

# **Bon Vivant**

**Parallel Planes, #4**

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**Published by Midcenturic Publishing**



**Midcenturic  
Publishing**

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-968595-13-5

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-968595-14-2

Cover design by: R. H. Burg

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# Chapter 1

## Trends and Trending

### Two Hundred Fifty Days Before the GRC's Investigation into the Air Division's System Breach

Egypt had withstood the assault of countless foreign invaders during a period when many of the world's lands were being conquered by colonizing imperial forces. The wealth and military dominance that kept Egypt under its own rule for millennia had extended into the twenty-first century where statements of Egyptian culture and architecture dominated cityscapes around the world, including the grand obelisks in foreign capitals like Paris and Washington, D.C., and the magnificent pyramid-shaped edifices that functioned as everything from mausoleums to residential buildings, government headquarters, shopping malls, museums, and office buildings throughout Africa and the West. Like the enduring cultural and political influences cast by the Roman Republic and Greek Hellenism, the lasting inspiration of the Ancient Egyptian Kingdoms continued to be significant throughout the centuries and across the globe.

While conventions like the unisex wearing of powdered wigs made popular by French royalty had fallen out of vogue by the early 1800s, and the gender-neutral wearing of nightgowns originating from ancient Eastern and Roman influences ended in the early 1900s, the unisex use of face powder originating in Ancient Egypt continued, as did the universal use of makeup worn for individual expression and protection from sun and disease. Along with the endurance of such cultural conventions, core values like loyalty, honor, family, collectivism, and order underpinned personal motivations and social traditions worldwide.

The repeated clank of metal against metal echoed throughout the upper level of the Nob Hill mansion as Damon Suez stared into the mirrored wall

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at the reflection of his twin brother, Dean, completing the fifteenth rep of his morning workout.

Drenched from the effort, Dean secured the two-hundred-pound bar above him and sat up on the weight bench to dry his forehead and the wet strands of his stylish buzz cut. With an ever-present hint of a smile on his perpetually moisturized face, Dean breathed in the crisp morning air and welcomed the dawn while he took a moment between reps to compliment his brother's outfit. Joy and freedom were what Dean valued most in his wonderfully privileged life, and nothing brought him more joy than high fashion. Inspired by Damon's ensemble, Dean wrapped up his workout and proceeded through the bathroom doorway where his brother was standing.

Always several steps ahead of his sibling in their morning ritual, Damon had already finished his workout and was almost dressed. Having donned a crisp white linen dress shirt and sky-blue vicuña wool pants—two of many custom-made pieces in the enormous closet he shared with his brother—Damon brushed his shiny shoulder-length hair, shaved the dark stubble from his face, plucked a few stray brow hairs, and applied a fine line of charcoal eyeliner pencil and a dab of subtle flamingo pink lip gloss. Eager to start his day, Damon was raring to address a matter that threatened one of the two things he cherished most. Like his brother, freedom was one, but order was the other.

As Damon sat on the deck overlooking the North Bay views of their four-level, seven-thousand-square-foot home, he attempted to steady his temper with the parties on the video call. The tension in Damon's voice had drawn Dean to the deck, where he usually liked to enjoy a quiet breakfast with his twin before heading to the office.

Carrying a polished silver tray that held two china cups, two bowls of fresh berries, and two linen napkins, Dean approached the glass door leading to the deck and paused until Damon's eyes met his. Damon's face was creased with annoyance, but he gestured for Dean to join him.

Dean stepped into the cool morning air and inhaled the sweet fragrance of orange blossoms and jasmine from the potted plants along the terrace. Then he set the silver tray on the beautifully carved stone table before him, logged into the conference call, and waited as the discussion continued.

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Visible even on the small cell phone display, the droplets of sweat on the forehead of Tokyo Franz, VP of Merchandising, and the flushed cheeks of Marcel Gillespie, VP of Procurement, told Dean most of what he needed to know. Damon's final words filled in the rest.

"I mean it. You're both done. I'm not saying you're out of the firm, but if you decide to stay, know that you're both going as far away from me as I can send you."

