Shevek allows Vea to string him along on a day of indulgence, excess, and frivolity. Despite the steep bill, Shevek goes along with Vea’s wishes, drawn to her and the carefree life she leads like a moth to a flame.



Vea changes into her eveningwear, which is just a full-length pleated skirt. Soon guests begin to arrive, and as the party gets underway Shevek continues drinking, never having consumed alcohol before and unaware of its effects. He carries on long conversations about the nature of time, simultaneity, and sequency with other guests. As the evening grows late, the party devolves into debauchery, with couples beginning to copulate in corners and groups of people arguing loudly about the war in Benbili.

Shevek, who has become very drunk, has trouble keeping up with any one conversation, but when someone asks about Anarres, he confesses that it is an ugly world, and that life there is full of dull and hard work just to provide people with the bare minimum. Nevertheless, he says, he feels that the Anarresti are free, whereas the Urrasti are in “jail,” imprisoned by their possessions. Shevek begins screaming about “the **wall**” over and over, and when he realizes that all of Vea’s guests are staring at him, he excuses himself, realizing that he is feeling ill and dizzy.

Vea accompanies Shevek to a bedroom, where she kisses him and calls him “magnificent.” Shevek kisses Vea back, and then begins groping her. Vea tells Shevek to stop, but he does not. Shevek removes his pants and attempts to undress Vea as well, despite her protests. The two struggle against one another physically until Shevek, overcome with excitement, ejaculates on Vea’s skirt. Angry and disgusted, Vea leaves the room to change her clothes. Shevek stumbles out into the living room, ashamed and overwhelmed, and vomits all over a platter of food.

Oiie and Pae arrive at the apartment to take Shevek home. In the limousine, headed back for the university, Oiie tells Pae he is relieved that though Shevek “escaped” to Nio Esseia for the day, he spent it with Vea rather than wandering through the “slums.” It isn’t that he doesn’t want Shevek to see poverty, though: rather, Oiie does not want Shevek to be *seen* by the poor and downtrodden, as pamphlets have been circulating among the lower classes announcing the arrival of the “Forerunner”—an empty-handed outcast who will deliver the poor from toil and obscurity. The lower classes have been planning a strike in recent weeks, and Oiie is nervous about a rebellion.

Shevek’s descent into indulgence compounds even further as he imbibes alcohol over the course of the night. He perhaps does not realize that he has become the thing he always railed against—an unwitting pawn of capitalism, sitting at a debauched party debating war and revolution while actual struggle rages on far away and out of sight.



At the height of his drunkenness, Shevek experiences a moment of clarity in which he realizes that though Anarres is “ugly” and devoid of the luxuries Urras enjoys, Urras is “ugly” on the inside and devoid of morals or empathy. As Shevek has a nightmarish vision of the wall at the port of Anarres, he is overwhelmed by the divisions and inequities on both worlds, and the “wall” he has raised between himself and the flawed but free world of his birth.



Shevek’s descent into immorality and indulgent behavior are complete as he forces himself upon Vea, greedily and lustily attempting to possess her. Shevek, too, has finally become “possessed,” and grabs at all Vea represents—freedom achieved through wealth, happiness achieved through materialism, bliss achieved through oppression and egoism.



In his disheveled state, Shevek is unaware of the conversations his “handlers” are having about him as they transport him from Nio Esseia, fearing that today was a close call and realizing that though Shevek may not have known it, he was on the precipice of exposing himself to common society and being recognized as a beacon of anarchy, rebellion, and revolution. Chifoilisk was right—Shevek is a pawn of the state, and they are attempting to keep him under their thumb at every turn and at any cost.



Pae and Oiie help Shevek upstairs to his room and put him to bed. As they do so, Pae asks Oiie why Shevek hasn't yet delivered his General Temporal Theory, wondering aloud if Shevek is a fraud and they all have been taken in by a "peasant from Utopia." Pae worries that if Shevek does not deliver, Urras will never establish an advantage over the Hainish. Before he and Oiie leave, Pae pockets a paper from Shevek's desk.

Pae and Oiie worry that they have created a problem for themselves by bring Shevek to Urras. He presents a great risk, and still has not delivered the General Temporal Theory which they feel he promised to them, and which they know their government needs.



CHAPTER 8

On Anarres it is the midsummer holiday, Insurrection Day, which commemorates the first great uprising back on Urras nearly two hundred years earlier. Shevek, Takver, and a group of their friends have just finished feasting, and sit in a park in Abbenay as the golden heat of the evening falls around them. Bedap asks for a glass of water, but there is none around—Abbenay is in the midst of the worst drought in forty years.

Though Shevek, Bedap, Takver and their friends are enjoying the golden beauty of summer, the threat of a drought lingers on the horizon. In a society like the one on Anarres, in which everyone is responsible for everyone else's well-being, a drought means that many will surely be called on to come to the aid of their fellow Odonians.



Winter comes, and water is being strictly rationed—the majority of it must go straight to the land to keep the holum plants alive, as they are the source from which the Anarresti derive food, clothing, paper, and more. Meanwhile, Takver is pregnant, and though she craves sweets all the time, they are in short supply. She suffers mood swings and remains overworked, unable to take a break, and she lets her research fall by the wayside.

Takver's pregnancy coincides with a fallow time on Anarres, and she and Shevek struggle along with the rest of their Odonian brothers and sisters to keep up with their day-to-day lives while the situation around them worsens, threatening everyone's health and happiness.



One night, Takver comes home from a difficult day to find Shevek sitting alone in the dark. When she asks him what's wrong, he tells her that Sabul is not going to recommend one of his newest papers for either publication on Anarres or export to Urras. In his critique of Shevek's work Sabul has accused him of egoizing in his paper and working on "impractical" hypotheses. Takver tells Shevek that they themselves will form a printing syndicate, learn to set type, and print the book for distribution, but Shevek points out that paper too is being rationed, and no nonessential printing is allowed for the foreseeable future.

In the midst of the planet-wide turmoil due to the drought, and the excitement and fear surrounding Takver's ill-timed pregnancy, Shevek receives more difficult news: his work, long-challenged by those at the institute, is now being rendered as useless in light of the worsening drought and the tightening of resources. This is a huge blow to Shevek, as he has been struggling for a long time to convince himself that his work—and his life—have value.



Takver suggests that Shevek offer Sabul a co-writing credit and see if that sways him, since Sabul himself is an egoist, but Shevek refuses to share any more of his work with Sabul. Takver insists that the name on the book doesn't matter, but what is contained in the book matters very much. Shevek eventually agrees, and early the next year, a heavily-edited version of his work is printed—with Shevek and Sabul credited as joint authors. Fifteen copies are sent to Urras, and Shevek slips his original manuscript into one of them, addressing it to the attention of the physicist Atro.

Takver wants to support Shevek, but she knows that he has encountered spite, resistance, and shame at every turn throughout his career at the Institute. She promises Shevek that his ideas will shine through, and Shevek takes her advice, though he knows his contribution to the realm of physics will once again be credited to the jealous Sabul. He attempts to safeguard himself against this by slipping his original work into a missive to Atro, whom he sees as his last ally in his field.



One afternoon, Shevek arrives home to find Takver in labor. He goes to fetch the midwife, but she is nowhere to be found, and sees her absence as an “evil omen.” He regrets having been withdrawn and testy around Takver since the fiasco with his manuscript, and now worries that something horrible will befall her. Shevek runs to a nearby clinic and tells them the situation—they send him home and call for another midwife. At home, Takver is already at work bearing the child. Shevek holds her and braces her, and soon the new midwife arrives to help shepherd the child into the world. Shevek and Takver hold their child—a girl—and soon the midwife leaves and all three of them fall asleep together.

By the summer, the drought shows no sign of ending, and it seems that there will be disaster if it continues much longer. Rations remain strict, and labor drafts have become imperative. Farmers cannot grow enough food, yet because everyone is working so hard—and Odonians take great pleasure in useful hard work—there is an undercurrent of joy throughout the summer. People in Abbenay have found a real feeling of solidarity, and the bond between people is “stronger than all that [is trying] the bond.”

Late in the summer, Shevek is posted to an emergency farm draft far from Abbenay. Some rain has fallen in an equatorial region, and the land must be harvested before the drought returns. Shevek is sad to leave the baby, whom he loves and has grown close with while caring for her over the summer. Though he must leave Takver and the baby now for sixty days, he feels he at least has the assurance that at the end of it he will be able to return to them.

The night before Shevek leaves, he and Takver and Bedap all have dinner together. Shevek toasts Sadik, the baby, saying that he is grateful she was born in a hard year, at a time when brotherhood and sisterhood are needed more than ever. He drinks to a long, joyful life for his daughter, and to the hope for rainfall.

After Shevek leaves for his work assignment, he and Takver write one another once a decad. Shevek tells Takver that the effects of the drought are much more dire where he is posted, and the climate is painfully dry. Takver writes back that she is worried, because when she checked the job postings at the Divlab, she did not see a new one for Shevek. She tells him to get in touch with his Syndicate as soon as possible—she worries that Bedap is right, and bureaucracy has crept up on them. Shevek, however, never receives her letter back—he leaves the farm before it arrives.

In the midst of all the turmoil and sadness in their lives, Shevek and Takver welcome a baby girl. A child on Anarres symbolizes both the fruits of partnership and collectivism as well as individualism and the perpetuation of the self. Shevek and Takver have brought something into the world which is, by its very nature, both theirs and not theirs—something they have created, but something that they have in theory made together in the name of perpetuating Odonianism and its values.



The height of the drought turns out to be a time not of sorrow, but of collective hard work and rejoicing in solidarity. When Odonianism works, it works well, and in times of hardship a sense of togetherness, obligation, and communal effort is a beacon of hope and a symbol of the utopian goals of Anarresti society.



