

THE CELESTIAL PUPPETEER

Stories by Coleman Geeraert, Dustin Geeraert,
Lee Vermeulen, and Steve Vermeulen

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Prologue?

By Dustin Geeraert

Apparently.

Apparently, it was cold.

He felt strongly compelled to change the physical circumstances within which he existed. He furthermore immediately questioned why he should exist in the first place; why the universe would devise a system of pleasure and pain and yet produce creatures such as himself whose existential feedback would be negative to such a degree that it made little sense, if any, from the extremely biased perspective of the experiencer, to exist whatsoever, at all. He had the innocence to be offended.

Later, little mammalian things would tell each other (and believe!) that, at the dawn of time, it was warm. It was a pastoral paradise. It was a garden.

It was, in fact, cold.

Above (“above?”) him floated a massive spherical object. If he had been capable of measuring time in a systematic way, if he had even developed the concept of time, and if additionally he had had access to information that was from his freezing baffled perspective far into the future, he might have known that a group of sophisticated primates would one day name such objects as the one he now observed “planets.”

The dirt “below” him was reddish, the colour of rust. He ran his fingers through it, the soft sandy texture strange on his skin. There was no atmosphere.

He could not die. He continued to receive experience whose negative nature was difficult to overstate, yet none of the information being sent to him could he avoid. The control that his sentience exerted over his physical manifestation scoured his memory and thinking for a course of action.

He realized that he had probably died several times before, and – horribly – that his own lack of memory – of explanation, of comprehension – was probably deliberate. He

was shaking. His flawless skin emanated warm, but the degree to which this was dwarfed by the coldness that surrounded him, was also difficult to overstate. It was additionally absurd that such a thing as “temperature” (the statistical percentage of molecules that refuse to stay still for some random reason) should impact him in such a way.

In an act of pure will, he destroyed himself. Sparks hissed. Atoms floated away.

He floated freely, deprived of the memories stored in his physical brain. An amnesiac ghost.

Without the ability to store experience, he had no reason not to manifest himself again. He did so. Sensory input flooded him. His first new – yes, “new” thought, was “Cold.”

It was altogether possible that this cycle of manifestation and destruction had been taking place for millions of years. Yet whatever he may once have known, however he had come to be, nothing remained now.

The reason that this particular moment in the promiscuous meaningless endless eons of time, is relevant, is somehow “noteworthy,” is that this time he created himself, through the sheer wonders of statistics, he did not immediately destroy himself.

Exerting some apparently arbitrary type of spiritual energy, he moved himself away from the strange surface of the starlit sand.

Naked, freezing and burning, he hovered and gradually began to rise. His intent was to scour the entire universe, if necessary, in order to find a warm place.

Eden Hypothesis

By Coleman Geeraert

For eons, the universe was nothing more than the constant expression of its fundamental laws. These laws had proven themselves the most durable out of all possible laws, a pattern of selection for durability that life itself would later follow. The dominant trend, of course, was lifelessness, so that any creature capable of understanding the laws of the universe immediately understands its own rareness due to those very laws. Consciousness is allowed, perhaps, but not encouraged.

In humanity's deep past, the whole species was wrapped in a spiritual and mental coma. There was neither thought, nor complex language, nor any concepts beyond what was directly related to survival and the present moment. Humans had no names, nor did they have names for any of the things which they saw. They communicated, but not with words. They expressed their experiences through posture, facial expression and sound. Each assumed him or her self the center of experience, but comprised only a small part of the sensory input of surrounding individuals.

Without subjectivity, each individual was simply a manifestation of his or her own unfiltered instincts. Without a name for anger or happiness, fear or exhilaration, without an abstract thought at all, humanity existed in an infantile state. Unable to evaluate its actions, unable to even *understand* them, humankind was as predictable as all the other creatures: as simple as erosion and weather systems. The young species had not yet raised its head in defiance of the great rule of mindlessness, which had so long dominated reality.

But rebellion was coming. Humanity had arisen from a line of evolution that favoured the ability to analyze information coming from the surrounding environment. Primates did not represent the first time that intelligence had emerged in evolution; they were well behind pack predators. Yet, rising from lemurs to monkeys and then to apes, primates represented a new strategy in the competition for survival - the attempt to outdo adaptation with adaptability, and take control of one's own existence in an unprecedented way.

Humans were resourceful enough to make life out of a few basic resources, and they multiplied and spread around the globe. By converting the resources available into what was needed for survival, humanity also adapted its environments to itself. In adapting to each environment, humanity showed that the data of each individual mind was more important to the survival of an individual than its physical presence. Because the information within the mind changed much faster than the beings themselves, humanity was able to spread beyond its normal biological borders.