Marcel and Tokyo knew better than to debate the issue any further with Damon. At the last sales meeting, he had told them what to expect if they didn't get their departments in line to support the sales plan that had been agreed upon months prior.

At six-two, with heart-shaped, high-cheeked faces and large almond-shaped hazel eyes, the twins had spent most of their lives as fashion models for their parents' multibillion-dollar fashion and media conglomerate, Seouliss United. Since retiring and transitioning into the business side of Seouliss United, the twins wore the high-end garments from their closet as part of their corporate attire.

As VP of Sales, Damon Suez rigidly and adeptly achieved the firm's revenue targets and managed growth while Dean Suez masterfully executed the role of VP of Marketing. They both knew every aspect of their family's business inside and out and easily navigated the dynamic arena of the fashion, media, and lifestyle industries.

Dean approached the company and its operations as a lab for artistic expression and cultural inspiration like their parents did, while Damon saw the business as a combination of a puzzle to be solved and an asset to be managed. For this reason, Damon had little tolerance for deviations from the strategic objectives and financial blueprints that were hammered out at the two-week annual executive retreat that Seouliss United held midway through the third quarter of every fiscal year.

Damon was not blind to shifting trends and inevitable challenges with suppliers, but he was a firm believer that proper pipeline planning and supply chain management would mitigate most typical assaults on well-developed strategic and operations plans. Deviations from the strategic playbook had probably sealed Tokyo and Marcel's fate, and at this point, they would have to plead their case with Seouliss United's chief executives and founders,

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Seoul and Lissette Suez. The more artistic of the brothers, Dean knew how much their parents disliked non-creative distractions, so he did not envy Marcel or Tokyo's position, but he did admire their creativity and courage to try something new.

Careful not to spill anything on his cream-colored linen suit and powder-blue cotton dress shirt, Dean gently slid the hot latte across the table to Damon as his brother set his cell phone down with a controlled tap.

"So, I take it that you already handled the details with HR?" asked Dean.  
"I did."

"So, who's stepping into the VP of Procurement and VP of Merchandising roles?"

"We are. For now, anyway," said Damon as he took a careful sip of his steaming latte.

Dean smiled in casual agreement. As long as he could continue to collaborate on product development and promotion, the title made no difference to him. "So, who's going to be heading Sales and Marketing now?"

"My director of Sales."

"Oh, Donna Cruz. She'll be terrific. She has a great relationship with the creative director, Charlene Monrovia, and Amy. This'll be fantastic," Dean said with a bright smile. "When are you going to tell Donna?"

"I'll take her to breakfast this morning and give her the news."

"I'm going to miss Tokyo and Marcel," Dean said with a sigh.

"I'm not," Damon said, picking up his phone.

In a periwinkle-blue, sleeveless, ruched chiffon, ivory-trimmed dress flowing with every step of her gold sandals, Amy Wu was in a mad dash to meet her colleagues for morning tea. Getting her rich brown hair to fall exactly as she wanted it had taken more time and styling product than usual, which had left Seouliss United's trend forecaster ten minutes behind schedule. Like Dean Suez, she cherished fashion. The only thing she valued more was her relationships with those closest to her.

Amy hurried into the café and continued to shift her attention between checking her email and reading the headlines of the hundreds of periodicals she perused each day. Then she paused gracefully to sit down across from her colleagues, Donna Cruz and Charlene Monrovia. "Almond milk is in. Satin is in. Extremely long—or as I like to call it, 'Princess' hair—is in. Flamingo

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pink is in. Coral pink is out. Soy is out. Jumpsuits are out. Real and faux fur are out. Plaids are out. Silk is out. And you know what else is? Tokyo.”

Donna raised an eyebrow. “What? Please tell me that was some random assessment about Japanese fashion and not an update about Tokyo Franz.”

Charlene shook her head. “I told you Tokyo was working Damon’s last nerve.”

Donna looked at Amy for confirmation.

Amy nodded. “It looks like Damon demoted two senior staff members before his no-carb, high-protein breakfast. One was sent to our textile division in India and the other he sent to our sustainable products division in Iceland. The last I heard, Damon was already planning to divest both divisions, so that’s going to be a whole other saga. Anyway, do you want to guess who went where?”