The flip side of communal responsibility for one another is the lack of prioritizing one Odonian's life and freedom over another's for any reason. Though Shevek is a new father, he is called away to serve his people, and agrees to answer the call in the name of the common good.



Shevek knows that his daughter's birth has come at an auspicious time, and that her thriving represents the hope that all Odonian brothers and sisters will thrive and prosper despite the threat of the drought.



The drought worsens rapidly, and Shevek and Takver, though separated, both feel its effects. Shevek realizes how dire the situation truly is, and understands the fact that it is not getting better any time soon. Meanwhile, Takver too is called away—her work with fisheries makes her a necessary asset to securing a food supply and preventing the drought from developing into a famine.



Shevek takes a train back to Abbenay. Though Anarresti trains are usually reliable, in the midst of the drought the demands on transport are extreme. Shevek's train stops frequently and is delayed often, and at one stop in the middle of nowhere he and the other passengers are forced to fast for nearly sixty hours. When Shevek finally gets back to Abbenay, he goes to his and Takver's domicile to find it empty.

A letter on the table from Takver states that she received an emergency posting to a laboratory in the Northeast for an indeterminate amount of time. She has requested that Shevek be posted nearby, but the Divlab will not honor this request until Shevek requests it as well. Another letter on the table, from Sabul, informs Shevek that he will not be reposted to the physics department at the Institute. Filled with disappointment and feeling as if he has nowhere to go and nothing to do, Shevek lies down to sleep in a fit of despair.

The next morning Shevek runs into his next-door neighbor, a greedy woman who has long coveted Shevek and Takver's corner apartment. Learning that Takver has left on a work posting, the neighbor asks whether Shevek will be staying in the unit, hoping she can move in herself. The neighbor implies that perhaps Takver wanted to leave—otherwise, she asks, why would she have left behind such a great room?

At the dining hall, Shevek runs into his old neighbor Desar. Desar informs him that there has been a reorganizing at the Institute, and staff have been cut back. Shevek wonders if the drought is serving to make Anarresti priorities clear again, and scour out the "sick spots [and] sluggish organs" in the body of Anarresti society.

Shevek goes looking for Sabul, and finds him in his office. Sabul says that things at the Institute are not going well, and that it is a bad time for intellectuals. Shevek asks if any letters or communications relating to their most recent book came back from Urras, but Sabul says that there have been none. Sabul accuses Shevek of doing work that is not functional throughout the course of his career, and urges him to face the fact that in the midst of the drought there is "no physics to be done." Shevek will not be reposted to the Institute due to the "irrelevant nature of [his] research," and Sabul has not recommended him for a teaching post anywhere else, unable to see the use in it—the only worthwhile jobs now are those working toward the easing of the drought and the prevention of famine.

Shevek and Takver pass like ships in the night. They miss each other due to the effects of their society's difficulties handling the drought—while Shevek took a long time getting home, he did not realize that Takver was traveling, simultaneously perhaps, farther and farther away from Abbenay.



Shevek is devastated by the dual pains of Takver's departure and yet another setback in his professional life. All of the hope he had felt and all the joy he toasted to just a few months ago seems to have disappeared as solidarity has given way once again to a profound sense of isolation and aloneness.



Shevek's disappointment and isolation are compounded by his neighbor's prying. She plants the insidious idea that Takver has no allegiance to Shevek or their partnership, and left without waiting for him. This worsens Shevek's feelings of sadness and despair.



Shevek's encounter with Desar confirms the fact that Shevek's branch of work has been rendered completely irrelevant by the state of emergency the drought has created on Anarres.



In this climactic encounter with Sabul, Shevek expresses his frustration with his selfish, unhelpful mentor, and Sabul berates Shevek for persisting in a line of work and research which everyone told him time and time again had no clear benefit to Anarresti society. The drought has made things hard on everyone, but Shevek—who, like his mother, always placed his work first—has been forced out of that which he has dedicated his life to by the unexpected worsening of circumstances and the threat of famine.



Shevek leaves Sabul's office and goes downtown to the Divlab to request a posting near Takver. The clerk, though, tells Shevek that there are no postings in that region, which is remote and obscure. Shevek debates whether he should go to the Northeast anyway to be with Takver, though without a useful job, or whether he should submit himself for another posting. He asks the clerk if there are any famine-prevention postings that require math, and she offers to post him to a work-coordinating position in the Southwest—about as far away from Takver's posting as one could get. Nevertheless, Shevek accepts it, and the clerk posts him to the office in the Dust indefinitely.

Devastated by what he sees as the end of his physics career and the haunting fear that Takver has left him not out of necessity but out of lack of love motivates Shevek to take a position far away in the remote and arid desert. He is going to be doing work to prevent the famine—work that will benefit his fellow Odonians—but he seems utterly miserable, and yet compelled to sink as far into that misery as he can.



CHAPTER 9

The morning after Ve'a's party, Shevek is awakened by nearby chapel bells. He feels sick and shaky, and even after a long bath he still feels vile and miserable. He has never shamed himself as badly as he did the night before, and now "look[s] at his [entire] life in the light of shame."

Shevek knows that he has indulged the very values of luxury and excess that he loathes, and feels as if his whole life has been rearranged by the shame he feels in the wake of having done so. With narrative symmetry, Le Guin aligns the stories of Shevek's "rock bottom" in both the past (being divided from Takver and going to work in the Dust) and the present (his debaucherous and aggressive night with Ve'a).



On Anarres, doing his physics research—the work Shevek was called to do though it did not benefit Anarresti society in its time of need—was a rebellion in and of itself. On Urras, however, this act of rebellion is a luxury. Being a physicist in A-lo serves the State, rather than mankind, society, or truth, as he had hoped to do on Anarres. Shevek realizes that A-lo owns him now, and there is no hope for bargaining with the all-powerful State for the good of his people. Shevek has made a mistake in coming to Urras, he realizes—one that will haunt him, perhaps, for the rest of his life.

Realizing how deeply he has erred in coming to Urras, thinking he could best the Urrasti systems which sought to imprison him from the moment he arrived, Shevek considers all he left behind on Anarres and all he has potentially ruined by being naïve, prideful, and easily susceptible to the allure of praise, luxury, and individualistic satisfaction.



Shevek resolves to no longer do physics for the good of the loti state, and wonders if they will let him go home if he stops working. As he thinks about this, he begins to long for Anarres. He realizes that the State will not let him go as he has not "paid his way" by delivering the General Temporal Theory, and nor is there anywhere to run. Shevek sits in his room, wondering where to go, when suddenly there is a knock at the door.

Shevek has worked himself into a hole. His one bargaining chip with the loti is the General Temporal Theory, which he now feels he cannot deliver to them by any means lest they use it to further the destruction of their world and the larger galaxy—but without giving it over, he is trapped on Urras.



Efor comes in with Shevek's breakfast and sets it down. As he leaves, Pae comes in to check on Shevek. Pae, seeing newspapers on the table, laments that they will not be able to show Shevek the rest of Urras with all the unrest abroad: loti and Thuvian forces have clashed in Benbili, and are now fighting. Pae updates Shevek with the latest news: A-Io has "liberated" the capital of Benbili and plans to reinstall their military dictator, but Thu still holds Benbili's two eastern provinces. The Thuvian army and the loti army will continue fighting their proxy war in Benbili, so as not to bring "barbarism" within the borders of A-Io.

Pae explains that because the country is at war, some "restrictions" will soon come into effect—travel will be limited, publishing papers will take longer, and Shevek will be prevented from leaving the University campus without permission from the Chancellor. Pae excuses himself, but before leaving, asks Shevek if he has seen an article in a Space Research Foundation paper—an engineer has developed plans for something called an ansible, an instantaneous communication device. According to the engineer's research, if a temporalist can work out the necessary equations, engineers will be able to build a device and put it to use perhaps within weeks.

After Pae leaves, Shevek tells Efor to turn away any visitors and tell them he is hard at work. Shevek knows he cannot share what he does not have, and so he goes to work on filling in the cracks in the General Temporal Theory. For days, Shevek works and refuses visitors, staring at his calculations and waiting for a breakthrough. One afternoon Shevek sits alone, thinking about Pae. Shevek sees Pae as his enemy, though it was Pae who gave Shevek the translations of alien Terran work on relativity which could potentially be essential to finalizing the temporal theory. Shevek finds it ironic that he has obtained what he needed for his research not from a friend, mentor, or brother, but from an enemy.

As Shevek considers Terran theories of relativity, he experiences a major breakthrough in his own work, and realizes that he will soon be able to complete the temporal theory, which he now sees as overwhelmingly simple and clear. Shevek is joyful and yet overcome with fear—his life is at last fulfilled, and he is full of an exceedingly strange feeling. As the moment passes and Shevek regains calm, he lets the moment go by and does not attempt to possess it.

Hearing the news of the worsening conflict abroad from Pae cements Shevek's realization that the loti elite have an unassailable wealth of power and control over the world around them. They are now waging a war against their ideological enemies, the Thuvians, with no regard for how the conflict affects the already imperiled state of Benbili.



The worsening conflict in Benbili has allowed the scientists at the University to conveniently enforce a stricter set of restrictions on Shevek, which are really borne out of their fear over the close call when he went out to Nio Esseia. Pae asks Shevek if he has heard about the ansible (an important recurring device in other works by Le Guin) perhaps as a method of spurring him to get to work—in the last chapter, Pae and Oiie shared suspicions that Shevek would never deliver the General Temporal Theory.



As Shevek gears up to complete the General Temporal Theory, he is inspired to complete it for his own satisfaction. Symbolically, one of the major texts that has informed his work was given to him by someone he is opposed to in almost every way—Shevek's journey has only been made possible through hardship after hardship, and this theory that is his life's work is no different.