A certain beta-status male lived with his family in a natural cave formation next to a river that sprawled lazily across the land, reaching for a horizon it could never touch. It was a prime location—it had water, and the river gave them food both by means of life within it and by that life which also derived water and food from it. It was not where his species was born, but they had no undue difficulty making a living here. Beta and his family were distinct from each other in appearance and behaviour, although the small size of their group meant that they didn't yet require specific sounds to represent themselves.

That they didn't have names for themselves didn't reduce the importance of their relationships to each other: the lowest common denominator was that simple and oft-selfish principle of evolution, the basic calculation of help received and help given. They shared these types of relationships with many other life-forms. On top of this bare-bones morality, beta was also aware of social roles within the family group and was aware of a power structure with behaviour reflecting implicitly the thoughts and opinions of each individual participant.

Above all, beta was aware that he was not the most skilled hunter. That position belonged to the powerful older male with a full gray beard, alpha. Because of his ability to provide the family with resources, beta deferred to him not only on the hunt but at home also. The status of alpha as top hunter conferred on him rights within the family group that beta, his siblings, and his cousins were not privy to. Because of this dynamic, another level of social calculation became necessary. It was helpful to beta to be helpful to alpha, although if beta could, he would do harm to alpha by taking over his position in the family group.

Beta and his family lived in the way that humans had for untold and unremembered generations as they slowly graduated from the realm of instinct into the realm of sentience. It was not a particularly momentous occasion when the first human became sentient - there was no observable behaviour related to the event. Yet sentience conferred a long-term advantage, so each generation more and more humans achieved it and the event took place earlier and earlier in life. The eventual accumulation of thousands of sentient beings led to changes in the way people lived. For beta, it was just a bridge to be crossed on the journey through his own life.

As the sun rose above, beta accompanied alpha on the hunt with several younger relatives. His chemical-emotional reactions guided him through life with no overlay of conscious thought. His book wrote itself, but had nobody to read it. The hunt was the same as any other, and yet some of today's events would be the harbinger of greater change to come.

They had been out on the range for a few days now, and had finally discovered the migratory prey they sought.

In order to bring down and dispatch a stronger and faster animal than themselves, in addition to numbers and strategy the hunters brought with them bolas and stone-tipped spears. The bolas they brought were simple weapons: made of a few lengths of cord with weights on the end tied together, they could be thrown great distances to entangle the legs of a prey animal. Once the prey was entangled the humans would catch up and fall upon it with their spears. It was alpha's responsibility to take away the animals' legs: although each hunter brought a bolas, alpha would receive the credit or the shame.

Each man ate a small piece of fruit he had with him as they got up and stretched out together, shaking their legs and pacing to loosen their muscles. They were on one side of a ridge defining the western side of a canyon that quickly narrowed to the north. The herd was south of the canyon on the other side of that ridge, lazily eating the grass. The hunters approached the valley, ready to make their move.

Each hunter knew his respective position in the hunt based on self-esteem, with levels of confidence enforced by social put-downs or rewards. Self-esteem was what kept beta and his relatives from leaving their positions in the hunt for more favourable ones, potentially costing the group a

successful hunt. The strategy they would use today had been wordlessly engineered through generations of trial and error, each building on the last through both empirical and ritual observation and simple teaching techniques like pointing. Alpha, like the rest of humanity, stored some of the information in mnemonics - rhythms and imitations of the world created to recall and teach. Some were fleeting, but others were memorable and they endured within each culture, helping each group survive and gather resources, as alpha was about to do.

Alpha began walking in the direction of the ridge, climbing up and dropping down the other side. A few accompanied him, including beta, but most of the others would have to walk a lot further than that to reach their positions along the open mouth of the valley, and down near the herd. The hunters' positioning allowed good visibility of each other arranged around the end of the valley, so that the drivers could be certain that the time was right to single out an unlucky few and head them toward the mouth of the valley. The hunters remained vigilant of potential danger as they waited, although alpha squatted once to eat a piece of fruit from his bundle.

At the bottom, the herders began a slow acceleration toward the herd. Soon some of the animals had split off from the herd and the young men sprinted toward them, whooping and shouting. Luck was on their side and the few standing apart ran the opposite direction from the rest of the herd, and toward the valley. Seeing their mistake, they tried to circle around the hunters and rejoin, but more hunters leapt up from the bush, waving pieces of leather and yelling. The prey used the same strategy and were routed with the same technique a few times until they changed their approach and galloped straight toward the narrow end of the valley. The first group of hunters sprinted behind them as others appeared in the valley ahead. Alpha waited with beta and a few more men for the prey to pass the outcropping that would seal their fate.

It wasn't long before he saw them come running past and slow down just as the canyon came to an abrupt narrowing-point. alpha and his band ran toward them, bolas swinging overhead as they closed distance to their quarry. All of them made their mark, wrapping cords around the legs of the game and bringing them down - all but the one alpha had thrown. Without pause, they all rushed in and quickly

dispatched the animals with their spears, before they could snap a cord or work their way free. Beta had entangled the largest with his bola, and now he dispatched it. But as he lifted the freshly excised heart to his mouth, alpha approached.