“Wait a minute. Who else landed on Damon’s bad side?” asked Donna.

“Marcel Gillespie,” said Amy.

“Well, there’s no way in the world Ms. Suez will let any of that happen. She adores Marcel, and Tokyo was her design assistant for years before becoming the head of Merchandising. She’d let Damon go before she would allow anything to happen to Tokyo,” said Donna. “Besides, who is going to step in for Marcel and Tokyo? Or will they continue their day-to-day responsibilities from their new locations?”

“I don’t know. The announcement reads effective immediately, so I guess we’ll find out at the staff meeting this afternoon,” said Amy.

“My day is about to start off with fireworks and hollering kittens. Damon just messaged me to join him for breakfast,” said Donna.

Amy and Charlene looked at each other dubiously as Donna hurried to gather her belongings. It was at that moment that Amy stopped to appreciate the truly magnificent ensemble that Donna had on. Her pencil-legged pants were a sheer peacock-blue that precisely matched the blue stripes in the white-and-burnt-orange ombre blouse tucked neatly into the tailored trousers cinched by a glossy burnt-orange belt matching the burnt-orange beret and shoes that finished her outfit.

“Did he say where?” Charlene asked.

“Horace’s,” Donna said, zipping her peacock blue messenger bag and slinging it over her shoulder.

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Horace's just happened to be the most exclusive spot for breakfast and brunch in the Bay Area. On average, reservations had to be made four months out. The women did not know whether the Suezes had connections that permitted them last-minute access or if they had a standing breakfast reservation at the finest of fine-dining restaurants.

Both scenarios were completely plausible for a family as influential as the Suezes. The Seouliss United media presence and the Suezes' cultural influence were so profound and far-reaching that every two months they were included in the government's Ministry Roundtable where the most significant companies joined the nation's key ministries to discuss the state, trends, and future of national society and the international impacts and opportunities of the nation's policies, commerce, and culture.

Amy looked at the time. "I'd better get going, too. I'm due at the Ministry Roundtable this morning."

Charlene smiled. Amy was off to meet with the most powerful individuals in government, and Donna was on her way to meet with one of the most powerful men in popular culture. "Better you two than me. I'll get the check," Charlene said, waving to her colleagues. As she watched them leave, Charlene looked down at the gold buttons of the ivory overalls she wore over her navy-blue-and-white ombre blouse and let out a long sigh of relief that she hadn't worn the coral jumpsuit that was up in the rotation in her closet. As Seouliss United's creative director, she could not afford to be seen clashing with her colleagues' periwinkle and peacock outfits or in out-of-trend fashion, no less.

As the driver pulled up to the golden gates in front of the ten-story glass pyramid at the center of Occidental Square, the government's West Coast headquarters, Amy braced herself in preparation for the next four hours. She would be joining representatives from a dozen of the nation's other most influential organizations.

Amy had been employed by Seouliss United for five years now, and while fashion and trends changed, the obligation to meet with the National Ministry did not. Every time she was chauffeured to this spot in front of the Occidental Gates, she recalled the start of her tenure with the fashion conglomerate. The afternoon before her first day, Damon and Dean had sent her the most glorious outfit: a stunning cotton dress with a bright

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white bodice and silver-and-white, geometric-patterned skirt tastefully accessorized with a white purse and silver shoes. When she put the outfit on that evening, she'd felt like a starlet from classic cinema. The next morning, the twins picked her up at her front door at 8 a.m. sharp, took her to an amazing meal at Horace's, and personally briefed her on Seouliss United's vision, mission, and upcoming projects. Amy remembered how touched she had been that the twins were so delighted to have her onboard, until she'd realized they were just excited to be off the hook for participating in the Ministry Roundtable. After breakfast at Horace's, the driver drove the three of them to the spot where she now sat, opened the car door, and sent her on her way to represent the company at the roundtable discussions. *Those jackals*, she thought with a smile.