Shevek again reminds himself not to fall into the traps of possession. His life's work is finally complete, and everything he has ever wanted is right in front of him, but he has learned enough to know that neither the theory nor the moment in which it was at last born are his exclusively. He is gaining wisdom, and with it a detachment that seems like the ultimate Odonian ideal.



Shevek paces around his room, marveling at how now that he has “seen the foundations of the universe,” he can see little difference between Urras and Anarres. There are no more abysses, no more **walls**, and no more exiles. Shevek goes to bed and sleeps for ten hours, and then awakes thinking of equations that might express the breakthrough he has experienced. That afternoon he goes to class, and then to dinner, and then comes back to his room and works. For eight days thereafter, he spends at least twelve hours a day at his desk, often turning his eyes to the window and looking up at Anarres, the Moon.

In the morning, Efor brings Shevek breakfast. Shevek is running a fever, and Efor suggests calling a doctor. Shevek refuses, and Efor offers to tell visitors that Shevek is still hard at work. Shaky, weak, and panicky, Shevek has become afraid of Pae and Oiie, and paranoid that the police will raid his room to take the General Temporal Theory. Efor tells Shevek that Shevek can trust him, then brings him a glass of water and leaves, shutting and locking the door.

Over the next few days Efor cares for Shevek, bringing him food and water and helping to lower his fever. Shevek tells Efor he should have been a doctor, and asks if he ever works with the sick. Efor says he doesn't—he doesn't want to get mixed up in the business of hospitals and “die in one of them pest-holes.” Efor says that lower-class hospitals are as old and filthy as a “trashman's ass-hole.” He reveals that he had a daughter die in a rat-infested hospital, and that though Efor once hoped to be an army medic, he was drafted as an orderly instead. As Efor continues to tell Shevek about his past, Shevek has trouble picturing the horrors of extreme poverty, though they are seemingly second-nature to Efor.

Efor tells Shevek to get some rest, but Shevek insists he is not tired. Efor asks Shevek if things are different on Anarres. Shevek concedes that they are: no one is ever out of work, and nobody ever goes hungry while another person eats. He describes the great famine, though, and admits that it is “not all milk and honey on Anarres.” Efor retorts that at least on Anarres there are no owners.

Shevek's breakthrough has allowed him to see that though Urras and Anarres profess their differences, they are actually connected by something very deep—the very foundations of time and space. Shevek has successfully accomplished his life's goal of “unbuilding walls,” though there is much work left to do to bring down the physical, political, and intellectual boundaries that still separate the two worlds.



As Shevek closes in on completing the theory, he fears that Pae, Oiie, and the loti state will take all he has been working towards. Efor, sensing the delicate state Shevek is in, agrees to care for him and look out for him, and it is through Efor's goodness that Shevek is able to focus on his work rather than his fears.



As Efor tells Shevek about the horrible things he has seen throughout his lifetime, Shevek realizes that things on Urras are worse than he ever imagined. Though he has seen through the fabric of the universe and understood that there are not “walls” between their societies, there is still, in a very real sense, a deep division that Shevek now knows he must remedy. It is not enough to rest on his laurels and his completed theory—he must take action to ensure the boundaries he has theoretically broken are brought down in the physical world as well.



Even though Shevek still remembers the pain of Anarres's flaws and the misery of its dark times, he sees through Efor's eyes the fact that Anarres still represents a beacon of hope and a dream of freedom, equality, and solidarity for so many disenfranchised Urrasti.



The next evening, Atro calls on Shevek. He warns Shevek against wearing himself out by working too hard, and updates him on the war in Benbili—it has become “a large-scale operation.” When Shevek asks if loti approve of the war, Atro replies that it doesn’t matter—A-lo is fighting for its status as a world power, and would not let popular opinion stand in its way. The poor—the people who must fight in loti wars—are “used to mass conscription,” and Atro argues that war is “what they’re for.” Shevek accuses A-lo of reaching the heights of power by “climbing up on a pile of dead children,” and Atro accuses Shevek of being soft, and as an Odonian refusing to consider “the virile side of life, blood and steel [and] love of the flag.”

After Atro leaves, Efor comes to collect Shevek’s dinner tray. Shevek hands Efor a slip of paper—on it is written the question, “Is there a microphone in this room?” Efor looks toward the fireplace. Shevek asks—again by note—if there is a microphone in the bedroom, and Efor shakes his head. The two of them file into the bedroom and then the bathroom, where they run the water and begin to speak freely. Shevek shows Efor the note he found in his coat pocket which asked him to “join with his brothers,” and asks Efor if he knows where it came from. Efor says he knows who it came from. Shevek asks how he can get to the sender, but Efor tells him it is “dangerous business.”

Shevek begs Efor to tell him where to go and who to ask for. Efor tells Shevek that attempting to run away is a trap—Shevek will never be able to hide on the streets of A-lo. Efor says he has been approached many times by members of the unpropertied classes who want to recruit Shevek to their cause, but Efor has attempted to protect Shevek from getting involved in any trouble, as he has come to like him a great deal after working for him for eight months. Efor wants to Shevek to be able to go home freely, and escape from the “prison” of Urras.

Shevek tells Efor that he cannot return to Anarres until he meets the people searching for him. Efor tells Shevek to seek out Tuio Maedda in Joking Lane, at the grocery in Old Town. Shevek is forbidden from leaving campus, but Efor suggests that if he takes a taxi he might be able to escape anonymously. Efor gives Shevek some money, calls him a taxi, and tells him the driver will be at the back door of the dormitory in five minutes. Shevek asks Efor if Efor will be blamed when Shevek’s absence is noticed, but Efor vows to cover for Shevek for as long as he can.

Atro’s rabid nationalism and complete disregard for the common people of A-lo has been there all along, but now Shevek finally sees it out in the open. Shevek looked up to Atro for so many years as a young physicist back on Anarres, and this idolization has caused him to overlook much of what is dangerous about Atro. Now Shevek finally speaks up, and is horrified to discover at last to true depths of Atro’s cruelty.



Shevek realizes the madness of the people who have been sheltering him after Atro reveals his love of war and his destructive sense of nationalism. Shevek knows that the only person he can trust now is Efor, and has finally learned enough distrust to realize that he is being monitored at all times—nowhere is safe, but he must try to find a place that will be nonetheless.



Efor wants the best for Shevek—despite the differences between them, Efor knows that Shevek is good, and has the potential to do much good on Urras. Efor proves himself to be different from everyone else who wanted to use Shevek for what he could offer them—though Efor was approached many times and asked to recruit Shevek to a cause, he never wanted to infringe upon Shevek’s safety or his freedom.



Efor supports Shevek’s escape from the university, and vows to do everything in his power to keep Shevek safe while he pursues his own freedom, and the support of the freedom of the Urrasti people. Efor is the first person on Urras who has shown Shevek true support, altruism, and solidarity. Shevek has been a pawn of the upper classes for a long time, and now finally is going to go out in search of accomplishing his true mission on Urras: to spread Anarresti ideals and help save those who need saving.



Shevek takes a taxi away from the University, then transfers to a subway train to Old Town. Old Town is dark and dingy, greasy with rain and dilapidated. Shevek asks many people where Joking Lane is, as it is not on any map, but the downtrodden poor of Old Town will not answer him. Shevek continues on, encountering homeless men and beggars and becoming more and more rattled. He stops in a pawn shop, where he tells the proprietor that he is the scientist from Anarres and must get to Joking Lane that evening. The proprietor agrees to take Shevek to the grocery, and the two set out together.

At Tuio Maedda's grocery store, Shevek is led to a back room where he meets Tuio face to face. Tuio asks Shevek what he is doing here, and Shevek replies that he is looking for help—he escaped from the "jail" of Ieu Eun University in search of the lower classes because they seem like "people who might help each other." Shevek tells Tuio that he has something the State needs—a scientific theory—and that he didn't understand, when he came from Anarres, that any of his ideas would be the property of the state. Shevek wants to get out of Urras, but cannot go home, so he has come to Tuio because Tuio does not need Shevek's science, and perhaps doesn't like the government, either.

Tuio tells Shevek that he will shelter him for the night. Tuio also informs Shevek that an underground Syndicalist-Libertarian faction has planned a demonstration which will take place three days from now, and will protest the draft and the wartime rise in taxes. Tuio says that the city needs a strike, and that their movement could use an Odo.

Tuio tells Shevek that Anarresti society has been a beacon of hope to the Urrasti lower classes for generations—a common good-luck wish is "May you get reborn on Anarres." Anarres is an "idealist's dream," and Tuio explains that the reason Shevek has been so well-hidden at the university is because Shevek himself is an idea—and a dangerous one at that. One of the girls who works in the grocery pipes in to say that Odo was only an idea, but Shevek is proof. Tuio asks Shevek to join their nonviolent demonstration, and Shevek agrees to be of use however he can be. He offers to write a statement in the local paper, and Tuio says that they'll get his words in the newspaper—they'll hide him from sight or harm, but let every man in A-Io know that Shevek has joined the workers' revolution.

As Shevek sees what true life on Urras is like, he understands the enormous plight of the unpropertied classes and the lack of societal support on Urras. On Anarres, no one is supposed to go hungry while someone else eats—here on Urras there is no sense of that solidarity, and people live in hunger and in squalor while the upper classes enjoy unimaginable wealth and decadence.



Shevek has escaped to Tuio because he has no other options. Shevek knows that Tuio can offer him shelter and solidarity, and feels that there must be something he can give Tuio in return—at the very least the gift of his presence. Shevek now knows what he means to the loti people, and the ways in which the University has tried to keep him from realizing the change he could make in A-Io. For once it is not Shevek's work as a physicist that determines his worth, but the simple fact of his being.