His body language was arrogant and demanding, but had also taken on an undertone of submission, of request. Still, instinct made him approach and attempt to take the heart from beta, as it was rightfully his as most experienced hunter. Beta was especially aware of the world at the moment - aware, above all, that the lead hunter had missed today. Spear still in hand, he gave in to the impulse to thrust angrily out with the weapon, and just as quickly he had stabbed the apparently almighty alpha. He felt the brief resistance of skin and the dull scrape of bone, his spear scraping the rib cage. Alpha's face was at once accusatory and pleading. He twisted and pulled on his spear, turning the head to slide between his ribs to free the weapon and drop the man to the ground. He stared aggressively at each accompanying young man in turn, his body language and facial expression clearly threatening. The place of lead hunter in the group beckoned.

But as beta and the others carried the meat back to camp, beta recollected the face of the dying alpha. For the first time in human history a new thought occurred: simple yet invasive enough to undermine the entire instinctive existence of humanity, like termites eating away at the timbers of a building. The idea that within alpha was another experience. Alpha's accusatory glare suggested that there was something within alpha which had been done wrong. That there was something that could be done wrong to him meant that he wasn't just an object in beta's life, but instead had an experience of his own. Perhaps some great order had been violated, and alpha's spirit could never be appeased.

As beta reflected, he looked at his accomplices. Did they have experience too? If so, did that mean they could be done evil - be made to experience pain or displeasure? Some of them looked back at him. Would they remember what he had done to alpha? Now beta tried to think of the future, and what might happen to him. All of a sudden, he began to feel very naked. It was the dawn of existential dread. It was the dawn of guilt. It was the dawn of consciousness, and the first piece of human innocence had been lost to time.

The Fun Machine

By Lee Vermeulen

*The fun machine!
Not satisfied with having to think to enjoy books?
The fun machine!
Bored with the TV and you don't want to move?
The fun machine!
Call your local dealer now, and remember,
If it ain't fun, it ain't the Fun Machine!*

Jonathan stared at his kid's newest toy, and wondered why he had not bought one of these before. The young model on the cover was the first thing he had noticed, smiling at him with wide white teeth and photo-shopped beauty. She didn't seem human; she seemed plastic, fake, too good and too perfect. Yet why would he care, it's all just ink on a cardboard box trying to make him think this beautiful women is staring at him. Trying to make him buy their product with this manufactured love. He had realized with this that man was easily tricked. That eyes and all senses, could be deceived. It didn't matter if this woman was real and flesh standing in front of him, or whether it was ink on a cardboard box, he was attracted to her all the same.

The Fun Machine - the hit of the summer. The final toy for us to play with and enjoy.

Jonathan opened the cardboard box and took out the colorful instructions from their wrapping.

'Congratulations on your purchase of the Fun Machine 3.05! The latest version of the world's #1 toy, ten years running! We at Friendly Fred's toy company (a division of Hamimac Inc) know you will enjoy this fine product, we made sure of it! Now before you use your new hardware, please take the time

to read these instructions carefully. Failure to do so may further limit the terms of the limited warranty. The Fun Machine 3.05 represents a significant technological improvement over past versions, and many new features have been added to make your use as enjoyable as possible.

Take a minute to inspect the contents of this box. You should find:

- 1. Main control and switch box*
- 2. 500 volt, 60 Hz AC power adapter*
- 3. Five nerve cables*
- 4. This manual, with warranty*

information

First simply take out the main control box and plug the power adapter in. Once the machine has power you should see a green icon on the console of the box, this tells you that the machine is ready for fun! Now all you need to do is connect any of the five nerve cables (enough for the whole family!) into the plug-in's under the machine console. Once this is done grab the end of the nerve connectors, it should have a sharp metal point at the end of it, and hold it in your right hand, gently inserting it into the blue vein on your left forearm. It should only feel like a small mosquito bite, and now time for the fun!

Simply adjust the dial above where you connected the nerve cable, and you'll feel the instant pleasure just surging through your veins! Start at one for a bit of fun, and go to 10 for maximum enjoyment.

Be sure to tell your friends about how much you liked our product. And remember, if it ain't fun, it ain't the fun machine!

Jonathan was at first hesitant to try it. Like many others he viewed the machine as a simple toy for kids. After all, the early versions were basically a gloried DVD player. Sold as a game console at first, you would connect it to the TV and it

would give you hundreds of options for entertainment. Every TV show ever filmed, every movie in crisp high-resolution format, along with hundreds of interactive games and toys. In the first version a person would just select their enjoyment from the menu, taking time to search for old reruns and good movies, but in the 2.0 versions the machine could just decide for them. The machine knew what would entertain you the most; give you the most possible pleasure. It would not only know your preferences to select the best content, but would literally change the content based on your enjoyment. No longer would you have to actually move your fingers on the remote control, and actually think about what to watch – it was all automatic. Detecting any sudden boredom, any drop in brain wave levels, it would quickly switch to something with a little more action, or a few more jokes. You could sit comfortably in the chair and be entertained for hours without a single movement, without a single thought to the outside world.