Fast forward five years and what Amy remembered most was how quickly she had become close friends with the twins and practically a third child to Seoul and Lissette Suez. As wacky, peculiar, and slightly obsessive as each member of the Suez family could be, they mainly were artistic, creative, driven, warm, and wonderful human beings. However, the members of the National Council of Ministers were an entirely different story. The ministers were certainly driven, but warm and wonderful they were not. At times, Amy was not even sure they were human—they typically behaved as single-minded instruments of their respective agency agendas.

"After you, miss," a man said, stirring Amy from her musings.

She was surprised to see that after navigating her exit from the company car and through security on autopilot, she had already made her way to the auditorium where the Ministry Roundtable was held on the first Monday of every other month.

"Ah. There she is now. Amy Wu, Trend Forecaster and Director of Market Research for Seouliss United," a familiar voice said as Amy made her way to her seat at the triangular formation of tables and chairs facing a three-dimensional hologram at the center of the room. Amy smiled warmly at no one in particular, took her seat at the table behind her nameplate, and settled in for the deluge of facts, charts, and statistics that she would need to share and absorb, then analyze and summarize multiple times before the day was over.

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Thank the pharaohs that the session flew by and the roundtable ended an hour early. Amy stole a glance around the auditorium, careful not to make eye contact with the Minister of Health or the Minister of Culture, the council members who seemed increasingly insistent upon cornering Amy for some additional conversation at the end of each session. In truth, it was the only part of the event that she didn't like.

While Amy appreciated her regal and androgynous style, Layla Maat, Minister of Culture, was an imposing figure that Amy found almost sinister and completely unyielding. Yet, somehow Amy had forged a relationship with this agent of the status quo, even though she suspected that Minister Maat only saw her as the malleable daughter and servant of the well-established Seoulliss United powerhouse that the Minister of Culture sought to wrangle under its control. Alternately, Amon Isfet, Minister of Health, was pleasant enough but always inserted himself into every conversation to which he was not invited. He hovered around the auditorium and hallways of the government building, never failing to seize an opportunity to share Ministry of Health policy and propaganda. But what Amy found particularly grating was that he would attempt to endear himself to her by kicking off each of their conversations with a request for her recommendations for the latest trends in menswear and what looks she thought would best suit his build and features while continually insisting on dressing in last season's everything—haircut, shoes, ties, suits, shirts. For a man so up to date on the latest trends in health and wellness, he was completely out of tune with—and obviously uninterested in—fashion, so Amy had no idea why he continued the charade of being interested in her fashion advice every time they met.

“God dag,” a familiar voice said. “That’s Norwegian for ‘good day.’ It might be what the Danish say as well. I think the Portuguese say ‘Bom dia.’ That works for Brazil too,” Minister Amon Isfet told Amy.

“Your knowledge of so many languages is very impressive,” Amy said with a smile.

Minister Isfet smiled back and paused to take in Amy's outfit.

“What do you call that shade of blue? Or is it violet? How do you think that color would look on yours truly? I bet it would look fantastic in a fitness wear line. I would love to see your brands push more fitness. Individuals must

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never stop the journey of self-betterment and wellness. Don't you agree? And with the fascination of major influencers and the public that your brand enjoys, imagine the impact that even the tiniest mention of the Ministry's health initiatives would have on major trends in purchasing and behavior in the health and wellness segment," said Minister Amon Isfet. "You saw how quickly bloggers like Xavier Pots helped amplify Lissette Suez's mention that she preferred olive oil to butter on her popcorn. Did you know that innocuous comment made in passing about Mrs. Suez's date night with her husband led to a rise in requests for olive oil at movie theaters last year to the extent that all major movie chains now feature oiled instead of buttered popcorn in their concession posters?"

Amy shook her head, indicating that she was unaware of this one of many random impacts of the public's obsession with the Seouliss United founders and their brand. *Isis, help me*, she thought as Minister Isfet belabored his point. Amy's plea was answered a second later when Minister Maat emerged from the crowd.

"Amon, good to see you. I hate to interrupt, but I was just about to ask Miss Wu if we could begin our lunch meeting now since the session has ended early. Would that work for you, Miss Wu?" Minister Layla Maat asked.

"Absolutely," said Amy, hiding her reluctance. She was eager to get to Seouliss United's San Francisco headquarters, to get caught up on office gossip and the aftermath of the demotion of Marcel and Tokyo.