Tuio wants to use Shevek as their movement's Odo—he wants to lift Shevek up as an example of the best kind of person, a person who is free of egoism, free of desire for material goods, and committed to brotherhood and freedom.



Hearing what Anarres represents to the oppressed people of Urras moves Shevek deeply. He realizes how important his involvement is to them, and offers to go above and beyond in support of their movement. Despite its flaws, he realizes, the idea of Anarres—and Odonian society in practice—are true marvels that the rest of the universe could look to as a model of what life and society can be. Anarres represents the potential of freedom realized, and Shevek sees this now through eyes unclouded by cynicism or egoism.



Shevek hides out in attics and basements over the next several days, and Tuio brings him copies of the papers that have published his manifesto so that he can look it over. He does not read it closely, however, and instead spends most of his time puzzling over the writings in his personal notebook, which contains coded equations for the General Temporal Theory. Looking at them now, though, Shevek barely even understands them.

At the demonstration, Shevek is grateful to be outside after having been locked away for so many days. He is thrilled by the thousands of people in the crowd marching and singing together, and is moved to tears by the rebels' passion.

A hundred thousand people or more are in the Capitol Square for the protest—more people, Shevek realizes, than live in all of Abbenay. Shevek stands with Tuio Maedda and his group on the steps of the Directorate, and delivers a speech. He speaks of suffering and brotherhood, poverty and humility, and assures the gathered poor and downtrodden that though they have nothing to give, and have only empty hands, neither on Anarres do the people have anything of their own. He tells the gathered rebels that “if it is Anarres [they] want, [they] must come to it with empty hands.” The revolutionaries must be the revolution, he says. As his speech draws to a close, police helicopters draw near.

The helicopters begin to fire, focusing on the people standing on or near the steps of the Directorate. The crowd is quickly full of dead and injured people, and many flee into the Directorate to seek shelter. Soldiers arrive, though, marching up the steps and shooting blindly, striking even the already-dead with their bullets.

Shevek drags a man alongside him as he flees Capitol Square. He tells the man to sit down on the steps of a basement entry to a warehouse. Shevek tries the door, but it is locked. Shevek smashes the lock, opens the door, and looks inside—the basement is empty. Shevek helps his companion into the basement and searches for water. When he returns, his companion has fainted, and Shevek examines the man's wound. The man's hand has been nearly blasted off by bullets, and Shevek attempts to wrap the hand. Shevek does not know this man's name, but knows by his white armband that he is a Socialist Worker.

In the light of his new engagement with the workers' movement and the focus of his efforts in helping them, Shevek's work now seems almost unintelligible to him. On Anarres he saw social engagement and obligation as a distraction to his work—but here on Urras, he has realized that work is often the distraction, and that brotherhood and solidarity are just as if not more important.



After so many disappointments on Urras and so much fear that he had undertaken a fool's errand and a suicide mission, Shevek is deeply moved by the displays of solidarity at the demonstration.



The demonstration is a massive show of solidarity, as loti citizens express their desire for freedom, fair treatment, and an end to the influence of the state—all things that Anarres has, and that they want. Shevek is a beacon of hope for them, and encourages them to continue their revolution with open hands, minds, and hearts. At the height of the demonstration's joy, however, state helicopters begin circling over the gathered crowd, signaling the loti people's inescapable relationship with the state that governs them.



The state has perpetrated a devastating act of violence against its own people. There is no freedom on Urras, only subjugation at the hands of the state and the upper classes. The soldiers shooting even at dead bodies symbolizes the state's disregard for—and even active hatred of—its people.



It is Shevek's nature as an Odonian to care for his fellow brothers and sisters, and he adopts this stranger from the demonstration into his care despite not knowing the man's name or anything at all about him. In the mad scramble for shelter, Shevek breaks the lock on a door, representing his constant mission of breaking down barriers and passing over and through high walls and locked doors, both literally and metaphorically.



Shevek tended to such wounds during his time at the mills in the Southwest, back on Anarres, but there was always a surgeon to operate—Shevek cannot help this man any more, and decides to go for help. On the street, though, a man warns Shevek that police are approaching, and Shevek returns to the basement. After a few hours, Shevek looks out the window and sees soldiers shouting orders to one another. He recalls Atro, months ago, explaining military organization—Shevek had exclaimed that it was a “coercive mechanism,” but Atro had waxed poetic about the worth of warfare. Now, Shevek understands why the army is organized as it is—its only purpose is to kill large quantities of unarmed men and women. Shevek’s companion lies still but moaning, and Shevek, unable to bear the man’s pain, hushes him.

Shevek, having finally witnessed firsthand the mechanism of the military at work, understands the brutality of its design and its sole purpose as an agent of death and destruction. Shevek’s comrade’s deep wounds, which Shevek cannot tend to, mirror the deep wounds in the workers’ movement and Shevek’s realization that he can no longer “tend” to it—he has done all he can, and as the mortal wounds take hold Shevek is isolated in his ineffectiveness just as he was back on Anarres.



Shevek stays with his companion for three nights, during which they hear sporadic fighting. Shevek considers going outside to the police, but his companion warns him that they will only get shot. On the third night, Shevek’s companion dies as the two of them lie side by side for warmth. When Shevek wakes in the morning, his companion has gone stiff with death, and the streets outside are silent.

The revolution has been brought to its knees, and Shevek sees and understands for the first time the destructive power that comes with the amassing of wealth and control. The silence in the streets mirrors the silencing of the socialist workers’ revolution, and the silencing of Shevek’s voice as a beacon of hope for the Urrasti.



CHAPTER 10

Shevek has long been stationed in the Southwest of Anarres, and now he is being taken across the desert by a truck driver—the man has been running people across the desert for the last several years and enjoys the work, though occasionally his rig breaks down in the arid desert. The men discuss the advantages and joys of partnership, and Shevek reveals that he has been separated from Takver, who is still stationed in the northwest, for over four years.

Shevek is approaching the end of a journey—“true voyage is return,” in the words of Odo, and Shevek is returning to Takver after having spent several years stationed very far away from her.



The driver asks Shevek where he has been working, and Shevek tells him “Grand Valley.” The driver solemnly acknowledges that he has heard about what happened at Grand Valley, and looks at Shevek “with the respect due a survivor.” While the mills there were running during the famine, many workers died of hunger. As the men discuss the looting and raiding that has gone on in the desert, it becomes clear that the famine has taken a devastating toll on Anarresti society. Shevek’s job at the mills was “making lists of who should starve,” though on Anarres nobody is supposed to ever go hungry while one of their brothers or sisters eats. Shevek says that after he quit, unable to stand the pain of the work anymore, someone else took over for him—there is “always somebody willing to make lists” now, as individuals posted to those jobs receive rations.

A lot has happened during the four-year time-jump in the narrative. It is clear from this exchange between Shevek and his driver that the famine worsened and became an extreme event. The famine could be seen as a physical mirror for the intellectual, spiritual famine that Shevek feels Odonianism is going through—as his ideology has come up against major pillars of Anarresti society, he is only able to see the ways in which his world is feeble and lacking, and Le Guin is perhaps using the catastrophic event of a famine to symbolize how bad things have become on this remote desert Moon.



Shevek arrives in a city called Chakar at late dusk. He approaches a domicile and enters it, examining the list of residents. One of the apartments is registered to Takver, and someone named Sherut. Shevek knocks on Takver's door, and she answers it—they embrace one another, and Takver invites him inside. A "serious, watchful" child is in the room, and Takver introduces her as Sadik—this is their child, but Sadik is frightened of Shevek, and clings to Takver's legs. All three start crying—Shevek and Takver are overjoyed to see one another, and Sadik is uncertain of what is going on.

Shevek sits on the bed and wipes his eyes, and Sadik offers him her handkerchief. Shevek examines Takver—she has lost two teeth over the course of the years, and her skin and hair have grown dull, but he notices these changes "from the standpoint of years of intimacy and years of longing." Takver tells Shevek that though she likes the town and she and Sadik have been happy here, she feels her work is not of great consequence, and she would like to return to Abbenay. She asks Shevek if he has received a reposting—he says he hasn't checked, and hasn't asked for one since he has been on the road from the desert for a full decad.

It is Sadik's bedtime, and Takver and Shevek walk her to the children's dormitory, where she sleeps each night, though she is only four. As they return to Takver's room, she tells Shevek that the effects of the famine were not so bad in the northeast—children were fed, and wild holum grew abundantly, so nobody starved. Takver's Syndicate at the laboratory wanted her to give Sadik up to the nursery and focus on her work, and then accused her of being a propertarian when she refused. Takver left that posting soon after the tangle with her coworkers and came to Chakar, where she and Sadik have been living since.

Takver regrets not having refused her initial posting away from Abbenay, but Shevek reassures her and urges her not to linger on the past. They embrace, grateful to be reunited at last. After eating dinner, they return to Takver's room and make love. At dawn, Takver wakes up and watches Shevek as he sleeps, marveling at the distances they have crossed for one another.

Shevek's emotional reunion with Takver and their daughter Sadik is the return that has proven to be the "true voyage" of his recent life. Shevek has always found freedom rather than constraint in partnership and family life, and has now been restored to that sense of freedom after four long years isolated in the famine-stricken desert.



Though it seems as if Takver has had a difficult time these last few years and has weathered a lot, Shevek looks on the changes that have manifested in her lovingly rather than with judgement. Again, a recurring theme throughout the novel is the physical manifestation of psychological or symbolic shifts—Takver's physical appearance, then, mirrors the changes that have no doubt taken place within her as well.