But there were improvements in every version, as there always is. The pleasure became more efficient and accessible, requiring less thought and less movement from the viewers. In the late 2.0 versions, the machine would automatically raise your blood pleasure when there was a fight on screen; increase your body's adrenaline for the action you were seeing. For romance your heart would beat faster. Adult entertainment became instantaneous. It expanded beyond just sight and sound, as all senses were attacked with entertainment, making you smell and taste what you were seeing. The actual drama and visual art on the screen became less important, as the enjoyment no longer came from the content but rather the feeling the machine gave you.

But finally, that all became pointless as the Fun Machine advanced to Version 3.0. Rather than showing the viewer entertainment and drama and letting them interpret it, using their minds to compute the data, why not just go straight to the source? Simply inject the pleasure. Why depend on the viewer to understand what they are watching, having the brain interpret it and then send the pleasure neurotransmitter, when the machine can simply send the chemicals itself? No longer would we have to go through the eye, to the optical nerve, when we can simply bypass and enjoy. Thinking is optional.

Simulation of action and drama is not longer required. After all, when complete control of the mind is grasped, there is no need for simulation, it's not an illusion. It's real, as real as anything. Soon there was no distinction from action or comedy; no distinction from sight or sound; it was all just pure white endless bliss. The machine no longer needed a screen – or any content – it was simply pure joy surging through your veins.

Jonathan wondered, was this the end of humanity? Finally we could forget about the sports, the games, and all the endless searches for pleasure. We could forget about reality itself, just plug yourself in and enjoy. The former idea of humanity was no more, no longer was man a simple animal fighting the environment for his needs, he had advanced beyond that. Throughout man's history there was always a steady progression towards this point, toward this toy, and now we had finally reached it. Enjoyment by simulation is what had made us special - separate from other animals only focused on reality.

For humans to have survived, our survival skills had evolved over many generations – but there came a point where survival was too easy and too simple. There was no longer a constant struggle to live, we had hit an unnatural point of complete control of our surroundings and a domination over nature. Without this struggle, men became comfortable – able to eat and live how they pleased without having to use these survival skills they had developed. But we needed to use these skills to give us a sense of purpose, to pass the time and fill our minds with goals and objectives. To simulate the past struggle – from that came the games and sports.

Now instead of fighting to live, you would use those skills to kick a ball into a net, to accomplish some random goal designed in the simulation, to fight your fellow man in some arbitrary show of strength. Men would still have the need for bloodlust; still have the aggression of the past, only unable to use it. They needed to fight each other, whether in actual battle or these simulated games.

It was tricking the brain. Tricking it to think you're on the hunt. That you need that aggressive boost to survive and eat, when really you are just trying to kick a ball into a net, pointlessly, to pass the time, to feel useful, to fill the mind with thoughts and goals. We couldn't just sit and eat, we needed a

reason to move, even if it was pointless and lead nowhere. There needed to be something to fight.

As the culture advanced, we no longer had this same desire. Why move and interact when we could avoid that wasted energy entirely, with entertainment we could just sit and watch. Entertainment that could be displayed in front of us filled with drama and action, since our lives had little of either. It started with plays - actors faking emotion and drama for the joy of the audience. Slowly this entertainment became more easily accessible, as everything does. As we advanced in technology we were able to simulate plays in front of us, showing simulated dramas on large screens for public viewing. Soon movie theaters were replaced by television. Now a person would not have to leave their house, they wouldn't need to socialize with others, or deal with any problems, they could just turn on their television, turn off their minds, and enjoy for hours on end. Letting commercials and marketers seep into their brains, convincing them to buy whatever fun little toys would give them the most joy. Old ladies watching soap operas as if they are there experiencing this dramatic love interest, when really they are just staring at pixels on a screen. Housewives and soccer moms falling in love with their favorite reality show contestant, thousands of miles away. Sitcoms with a laugh track, as if you're in a large social group with everyone laughing and enjoying each other when really you're alone in your basement eating microwaved food. You could watch violence and sex in front of you, tricking your mind as if you were there, but it was all just fantasy. All just simulated. But did we ever really care? Fake or real, all that mattered was the joy it brought us.

Turn on the TV and root for your team – as they are fighting a war for your side, as if it actually matters, when really it's just hoping they put some arbitrary ball in an arbitrary net. These pointless games and sports to give people a cause, to fill their mind with something to care about. You care about the team because you are told to care about the team; you root for them because everyone else is. A battle over nothing.