Minister Isfet's face broadened with a greasy smile. "Well, Layla, I was hoping to take the early recess to discuss a few new health programs with Amy. We could use her sway with the influencers to get people more engaged with our health initiatives. We are seeing some alarming trends around our nation's overall wellness."

Minister Maat stood for a moment as expressionless as ever. She studied her colleague's face and then conceded. "Why don't you join us? That way, all of our schedules will benefit from the early break. Besides, I would like to hear about these new health programs as well. Perhaps the Ministry of Culture can also lend some of its influence," Layla Maat said without the slightest hint of emotion of any kind.

Minister Isfet's smile tightened slightly. Amy wasn't sure, but she thought the subtle change in Amon Isfet's expression might have been accompanied

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by a wince. Evidently, she was not the only one who found Minister Maat's demeanor imposing and unnerving.

"I wouldn't imagine that you would want to listen to our wellness initiatives any more than I want to hear about the Ministry of Culture's threat management tactics and critiques about national and global threats to Afrocentrism," said Minister Isfet.

"You and I will both be fine. I will have my aide order lunch for you as well. Shall we?" Minister Maat gestured toward the double doors that were propped open to facilitate the egress from the auditorium. Minister Isfet's eyes narrowed as his smile widened.

Amy scanned the room to see if any of the other exchanges taking place were as awkward and interesting as that one had been. She surveyed the casual smiles and friendly handshakes among the other representatives and council members and sighed softly before saying, "What's for lunch today, Minister Maat? I'm starving."

As the Minister of Culture ran through the lunch menu, Amy glanced at the two ministers and pondered their backstory. Their objectives appeared complementary: the Ministry of Health aimed to keep society strong and stable by maintaining citizens' physical and mental wellness, while the Ministry of Culture focused on promoting and preserving traditions, conventions, and values rooted in the nation's heritage.

Both ministries relied on the influence of Seouliss United to help shape social trends and behaviors that aligned with their goals—but then, so did many of the others. Yet Amy couldn't recall lunch meeting requests from any of them, not even the Ministers of Environment or Commerce. To her, additional contact with those agencies would have made more sense than the frequent touchpoints with the Ministry of Health. As the nation's top producer of media and apparel, Seouliss United had a direct impact on both the economy and the environment through its manufacturing operations.

Amy made a mental note to ask the Suezes about the keen interest the Ministers of Health and Culture seemed to have. So far, the extra meetings with them had accomplished no more than the requests submitted by other ministries through the regular channels of the Ministry Roundtable forum.

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Having grown up in the Seouliss conglomerate, it was as easy as changing one of his designer shirts for Damon to step into the role of Vice President of Procurement, and the same could be said of Dean's transition from the company's head of marketing to the Vice President of Merchandising. By lunchtime, they were up to speed on their new departments and personnel down to the line managers across the global corporation and were anxiously awaiting Amy's update from her meeting with the national ministers so they could incorporate the highlights into that afternoon's staff meeting.

Amy exited through the glass doors of the elevator and strode into the lobby of the top floor of Seouliss United. She waved to the executive assistant and headed down the hall, taking casual notice of the sweeping view of San Francisco Bay and the skyline. She shook her head, smiling as she reached the glass wall that bordered the corridor of executive suites where Dean, Damon, and her offices were located. She paused at the door of the first office to try to read Damon's sphinxlike expression on the other side of the glass as he and Dean watched her approach.

"So, how'd it go?" Dean asked brightly as she entered his office.

Amy pursed her lips and let out a breath that sent her perfectly trimmed bangs fluttering. "Mainly the usual, but the one-off meetings with a few of the ministers are getting stranger."

"Oh heck," Dean grimaced, looking at his phone. "Amy, you're going to need to tell us on the way. I just got a text from Tokyo for us to come to the design floor right now."

"Ripples from the personnel changes?" asked Damon, unconcerned.

"No, Dad is having one of his fits of inspiration."

Amy's phone chimed. "We'd better hurry. Charlene says it's bad."

A second later, Damon, Dean, and Amy sped from Dean's office and disappeared down the emergency exit.