Takver, too, has experienced difficulties and has grown to question the Odonian values that are seemingly becoming more and more restrictive, and less and less conducive to achieving any kind of happiness or fulfillment. Takver has been accused of egoism and selfishness for the simple "crime" of wanting to retain a relationship with her precious daughter, and moved on from her relatively cushy posting because of it, despite not knowing what kind of conditions would await her elsewhere.



Takver and Shevek and their unlikely, somewhat nontraditional bond have withstood the tests of time, distance, and hardship. Their commitment to one another is the one thing that hasn't faltered or changed, and a symbol of the transformative, loving power of true compassion and solidarity—a kind of solidarity that has not yet been achieved on Anarres as a whole, but that the two of them have been able to cultivate together.



Takver puts in her notice at work, but still works long shifts even though the drought has broken. Shevek, mildly sick with a chronic Dust cough, spends his days sleeping and taking walks, often stopping by the learning center to watch Sadik play. After school, Takver and Sadik and Shevek spend their evenings together before Sadik returns to her dormitory. The days are peaceful, and Shevek feels he is living in a “time outside time.”

Takver and Shevek discuss Sadik, as well as their childhood friends, on their nights alone. They reminisce about Tirin, who is now out of the asylum and is writing and rewriting the same play he was originally “punished” for putting on. Takver says that Tirin should have refused his multiple labor postings, as she should have refused her work posting to the Northeast. Shevek says that because Anarresti believe they are free, they do whatever they are told, believing they are acting of free will when really they are just following the orders of the PDC. Bedap was right, Shevek says—social conscience has overwhelmed individual conscience to the point that Anarresti are no longer anarchists, but obedient cogs in a flawed machine.

Takver draws parallels between Tirin’s persecution for artistic expression and Shevek’s for “unproductive” research. Shevek looks back on his own capitulation to Sabul’s “authoritarianism,” and argues that though his book was printed—the right end—it was achieved through “the wrong means.” When it comes to the book, Shevek says, though he and Takver believed they were actively choosing to follow the path of least resistance to publication, they had actually let “convention, moralism, [and] fear of social ostracism” guide their decision making. Shevek resolves to never succumb to that impulse again.

Shevek expresses his desire to return to Abbenay, with Takver and Sadik beside him, and start a printing syndicate in order to print his own unedited theories as well as “whatever else [they] like”—Tirin’s scandalous play, for example. Shevek resolves to spend his life unbuilding **walls**.

That night, after Takver falls asleep, Shevek lies awake. He reflects on how over the last four years, he has learned the strength of his own will, and has recognized its irrepressible nature. He has reconciled this drive with his Odonian values, and now has realized that his sense of “primary responsibility towards his work” is a force that can engage him with his fellow brothers and sisters, not estrange him from them. He believes he is obligated to carry out his sense of responsibility to his work.

Shevek has found peace, happiness, and above all freedom in the arms of his family. He feels free from the constraints of time and societal expectations alike, and revels in this timeless and utopic period.



Shevek and Takver have much to catch up on, and one of the largest issues they must work through together is the growing influence of the PDC and the dark flip side of social conscience. Responsibility to one another should be a source of freedom on Anarres, but something is wrong, and the spirit of anarchism and intrepidity upon which Anarres was founded has been lost and replaced by blind obedience and fear of being called out as an egoizer or a propertarian.



Shevek and Takver reflect on the ways in which they have been complicit in perpetuating the harmful centralization of power and coherence of “authoritarianism” on their supposedly utopic anarchist planet. They have capitulated to the ideals which have long been seen as the most harmful to any society, and regret both the failure of utopian ideals and their participation in allowing their society’s anarchist roots to rot and wither.



Shevek’s resolution to change his circumstances and his life in pursuit of a reorganization of Anarresti society shows his true love and devotion to its ideals. He believes that the kind of freedom Anarres promises is still possible, but knows that things must change for it to be realized.



Shevek has long been told that his work is selfish, egoistic, unproductive, and detrimental to the furthering of Odonian society and Anarresti collectivism. He now realizes that his work does have value, and that it isn’t egoistic or propertarian to make that simple claim. He knows that his work can help the Anarresti, and resolves to push forward to that goal no matter what kind of resistance he meets with along the way.



CHAPTER 11

The Urrasti Council of World Governments has had its seat in Roddared, the old capital of Avan Provice, for the entire three hundred years of its existence. The city is just an hour by trail from Nio Esseia. The Terran embassy is also located in Roddared, and Shevek arrives there at seven in the morning and asks to see the Terran ambassador. He is told by a clerk that the embassy does not open until eight—the ambassador is at breakfast, and Shevek must make an appointment to see her.

Shevek remains steadfast, insisting on seeing the ambassador right away. While the clerk dials a telephone, two men enter the lobby from another part of the building, and Shevek runs around the reception desk toward them, begging them for help. One man takes Shevek's arm and leads him into an office. He asks Shevek if he is one of the strikers from Nio Esseia, and Shevek introduces himself as a scientist from Anarres. The man asks Shevek if he is seeking asylum, but before Shevek can answer, the man whisks him away further into the embassy.

Many people descend upon Shevek, removing his bloody coat and tending to him. The men and women surrounding him tell him that he is on Terran soil, and is safe. Shevek is perplexed by the Terrans' strange, "childlike" features. Exhausted, Shevek lies down, still protesting that he wants to see the Ambassador. One of the women standing above him informs him that she is the Ambassador—her name is Keng, and they will speak after he rests. Shevek thinks the woman's voice sounds like Takver's, and he cries out for his partner before falling asleep.

After sleeping for two days, Shevek is fed, dressed, and shown into the Ambassador's office. The Ambassador, Keng, apologizes for the fact that the two must speak in lotic—the only common tongue they share, though it is foreign to both of them. Keng informs Shevek that people from Anarres have been radioing the loti government and asking urgently to speak with Shevek. The loti are embarrassed, as they do not know where Shevek is "officially"—though Keng informs Shevek that because there are many loti clerks and secretaries working at the embassy, the government is probably aware on some level of his whereabouts.

In the wake of having witnessed the Urrasti perpetrate extreme violence against innocent rebels, Shevek seeks out the help of a foreign embassy. He is no longer torn between two worlds—he is excluded from both, and now must turn to outside help in order to survive.



Shevek is clearly desperate for help, and deeply shaken by his experiences out in the cities of Urras. The Terrans are more than willing to help, bringing Shevek deeper into the embassy to shield him and offer him help, support, and solidarity.



Shevek is traumatized and exhausted, and bewildered by the strange race of people surrounding him. He misses home and Takver, and is desperate to escape the corrupt and dangerous planet he has entrapped himself upon. Terrans are beings from Earth in the future, so the fact that Shevek finds their features "childlike" raises the question of what all the "alien" humans (like Shevek himself) of the book look like.



The Anarrestis and the Terran can communicate only in the language of a planet that has sought to oppress and best both of them. The all-powerful loti state, though, has been tested as it has not been in a hundred years by Shevek's disappearance—an embarrassment to their consolidation of power and strength, and a symbol of their inability to truly stamp out anarchism despite horrible efforts to do so.



Because the Terran embassy is to the Council of World Governments and not the nation of A-Io, Keng says, Shevek brings no risk or burden upon the Terrans by seeking refuge with them. She tells Shevek that if he needs to get a message to Anarres, they can easily arrange a conversation with his home planet using a transmitter onboard their ship, which is Hainish—Hain and Terra work together peacefully.

Keng tells Shevek that she heard his demonstration speech on the clandestine radio, and was moved by his words. She asks him how he escaped the strike, and how he made it to the embassy. Shevek reveals that he traveled under the backseat of a taxi—some people, presumably fellow revolutionaries, commandeered a cab in order to get him to safety.

Keng admits that she knows almost nothing about Anarres—she only knows what the Urrasti have told her. She believes Anarres to be a “rather unimportant [but] interesting experiment,” and wants Shevek to tell her more about it. Furthermore, she wonders why the loti government, knowing such unrest exists just under their noses on their own planet, would bring Shevek—a symbol of anarchy in practice—to Urras.

Shevek tells Keng that he was meant to be kept away from the unrest, confined to the University among scholars and the rich. He also tells Keng that his research was going to be stolen by the government so that they could use it to threaten Terra and Hain with “the annihilation of space.” Shevek explains that what the loti government ultimately wants is instantaneous transfer of matter across space, or transilience. With the help of Shevek’s equations, he admits, the telephone-like ansible will be possible, though transilience remains far-off according to his calculations. Though men and matter cannot leap the great gaps between worlds yet, ideas may soon be able to. Keng excitedly remarks that the ansible would change the lives of billions, and would make a league of worlds possible.

Keng provides Shevek with refuge and with the first opportunity to reconnect with the Anarresti that he has had since his arrival on Urras. As opposed to the Urrasti and the Anarresti, who are engaged in a constant conflict of ideals, other planets in their galaxy provide each other with support, innovation, and peaceful exchanges of ideals and resources. The Dispossessed is part of Le Guin’s “Hainish Cycle,” named after the benevolent Hainish race mentioned here.



Shevek has relied on the support of others to get him to safety. As the most wanted man on Urras, his freedom is greatly compromised, and the value he represents to the workers is equaled only by the threat he presents to the loti government.



Keng is puzzled by both Urras and Anarres, unsure of what the answer is to either planet’s politics and naïve to the deep ideological rifts between the twin Moons. Though she knows little about Anarres, she does know that its anarchist values align directly with those of the maligned and persecuted Urrasti workers’ movement.



Shevek reveals that he was all along a pawn of the loti government, brought to Urras to work for them in their crusade against the other planets of the galaxy. It can be inferred that the loti thought that the possibility of using Shevek’s brilliance to achieve a theory that would support transilience was worth the risk of bringing an anarchist Anarresti to live among them, though they took every precaution they could to keep him locked in an ivory tower, so to speak, far from all the unrest. The ansible, only mentioned here in theory, becomes an important part of Le Guin’s work and is later used by other science fiction writers as well.