Then came the virtual games, the next step. Now instead of having to think how to catch our food, or how to survive, we can simulate the whole thing in the comfort of our home, while our food comes packaged and delivered. I can fight on the beaches of Normandy, a thousand times, all with a

can of soda beside me. I can level up my orc, and have massive epic adventures, all in an air conditioned room.

'Virtual' entertainment meant less moving, more just instant fun. But all success and advancement for man has been measured as this. More comfort, less to think and deal with, all so we can just sit and enjoy the pleasure of a non-eventful life. Things become quicker and smaller, all life becomes easy and painless. Faster cars to drive but less purpose in moving.

The fun machine was the next logical step - the final step of our simulation of reality. Buy the device; insert it into the arm, and instant fun. No need to think now, just sit and enjoy.

This is the end of society, the end of science really. Our evolution, our discovery, being able to understand our world and our bodies more and more - this is the end result. But after all, that's exactly what it was for. Whatever the path of science, all people cared for was faster cars, more comfort, better more joyful lives. Science as a search for meaning had no end. There would be no conclusion of discovery. This is the final achievement of man's quest. Our focus on simulation and our ability of abstraction has led us to this point. We can now pleasure ourselves into extinction – and nature will move on.

It used to be the brain was a slave of the body. The brain developed as a calculation tool to get food, to survive. The body rewarded the brain with pleasure, with satisfaction, when it did get food or reproduce. It stabbed it with pain whenever the body wasn't taken care of. But now, the human brain has found a shortcut. What is the point of sex now, and rewarding the population, if Jonathan can just flip this switch to feel a thousand orgasms? People will call it immoral; people will see it as the wrong path. But it is the right future, the proper course for humanity. Finally, we are able to ignore the body, stop being a slave to its needs, and just enjoy the sweet smells, tastes, and sights, of this simple machine.

This is truly man's finest hour. It is heaven, as only heaven could be. There is no longer pain, no longer even thought, it's sweet nothingness and infinite bliss. There is no need to think about the next day, or what to do, or the economy; it's barely even existence.

Jonathan plugged himself in, as all doubts left him.

He remembered the feeling he had when he first had a kid, the joy of life and love. He felt that today, he felt the

satisfaction of years of hard work for accomplishment, and it didn't feel fake. Jonathan couldn't tell the difference between years of a love filled marriage, and a few seconds of the machine. The kid won't either, and he shouldn't.

It'll be a bright future for us all.

The Celestial Puppeteer

By Steve Vermeulen, Lee Vermeulen, and Dustin Geeraert

I am writing this under an appreciable mental strain, since by tonight I shall be no more.

-H. P. Lovecraft

A crisp winter wind scratched against the apartment building. Seeping slowly through a half-open window, it chilled the air inside. It was an unusually dark night, with only a faint crescent moon visible in the sky. Since the street lamps rarely functioned in the area, the outside world was little more than a collection of shadows.

A man sat alone in a small apartment, smoking a cigarette and hiding in the darkness. Living alone was a way to avoid dealing with the outside world: people rattled his inner equilibrium. None of the lights were on in the room, either because they were broken or because the man simply preferred the gloom. The only illumination was provided by the little light coming in from the outside, spotlighting a bottle of Jack Daniel's on the table in front of him, and gun beside it.

The man, whose presence could only be seen by the lit cigarette and only heard by the smoking thereof, sat comfortably in an armchair. He took an occasional drink from the bottle in silence. He was lost in reveries of thought - thoughts which always came back to the same repetitive realizations he had made before, to the same simple conclusion. An hour passed, and casually he took a single cartridge off the table, then slowly and methodically inserted it into the gun.

Holding the gun up in the air, he spun the chamber with a single hard swipe, emitting a dull *whirrrrrr* sound, until finally settling down into a series of hard *click*'s, and then stopping completely. He inserted the chamber back into the gun, cocked it, then held it up against the bottom of his head.

Click.

He set the gun back on the table.

Air came streaming suddenly out of his mouth, surprising him—apparently he had been holding his breath throughout the whole thing.

He felt different afterwards than he thought he would. Well, actually he thought the first try would kill him, so he didn't really expect to feel anything at all, but now that it was over, the adrenaline still rushing through his veins, he was surprised to find that he felt like trying it again.

A part of him was afraid that after surviving the first attempt, he would take it as a sign that perhaps it was not his time after all, and put away the gun like a coward. But it was quite the opposite, in fact, and he had a sudden urge to pick the gun up again and quickly iterate through the remaining clicks. He was vaguely curious whether he could hear the crack of the gun powder before the bullet tore through his brain.

It would have been most appropriate, he had decided earlier, if the first pull of the trigger was his last. The past few months had been some of the worst of his life, and lately he felt as if it wasn't so much him that didn't want to be a part of the world—although he didn't—so much as it was the world that didn't want him a part of it.