Shevek explains to Keng why he came to this world: he came for the sake of his idea—to learn it, teach it, and share in it. On Anarres, which is cut off from the rest of the galaxy, he could not finish his work—and even if he could, no Anarresti saw any use in it. Now he has finished the work, though he has not written it out yet, but the ideas in his head are not the only ones important to him. The idea of his society is also important, and he refuses to let the proprietarians buy the truth from him. Shevek wants to give his idea as a gift—to Terra, Hain, and all the other worlds, so that it may only be used for common good. He refuses to serve any master, he says, and will not waste any more time on greed, profiteering, and lies.

Keng asks Shevek about Anarres, and about why he left. Shevek says that he left because he was frustrated by his people's refusal to look outward. He now realizes he was wrong to leave—there is nothing on Urras that the Anarresti need. When the Odonians left nearly two hundred years ago with empty hands, Shevek says, they were right to do so—there is nothing on Urras, he believes, but lies, weapons, and misery. There is no way to act right on Urras, and no way to truly do good to another. Urras, he says, is Hell.

Keng tells Shevek that to her and her fellow Terrans, Urras is “the kindest, most various, most beautiful of all the worlds, [and] the world that comes [closest] to Paradise,” despite all the pain and hardship present in it. Keng reveals that her home planet of Earth is now a ruin, “spoiled by the human species.” Because Terrans could not control their appetites or their violence, they destroyed themselves and their planet. The Hainish, the altruists of the universe, have helped Terrans to rebuild and survive, giving them the gifts of ships that allowed them to leave their ruined world. To the Terrans, stripped of their home planet, Urras means Paradise. Shevek asks what Anarres would mean to the Terrans, and Keng replies that she does not know—her people have no chance at Anarres anyway, sealed off from the galaxy as it is.

Shevek tells Keng that she does not understand time. Haunted by a wasted past and fearful of an impossible future, Terrans focus on “nothing but the rich, real, stable present, the moment now.” The present cannot be possessed, however, Shevek argues—the present is not stable by any means. Shevek attempts to force Keng to see the mutability of time and the coexistence of past, present, and future, but Keng does not understand what he is saying, and Shevek does not attempt to explain himself any further.

Shevek, too, was engaging in a game of risk-versus-reward. He knew that the risks of travelling to Urras were great, but that the reward would be so much larger than himself—he knew that his theory, once complete, would accomplish Keng's goal of enabling a “league of worlds” to come to fruition. Now, his illusions about Urras and its machinations stripped away, he stands on the precipice of fulfilling that goal, and just needs Keng's participation.



Shevek's journey has hardened him to the reality that utopia is not consistently possible on any world. He thought that Urras would have the missing piece to his life, and naively believed that he would find peace, acceptance, and even glory on this planet. Now, he has realized that there is nothing on Urras that is worth the pain and suffering that exists there, and longs to abandon the Hell he has found himself in.



Keng, whose planet has been decimated and ravaged by the neglect of its own people (showing Le Guin's bleak vision of Earth's future), sees the bounty of Urras as a paradise. She is willing to take the bad with the good, and looks to Urras as a beacon in the universe despite knowing all the subterfuge and evil they are attempting to spread elsewhere. This is perhaps also the case because Urras resembles Earth's society more than Anarres does. Shevek seems to want to explain to her that Urras is not the beacon—Anarres is—but because Keng knows nothing of Anarres, she cannot see the potential in it that Shevek can.



Shevek is very isolated in this moment. He is unable to fully get through to Keng and force her to see the impossibility of utopia and the ruinous nature of Urras, and cannot explain to her the fallacy of assuming that because Urras is alive, rich, and bountiful in the present moment, it will always be that way (which was also presumably the mistake other Terrans made that led to the destruction of their planet). His frustration is so deep that he is unable to express himself, and he shuts down, isolated in his own mind as he always has been.



Keng asks Shevek why it is he came to her in the first place. Shevek tells her that he wants to give her his theory to save it from becoming loti property. He hopes that she will broadcast the equations and give them to physicists all over Urras, as well as those on Hain and throughout the rest of the galaxy. Keng is more than willing to do so, and asks Shevek where it is he plans to go.

Shevek's intentions are pure—he wants to give the galaxy a chance at something amazing and unprecedented, and refuses to be a pawn of the loti any longer. Keng believes in this dream as well, and agrees to aid Shevek, perhaps hoping against hope that a new vision of utopia—or at least of solidarity and freedom—will become possible.



Shevek asks Keng for her help in returning home to Anarres—he does not want to be jailed or killed in Hell. He thinks that being sent home to Anarres would satisfy his own desires as well as the Urrasti's—"dead anarchists make martyrs, but absent ones can be forgotten." Shevek apologizes for not having anything to give the Terrans in return for his theory, and Keng asks if he really thinks he is giving them "nothing." Shevek tells her to weigh his theory against the freedom of one human spirit—he cannot tell which will weigh heavier.

Keng believes that Shevek's theory is priceless in value, and stands to change the universe, but Shevek knows that weighed against the blessing of true, unfettered freedom, it might not measure up. He has come to realize the value of freedom and human life at any cost, and sees that as the most valuable commodity in the whole of the universe. Shevek has gained wisdom in his trials, and is now willing to be truly "empty-handed."



CHAPTER 12

At a PDC meeting, Bedap introduces a project idea from the Syndicate of Initiative, who have—against the recommendation of several Anarresti organizations—been in contact with Urras for twenty decads. Bedap has been fighting against the gathered councilmembers for three years now, but asks if at this meeting they can stop reigniting old quarrels. His syndicate has received an interesting message from the Urrasti country of Benbili—a group called the Odonian Society has reached out to the Anarresti, asking to send people to Anarres as settlers. The PDC is deeply against reopening the planet "to any profiteer who calls himself an Odonian."

In this passage, Bedap goes up against the organization which he claims has created an imbalance of power in Odonian life. He appeals to their values of compassion, freedom, and solidarity when he asks to reopen the planet to refugees from Urras, but the PDC apparently now see any outsiders—any non-Anarresti—as opportunists and profiteers looking to hurt Anarres.



One of Bedap's opponents—a "cool, intelligent" woman named Rulag—asks how the Odonians even propose to get to Anarres. In these meetings, which occur regularly, Rulag opposes the Syndicate of Initiative on each and every issue, but Bedap always respects her clever arguments and occasionally even ends up siding with her due to her cool, convincing point of view.

Bedap admires Rulag, though she is his main opponent on the PDC and the two are frequently engaged in arguments. Because the PDC is not supposed to be a government organization, those who sit on its council toe the line when it comes to power and influence. They cannot control their fellow Anarresti, only offer their opinions—but people then suffer consequences when they don't go along with those opinions.



Bedap has wondered several times since the winter after the famine, when he and Shevek first got together to form their Syndicate, whether the two of them have "set off an uncontrollable chain of events." The Anarresti have been angrier and more opposed to communications with Urras than either Shevek or Bedap thought they would be.

Shevek and Bedap worked together to create the Syndicate of Initiative, whose main "initiative" is communication with Urras. They could not foresee how vehemently opposed their fellow Anarresti would be to their mission of exchanging missives with Urras, and Bedap wonders if he and Shevek are in over their heads.



Bedap tells Rulag that “like good Odonians, [the Benbili would] hitchhike on one of the freighters.” Bedap wonders if the archists on Urras would even let the anarchists leave, and says he is very curious to find out what would happen on both planets if a small group departed Urras for Anarres. Rulag applauds Bedap’s curiosity, but tells him that it is impossible to predict the level of danger, since the Anarresti know so little about what things are really like on Urras. Rulag stands, announcing her intent to give a speech. Bedap notices that as Rulag begins to speak, she continually stares at Shevek, who is seated beside him.

Rulag denounces the Syndicate of Initiative as being against Odonian ideals and says that they are behaving “in the way that archist critics always predicted people would behave in a society without laws: with total irresponsibility towards the society’s welfare.” Rulag believes that if Urrasti come to Anarres, they will dismantle Anarresti society and occupy the planet, ending the Anarresti once and for all.

Bedap argues that sheltering the Urrasti will not make them believe that the experiment of Anarres has failed, but rather will show them it has succeeded, and the Anarresti are now strong enough to face the Urrasti as equals. The argument between Bedap and Rulag goes on and on, but eventually Bedap relents, agreeing that no Urrasti will come to Anarres.

Shevek speaks up and proposes the flip side of the question: what if an Anarresti is sent to Urras? Shevek argues that his journey would not harm or threaten any Anarresti, and that such travel is not forbidden in the Anarresti terms of settlement. Rulag tells Shevek that anyone can leave Anarres, but that if he leaves, he cannot come back. She cites the Terms of the Closure of the Settlement, which states that no one from another planet is allowed past the **wall** of the Port of Anarres. Another member of the council shouts that Bedap and Shevek are traitors to their own planet. The councilmember warns the two of them that if they leave Anarres and then attempt to return, they will be met with justice. Rulag clarifies that the councilmember means violence—and that if there is violence on Anarres, it will be Shevek and Bedap’s fault.

Rulag’s fear of the Urrasti and her desire to keep her people safe nonetheless come off as an extreme and isolationist aversion to sheltering desperate refugees. Bedap notices as she begins speaking that she is focused intently on Shevek, but as he does not know that Rulag is Shevek’s mother, he cannot understand why, and sees her aggression against the two of them as aggression solely against their ideals rather than one tinged by personal drama.