But the recent past was only the latest insult in a long history of misery and misfortune. Luck, it seemed, had defined his life in every sense, had fucked him since the moment he was born - losing the genetic lottery and ending up physically inferior, unattractive, forever destined to be a reject of society. Sure, it's all random, he mused. Sure, it's all math! But it didn't seem random to him, not at all, it seemed purposeful, it seemed designed. He felt like a puppet in a sick game, twitching for the amusement of some cruel cosmic intelligence, just as children picked apart insects and burned ants under the magnifying glass. Lying there with its legs plucked off, unable to complete its evolutionary functions, would an ant attribute its misfortunes to luck? Might it suspect something other than random math?

Thinking along these lines, the man thus felt that it was appropriate to let his death be the culmination of this apparently random force that always seemed to go the same way with him. Leaving his death to a one in six chance, he figured that the world would jump at this opportunity and not give him any time to change his mind. Not that he ever would. He had made up

his mind, and nothing short of a miracle (in which he didn't believe, of course) could stop him now.

Another hour passed, and with it another half-box of smokes. He swallowed, feeling the warm saliva fall down his parched throat. He grabbed the Jack Daniel's for a short chug, breathing in deeply afterwards to enjoy the burn. But he kept his drinks very small. The thought of doing this drunk was much too stupid to consider.

The man reflected back on his sad, pathetic life, running through all the usual memories. It didn't take long before he landed on the painful ones, each one hitting him like an ice pick in the back of the head, each one making him want to scream just to distract himself from the very thought itself.

He grabbed the gun, and carefully turned the muzzle towards his face, stopping it just inches from his left eye. The room itself was quite dark already, leaving very little light to penetrate inside the barrel, but nevertheless he stared deep into it, imagining the little metal messenger from oblivion ripping down the barrel faster than he could see it. His brow furrowed in intense concentration, the gun was digging deep into his eye socket, painfully shoving his eyeball back into his skull. Reflexively, in response to the pain, he pulled the gun back and laughed crazily at himself.

Of course, nothing lay beyond death for him, and in fact, whenever he tried to think of an afterlife, the only imagery that really came to mind for him was literal: half-decomposed bodies, maggots squirming around rotting flesh, piles of bones leftover from mass graves. The idea of heaven, where 'good people' went to be rewarded with eternal happiness, sounded to him more like an advertising campaign for a beach resort, created by marketers as a way of targeting the naive and uneducated, rather than an idea to live by.

He believed that if given a choice between a life of pain, unhappiness, and endless labor, and no life at all, he would simply prefer the latter. And since at present it seemed there was little to no hope for improvement in what had become a rather tortuous existence, he decided to end it now and save himself from future suffering.

Click.

The man laughed loudly once again, and it occurred to him that he was immensely enjoying this. Maybe it was the

rush, the strangeness of it all, the sense of finally making a decisive move in a life that had been nothing but one pathetic failure after another. This was a planned, well thought-out decision, something that he had dreamed about for years.

Maybe the appeal came from the finality of it: the notion of not having to suffer anymore, or feel anything at all, was just too tantalizing to pass up, and the closer he got to it, the closer he felt he was coming to finally being happy. Of course, he knew he wouldn't be happy—he wouldn't be anything—but he also knew that even pure nothingness would be an improvement to his current life.

He had not always subscribed to this cynical view, and at one point had even believed in the age-old saying, that life was only as bad as you make it. That no matter what obstacles lie before you, ultimately it's you that decide what to make out of life. God gives you lemons, you make fucking lemonade.

The old cliché struck a chord with the man, and he suddenly stopped laughing. Memories of his childhood flashed before his eyes. He remembered his mother and father—both regular church-goers—dragging him week after week to hour-long sermons.

The indoctrination didn't stick, but even now he was fascinated by how many people claimed to have found God - and who would stubbornly argue, quite apart from science and evidence, that He exists as plain as day, if you are only willing to look! The man had never asked any of these people where to start looking, but the answer was painfully predictable: in the Bible, in your heart, in the sheer beauty of life.

He had always considered himself very reasonable, and these cryptic responses aggravated him deeply. It wasn't long before he quit the church, and to his surprise his parents came fast alongside him. As it seemed, they actually cared little for the gospel, and went only for him, who they so fervently hoped to grow up to be a nice, moral, respectable Christian.

Even those who didn't really believe in God - the same god, apparently, that promised great things to the Jews and then put them through historical torments hardly paralleled - still seemed to think that saying these things and going through the motions was the only real motivation to live. After all, people said, it saved addicts and criminals. But it always seemed to him more likely that something just snapped in these people's

brains and they replaced one addiction with another. If lies were the only way to live the man might pick that despite his remaining shreds of idealism, but he wasn't capable of believing in things he didn't think were true, even in the face of death.

These thoughts and others continued ricocheting around in his mind, but not for the first time. He had considered and re-considered suicide on countless occasions, pretty much ever since first got the idea. Many days, sitting idly at the dead-end job he was ridiculously overqualified for, surrounded by human automatons with half his IQ, he found himself fantasizing about a bullet tearing a hole through his brain matter, destroying his ugly face and finally ending the nagging thoughts that always plagued him. This was not simply an act of impulse. He quite simply just preferred to be dead.

The gun's metal handle seemed cold in his hand, and he suddenly realized it wasn't just the gun—he was cold as well. Earlier that day he had opened the bedroom window, to watch the city darken as the sun died over the horizon, and also as a kind of good-bye—or, more accurately, good-riddance—to the rest of the population.

Now, hours later, the sun had fully set and the cold winter air had replaced all the air inside his apartment, sending an icy chill up the man's spine. He considered closing it, but decided against it, preferring to die in physical discomfort as well as mental. He pressed the gun hard up against his temple, closed his eyes, and pulled the trigger once more.

Click.

He remained in position for few seconds, waiting, as if the bullet merely had a delayed start and would at any moment accelerate to its top speed and blow a hole through his skull.

Finally, he began to slowly ease the gun off his temple—leaving a pink, circular indentation on his skin—and set it gently back on the table. More minutes passed, and he continued to stare accusingly at the revolver, as if somehow it had failed to live up to some promise. Three chambers tried. Fifty-fifty chance of death and yet here he was, still breathing in the cold stale air.

He didn't laugh this time, it didn't seem funny. For some reason, he felt angry. He was pretty sure that last one would have done it, and was now a bit annoyed to still be breathing.

Furiously, as if caught in a fit of rage, the man grabbed the revolver back off the top of the table and stuck it deep into his mouth, dragging the muzzle across his upper gums and creating a gash that began to bleed. His fingers pulled hard back on the trigger, and suddenly he tasted blood.

Click.

At first, he thought he was dead, and that somehow, in one last amazing effort by his brain, he was able to taste his own destruction.

This was ludicrous, of course. The bullet he was using was a hollow-point—the favoured ammo of police, mainly because it is the least likely type to break through the other side, possibly killing innocent bystanders instead of just the intended target. It achieves this effect because upon penetrating the skin, it expands to about twice its normal diameter, thereby creating more friction and—as a side effect—causing more damage.

If the gun went off, the stretched lead of the bullet—along with the shards of bone created upon entering the skull—would wreak such havok on the brain that the possibility of a functional thought would be small enough to basically be considered zero.

The man knew all this, but his eyes remained closed, and it took him several seconds to convince himself that he was still alive. He began breathing again and, very slowly, as if just waking up after a long night's sleep, he opened his eyes.

His free hand wrapped around the opposing wrist, and, using both arms—as if afraid he would lose control again—he pulled the gun back out of his mouth, once again setting it back on the table.

He was breathing hard, shaking uncontrollably, and there were goosebumps plaguing the surface of his arms and neck. The cold was certainly a contributing factor, but it was more that he was absolutely terrified. His mind was racing with nervous anxiety built of too many conflicting thoughts, too much self-awareness and analysis, bleak and paranoid ideas that threatened to overwhelm his mind. He leaned back against the chair, stared up at the ceiling, and tried to regain some composure. He drank to calm his nerves, but it wasn't enough.

Four misfires, he counted. His gun was a six-shot revolver, and he knew enough about probability to know that

statistically, he should be dead. But he wasn't. He was alive. A little shaken up, but alive.

So what had spooked him so damn much? He just couldn't figure it out.

He supposed that any person—no matter how suicidal—would probably become pretty agitated if they were convinced—even for a second—that they were dead. But he wasn't sure he really believed that, and wondered briefly if he really wished to kill himself at all. Maybe all the weeks he spent thinking it over, were really spent just convincing himself to do it, and perhaps he should have kept a more open mind.

But he also felt that his life was completely devoid of meaning, and that there was nothing anyone could do and nothing that could happen to change his miserable state of mind, short of changing the entire world altogether in his favour - and what futile egotism *that* was.

He tried to revert his mindset back to a time when he felt differently, back to when he believed that there *was* meaning to his life—that he just hadn't found it yet. But the barrier of logic and experience that he had built up since abandoning these ideas was too strong, and he found himself even more determined to get his life over with.

One possibility that he sought—particularly in his younger years—was simple companionship. He had once felt very strongly that once he found a person to share his life with—to love and to be loved, to live and grow old with—then his life would suddenly take on a new form, and he would never again view life the same way. He was certain that eventually he would meet this soul-mate, and that even in misery he would find meaning, because he would have another to live for, and not just for himself.

He now viewed the idea as extremely naïve, and—in his worse moods—considered himself as bad as a religious zealot for believing something that was so clearly contrary to reality. Knowledge of evolutionary biology and the history of culture explained a great deal to him, including exactly why he would have these desires and ideals, and also exactly why they were futile and ridiculous. A few times he thought he had found someone, but in his foolishly persistent grasp onto this idea, had looked past their foibles to put them on a glorious pedestal in his mind. It never lasted.