Rulag is deeply suspicious of anyone who is not a native-born Anarresti, and worries about a large Urrasti conspiracy to destabilize and overtake Odonian society (not a wholly unrealistic fear, given what we’ve seen A-lo do in Benbili). She fears that Shevek and Bedap’s behavior—their “egoistic” initiative—reflects poorly on the rest of the Anarresti, and is not the behavior of those who stand in solidarity with their people.



Bedap wants for the PDC to see how opening their doors to the Urrasti is a sign of strength rather than weakness, but the councilmembers are full of fear and caught up in their traditions and power, forgetting their people’s anarchist roots. Bedap eventually caves, having known that his proposal was a long shot anyway.



The tension between Shevek and Rulag is palpable and intense as they argue a major ideological point. Rulag speaks vindictively to Shevek, still wounded by his rejection of her reentry into his life so many years ago. Their personal vendetta conflicts with Shevek’s larger altruistic mission of bridging the gap between Urras and Anarres, and seeking a better way of life for his people through communication with their twin society. Rulag threatens Shevek outright, as she feels that he is threatening the very values of Anarresti society and bringing on pain, violence, and discord rather than revolution and innovation.



Shevek speaks up, stating that their people did not come to Anarres for safety but for freedom, and that since he cannot work in solidarity with his fellows, it has become his duty, and his right, to pursue his work alone. He says that forcing any Anarresti to work in a certain field or with a certain group is tyranny, and the individual must accept no rule—such is the basis of Anarresti society. He believes the time has come to take risks. Rulag responds that Shevek should not involve other Anarresti in his risk-taking, but Shevek remains resolute in his belief that no one has the right to stop him from going. The two look directly at one another, and then both drop their gaze.

Bedap withdraws the topic, and he and Shevek leave the meeting. As they walk out of the building, Bedap disparages Rulag, noting that she seems to have a personal grudge against Shevek. Bedap wonders if he and Shevek have just hardened the opposition to their goal, but Shevek insists that they should send someone off to Urras just to prove their right to act. Shevek heads off to meet Sabul, while Bedap goes over to Shevek and Takver's to help Takver with the new baby, Pilun.

Bedap and Takver talk over a drink of fruit juice, which is no longer being rationed. Takver is thinking of quitting the fish lab where she works—as Shevek's profile in Abbenay has risen, Takver's fellow syndics are coming down harder on her lately. Many people hate her, she confides in Bedap, and some will not even talk to her. Takver is frightened, and fears both disapproval and violence.

Bedap warns Takver that his and Shevek's Syndicate of Initiative had a difficult time at PDC today, and that Rulag threatened the two of them. Takver then reveals that Rulag is Shevek's mother. Takver explains that Shevek feels that something "essential" is missing from him due to Rulag's absence from his childhood. Bedap observes that now it makes sense—it seems like Rulag has been waiting for Shevek to come to a meeting, and speculates that Rulag hates the Syndicate of Initiative so much because of her guilt over abandoning Shevek.

Shevek and Sadik come in. Sadik is ten years old now, and Bedap observes both her and Shevek, for the first time, through the lens of knowing that Rulag is Shevek's mother. Shevek announces that Sabul has told him that the Physics Federation has an autonomous and permanent full-time posting to fill at the institute. "If you can't uproot it, domesticate it," Shevek says, referring to the notion that perhaps the PDC is trying to force him to stay put on Anarres—and get home to dissociate from the Syndicate of Initiative—by dangling a great opportunity in front of him.

The value that holds weight above anything else to Shevek is freedom. He believes that Rulag's threats symbolize her belief that the PDC has power over its citizens, and he feels—like a true Odonian—that any kind of consolidated power has no place on Anarres. He laments the loss of anarchist values, and, after a lifetime of being told that his ideas and initiatives are of no value to Odonian society, is finally fed up and ready to retaliate.



Bedap and Shevek depart the council meeting but do not abandon their hope that their syndicate will be able to successfully bridge the gap between Urras and Anarres. Now that their right to do as they please—a cornerstone of Odonianism—has been threatened, they feel they should proceed just to make a point that they will not be controlled by any individual or organization.



Bedap witnesses firsthand the effects of his and Shevek's Syndicate. Takver is being discriminated against at work, and though freedom of thought, speech, and action supposedly reigns on Anarres, she feels directly threatened by those around her as a result of her partner's actions.



Rulag's vehement opposition to all of the Syndicate of Initiative's actions becomes clear to Bedap as he realizes the depth of the connection between her and Shevek. He sees now that no matter what they do, they will come up against opposition, but that Rulag's motives for keeping their Syndicate from mobilizing or taking initiative are not entirely related to the Syndicate's actual worth.



When Shevek returns home, he brings with him news of even more attempts to control the Syndicate's actions. This time, the PDC—and the Institute—are directly interfering and attempting to exert control over Shevek. This insidious and threatening coherence of power in the name of keeping a free citizen from exercising his rights is deeply troubling to Bedap, Takver, and Shevek.



Takver can't believe that Shevek would even speak to Sabul, who has betrayed him and slandered him so many times. Sabul has been spreading lies that Shevek stole research from him, and also refused to inform Shevek that Shevek won a major Urrasti prize. She asks Shevek what he said to Sabul, and Shevek replies that he told Sabul that he no longer accepts regular work postings in favor of doing his own theoretical work. Sabul countered that Shevek could go on with his research. Takver tells Shevek that if he takes the post he will be allowed to publish his own work autonomously—"the walls are down," she says. Bedap insists, though, that there are only more "walls behind the walls." Shevek tells Bedap that he is not going to leave the Syndicate, and the five of them all head off to dinner.

After dinner and some conversation in the common room of Shevek and Takver's domicile, Bedap and Shevek take Sadik back to her dormitory. At the entrance, though, she stops, and refuses to go inside. Shevek asks her what's wrong, and she tells him that the other children in the dormitory don't like her. They call her "traitor," and disparage Shevek, Bedap, and their Syndicate. Shevek embraces Sadik while she cries, and Bedap leaves the two of them alone, returning to his dorm and lamenting the fact that he does not have a family of his own.

Shevek goes into the dormitory to tell the watchman that Sadik will not be staying the night. He and Sadik return home, and Sadik apologizes for interrupting Shevek and Takver's privacy. Shevek tells her that she is of course welcome in their room, just like her baby sister Pilun is. At home, Takver comforts a crying Sadik until she calms down. Shevek fills Takver in, explaining that Sadik's friends at the learning center disapprove of them all. Takver asks Sadik how long this has been going on, and Sadik says that for a long time now she has been excluded from games, and that her classmates have told her that her father is an egoizer and a traitor.

Takver braids Sadik's hair and tucks her into bed beside Pilun. Shevek and Takver get into their bed, and fret about what to do with Sadik. Takver worries that no matter what they do, Sadik will experience pain because of their actions. Shevek shoulders the blame, but Takver assures him that she doesn't care what anyone thinks of them—they will send Sadik to a new center and she herself will take on a new job posting if need be, though it may be far away, in a town called Peace-and-Plenty.

Even though Sabul has offered Shevek everything he used to want—the chance to pursue his own research topics and to publish his own work freely and under his own name—Shevek and Bedap know that there will only be more subterfuge and conflict waiting if Shevek accepts Sabul's offer. They have grown distrustful of the institutions and organizations on their home planet, and are not willing to sacrifice the progress their Syndicate has made in order to become pawns in a larger scheme to erase anarchy from Anarresti society.



As Shevek realizes that his ideas, actions, and politics have made his family pariahs in all spheres of their lives, he feels immense guilt. Bedap, meanwhile, struggles with feelings of isolation and fear that he has missed his chance at having his own family. Now, seeing how Shevek has become isolated from society due to their Syndicate's work, Bedap worries that he will never have the chance to break out of his own isolation.



Shevek brings Sadik home, where she reveals the extent of the torment she has suffered at the hands of her classmates. It is clear that societal opposition to Shevek runs deep, if even children at the learning center know of his controversial ideas and think of him as an egoizer and traitor. Word of Shevek's work with the Syndicate must be spreading fast, and clearly many of his fellow Odonians are deeply opposed to the work he is trying to do and the changes he is trying to make.



Though Takver is a supportive and caring partner and stands in solidarity with Shevek against anything that comes their way, Shevek knows that he cannot put his family in danger of ostracism, cruelty, or violence any longer.



Shevek offers to come with her, but admits that the only real solution to their problems would be his dropping out of the Syndicate of Initiative—the two of them and their children might not even be free from scorn and ire in a small place like Peace-and-Plenty. Shevek admits that he has had rocks thrown at him, and has had people pick fights with him, but hasn't said anything because he was the only subject of people's hatred. Now that it has spread to Takver and the children, though, he worries he is putting them in danger by staying with them. Shevek is despondent, and says there is nowhere for him to go.

Shevek cannot outrun or escape the ire and disdain that he has subjected himself to through his Syndicate's work. Now, Takver, Sadik, and Shevek alike have admitted to suffering due to Shevek's work, and Shevek knows that now that his family's safety is on the line he can no longer proceed with his work. He fears he has done irreparable damage to his reputation and his family's lives, and sinks into his isolation even further.



Takver tells Shevek that he should go to Urras. Her voice is harsh and firm. The Urrasti want him there, she says, and he clearly wants to go. She knows he needs appreciation, discussion, and the chance to learn and teach. Shevek protests, claiming that he doesn't want to go, but Takver knows that he does. She insists that it is his right to go. Shevek asks what Takver would do in his absence, and she says that she would go to a fish lab on the coast and live peacefully with the girls until Shevek returns. Shevek tells Takver sadly that he might not be able to come back, revealing Rulag's warnings and threats earlier at the PDC.

Even despite the danger Shevek would face, Takver supports her partner and knows how deeply he wants to embark on this journey. She is prepared to care for their family in his absence, but she does not know the extent of the threats against Shevek—when he reveals to her that he might not be allowed to return to Anarres after leaving, it is a large revelation and a serious weight on both of them.



Takver asks Shevek if it would be worth it for him to go to Urras despite the risk of being unable to return. He tells her that it would be, if he could finish his theory and give it as a gift to the worlds of the universe. He feels **walled** in on Anarres, and no longer wants to spend his life handing his work over to Sabul. Takver agrees that it is worth the risk, stating that she believes that there are more Anarresti on their side than they realize—perhaps Shevek's journey to Urras would flush like-minded Odonians out into the open.

Takver knows that Shevek's motivations are as pure as any could be. He wants to help not just Anarresti or Urrasti, but the entire galaxy, and Takver believes that he can do so. She supports him and stands in solidarity with him as he considers leaving, and even tries to make him feel better by asserting her belief that his initiative would open doors for many Anarresti who might not be speaking their minds, and lift the stigma on communications with outside worlds.



Shevek tells Takver that he's not going to go to Urras, but Takver insists that he will—and not only that, but he will return. He always gets where he's going, she says, and he always comes back. Shevek argues back, but Takver proclaims that she is tired, and insists they both go to sleep.

The reader knows that Shevek will journey to Urras, but this moment in which he is uncertain of what to do provides an insight into his mind—he is torn between two worlds and two lives, and as dedicated to his family as he is to his work.



CHAPTER 13

As the ship bearing Shevek away from Urras breaks orbit, the stars of the universe—Anarres among them—come into view. Shevek is shown around the ship, which is named the *Davenant*. Shevek notes that this ship is vastly different from the *Mindful*, the freighter he came in on. The ship is fragile-looking, but spacious and solid on the inside. There is a garden for recreation, bathed in artificial sunlight, and at night the ceiling provides a clear view of the stars. The ship is designed to spend months at a time in space, and has been made eminently livable for its inhabitants. Shevek notes that the style is not opulent in the Urrasti way or austere in the Anarresti, but strikes a balance between the two. The Hainish crewmembers are considerate and somber, and the Hainish race gives off the appearance of being very old, even among the youngest of them.

Shevek spends most of the journey in silence, speaking only when spoken to. Though many people on the ship are drawn to him, they are also shy of him—but Shevek is hardly aware of anyone else onboard, so fixated is he on his return to Anarres and his family. Shevek feels he is like a man who has just been released from jail, and is aware of his broken hopes and his inner joys simultaneously.

On the second day of his journey, Shevek speaks via radio to the Syndicate of Initiative back on Anarres, listening and answering their questions in Pravic. After his radio conversation, Shevek tells the Hainish first mate, Ketho, that the Anarresti will contact him tomorrow to arrange entry. Ketho notes that it seems, from Shevek's conversation, that he got some good news, and Shevek confirms that he did. He tells Ketho, in Ioti—the only tongue they share—that the landing tomorrow will be “exciting,” attended by friends and enemies alike, though Shevek believes that there are more friends and supporters awaiting him than there were when he left.

Ketho asks Shevek if he fears being attacked upon returning, and Shevek concedes that he accepts the risk of having been a dissident in his society—it is his privilege as an Odonian to even be able to take the risk. Ketho tells Shevek that he will take Shevek down to the surface in a landing craft, and will be glad to witness Shevek's return alongside him.

The novel's final chapter and coda is rife with physical and psychological symbolism representing the end of Shevek's journey, and the “true voyage” of his return. The ship he is returning home on is not Urrasti or Anarresti, symbolizing Shevek's internal rejection of the perfection of either planet. He has found a middle ground in his life that will now allow him to see the good and the bad in both planets, and hopefully this new chapter of his life will allow him to think more broadly about the universe he inhabits instead of just obsessing over the virtues and failures of the twin moons.



Shevek is no longer isolated, caught between two worlds, though he is quiet and reserved on the spaceship. Rather, Shevek feels a profound sense of newfound freedom, no longer caught up in the tension between Urras and Anarres and looking forward only to his return to his home planet and his family.



Shevek is even more full of hope for and excitement about his return after hearing from his fellow syndics back on Anarres. He knows that he will be met with resistance and anger still, but seems optimistic after his conversation with the Anarresti that in his absence there have been some changes on Anarres, and more people have become sympathetic to Shevek and his goals for their society.



Though Shevek left his planet knowing that he would be met with anger, resentment, and perhaps even violence upon his return, the great gift of his identity as an Odonian is the freedom to make his own decisions—he has come to realize that now more than ever after his travails on the stifling and state-controlled planet of Urras.



Shevek asks Ketho if he wants to land *with* him rather than just alongside him, and Ketho says that he does. Shevek asks if Ketho's commanding officer would allow him to visit Anarres, and Ketho replies that it is his duty, in fact, as an officer of a mission ship, to investigate new worlds when possible. Shevek considers Ketho's request, informing him that the Terms of the Closure of the Settlement of Anarres do not permit Urrasti to land anywhere other than the port, but that because Ketho is Hainish and not Urrasti, there is no precedent. Ketho states that he believes all foreigners, by implication of the Terms, are barred from Anarres. Shevek states that Anarresti managers who, after first contact with the Hainish sixty years ago, wanted to keep them out were just "building more **walls**." He asks Ketho why he wants to land on Anarres.

Ketho replies that he is curious about Anarres after reading Odo's works. After confirming that visiting Anarres is Ketho's own wish, and that he understands it might be dangerous, Shevek tells Ketho that things are "a little broken loose on Anarres." Though the purpose of Shevek's journey was to shake things up and make Anarresti ask important questions of their society, he did not realize that in his absence such conflict would take hold. Because of this, Shevek tells Ketho that he will not bring him to Anarres as an official representative of a foreign government. Rather, once Ketho crosses the **wall** separating the Port from the rest of the world, Ketho will take on all the responsibilities of an Anarresti and become one of them. Though Ketho will be given unprecedented freedom as an Odonian, Shevek warns, "freedom is never very safe."

Though Ketho knows he might feel alone on Anarres, he insists that his race is very old, and has experienced and experimented with many social models, anarchism among them. Ketho himself, though, has never lived as an anarchist, and longs to try something new. He wonders why anyone is born if not to make each single life new. Shevek, in Pravic, tells Ketho that they are all "children of time." Calling him brother, he urges Ketho to call Anarres on the radio and inform them that he'll be coming to stay, hoping that in offering Ketho a chance to live on Anarres he will be giving him a gift, a promise, and a risk.

The following night, Shevek paces through the garden in starlight. He looks out the windows at Anarres, wondering if Takver will be at the Port when he lands. The last time he spoke with Bedap, he had asked Bedap to decide together with Takver whether it would be safe for her to meet the *Davenant* at its landing. Bedap had told Shevek he wouldn't be able to stop her even if it wasn't safe.

In a symbolic gesture representative of the massive shift away from binaries and toward collectivism that has occurred since the start of the novel, the Hainish officer Ketho expresses his desire to live on Anarres and learn more about it—both out of his own personal desire and his duty to his world and his people. Like Shevek, Ketho is an intrepid traveler hungry for knowledge about the universe he lives in. Shevek's journey is coming to a close, but Ketho's is just beginning, and the walls that divide the planets of the galaxy are coming down more and more rapidly.



Shevek knows that things will be difficult for him back on Anarres, and warns Ketho that Ketho too may be the subject of the doubt, suspicion, or even anger of the Anarresti people. Shevek's goals have been completed, and the Anarresti are evidently engaged in a tumultuous upheaval of many things that had been established as the status quo since the planet was first settled. The radical freedom characteristic of Odonianism is many things, but "safe" is not one of them, and Shevek wants to be sure that Ketho understands the burdens inherent in such complete freedom—the burdens Shevek has been struggling with (and for) his entire life.



Ketho shares many of Shevek's values and questions, and Shevek is delighted to see someone from somewhere else in the galaxy wrestling with the same questions he has been for so long. Shevek sees Ketho as his brother, and gladly welcomes him into the Odonian tradition. The borders are opening and the walls are coming down, and the constrictive rules that had come to silently govern life on Anarres for so long are changing fast.



Shevek has been telling Ketho that things are dangerous on Anarres, but is only now reckoning with how that unrest and upset will affect him and his family. He knows that Takver will remain allegiant to him no matter what, and that her joy at his return will not be stopped by a bit of discord—they are anarchists, after all.



The commander of the ship walks in with Ketho, and the two announce that they have obtained the entry pattern from the Anarresti ground control. The commander tells Shevek that as soon as he is ready, they will begin their descent, and Shevek tells the commander to go ahead with the launch procedure. Shevek asks Ketho if he is completely sure that he wants to breach the **wall**. Shevek is coming home, but Ketho will be leaving home, and though the true journey of any leaving is the return, return may be difficult. Ketho concedes that he hopes to return home, in time.

Shevek looks out the window again, watching as the sun begins to rise. He thinks excitedly of how he will lie down to sleep tonight on his home planet, safe beside Takver and their children. He wishes he had a souvenir to give to Pilun, but he has not brought anything from Urras at all; his hands are “empty, as they [have] always been.”

Shevek warns Ketho one last time that the road he has ahead of him may prove to be a difficult one. Shevek has made it to the true heart of his journey—the return—but cannot in good conscience promise Ketho that he will be able to return home. Nevertheless, Ketho wants to proceed with landing on Anarres, dedicated to his people and his mission of discovery.



Shevek has become truly empty-handed, both externally and internally, having let go of any egoistic attachments and become “dispossessed.” He has found what is important to him—his family, his people, and the ideal of freedom—and is now ready to receive whatever lies in wait for him back on Anarres.





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