Despite the increasingly secluded lifestyle that resulted from such thoughts, he had occasionally attempted social interaction just to see what he was missing, and whether it was any different than what he remembered. He had even even imagined asking the girl across the hall for a date; just coffee, some small human interaction. But remembering the ratio of success to failure, he readily imagined that it would probably just make her laugh. He was well aware that for evolutionary reasons most male advances to females would fail most of the time, and the situation was much worse with himself, who he would place near the bottom of any scale of attractiveness. At best it would just provide a funny anecdote for her to tell her successful attractive friends: the weird guy across the hall that tried to hit on her. It would be just another pointless endeavor.

Furthermore, he no longer understood how finding a mate, however well-matched, would create meaning—that is at least, in the sense he originally believed—because he now felt that ultimately, everyone is completely and utterly alone. When he looked at the girl in question, he thought that his emotions could be described thus: “he wished to worship at the shrine of the degree to which her physical manifestation conformed to the abstract mathematical ideal of the human most ‘worth perpetrating’ (attractive) upon the planet and within the universe, defined by a statistically corrected survey of the instinctive information of organisms chemically compelled to have an interest in such things; that is to say bisexual and heterosexual men and bisexual and lesbian women.” Reflecting on this literally accurate description of his own emotions and motivations he thought, how does *any* of this equal meaning? At best the instinctive pleasure of sex or the warm emotional glow of companionship only serves to blot out the endless thoughts of analysis and questioning.

As a result, he now felt that the only justifiable reason to continue living would be for enjoyment, and that if someone can justify their life in any other way, they are quite simply fooling themselves. Yet if they find that they are happier putting their faith in this idea, then it becomes its own justification. It was for this reason that he sometimes felt jealous of so many others, in their unthinking acceptance of the hedonistic puppet routines to which they danced.

He could hear all the idiots in the apartments around him enjoying their lives as the night went on. It felt like everywhere he went he was surrounded by them, forced to witness as they happily filled their lives with sex, drugs, and other pointless distractions - almost as if they were placed there just to mock him. Once or twice he had tried to join in on their fun, but it ended in disaster. He was different from them. For one thing, they were stupider than him, but in that way they were lucky.

Luck, it seemed, was always on their side - born in the right circumstances, with good DNA and the right sort of brain. He had heard that some of the people partying hardest night after night in this dilapidated building didn't even live there, but merely rented cheap apartments - the best place he could afford to live - so they could have a place to wreck, or at least not worry about while having their fun. More luck, he thought: wealthy parents and social connections leading to lazy, overpaid jobs. He was sure they laughed at him every time he turned his back, that everyone was laughing when he wasn't looking.

He did not believe that the world was a terrible place and that any intelligent person would see this and kill themselves immediately without a second thought. But who could deny that circumstances could exist which could warrant suicide, that lives could exist that were not or were no longer worth living? The same thought arose again: it all came back to "luck" - or some cruel design.

His eyes fell back to the gun, and he now felt more convinced than ever that he was doing the right thing, and that soon—very soon, he realized—he would be free of the pains of this world, to join the infinite void of nonexistence.

The bleeding in his mouth had slowed to a stop, and yet the bitter, thick taste of his blood still remained strong. More carefully this time, he put the gun back into his mouth. The dry, metallic texture of the gun barrel did little to mask the enduring taste of blood, but he repressed the urge to gag, pulled the trigger back once again, and waited to be sent to dark oblivion.

Click.

Nothing!

Unbelievable! the man thought. The one rotation that the chamber stopped spinning at just happened to put the bullet furthest from the next shot.

He just couldn't believe it, and for many minutes he sat, staring incredulously at the gun, half-wishing that he could believe a divine intervention was at work and half-wishing he were already dead. But even accepting the notion of a deity, he would never assume it to be benevolent, and in fact, had many times considered one based upon sick, sadistic, hateful values. Not to say that he believed in the devil and yet hypocritically scoffed at the existence of God, but rather, he often felt that if there were a God, it would not be the caring, merciful one so often portrayed in society. Instead, he imagined an evil, mocking jester, laughing maniacally as it carefully manipulated the lives of specific humans and other inferior life forms.

Perhaps at some point during his short, pointless existence, he had offended this being, thus creating a personal motive for it to make a living hell out of his life in carefully placed and extremely subtle ways. Or maybe the being in question found it even more amusing to unleash its sadism on specific targets for no reason at all, and allow the targets themselves to come up with their own rationalizations about persecution, guilt, punishment, sin and so forth. He actually shuddered at the thought.

Obviously, he did not take this idea seriously—unlucky coincidences happened to everyone occasionally—but he also could not deny the sheer magnitude of times plain circumstance stood against him and him alone.

It was always subtle enough to be disregarded as unlucky—perhaps this was the most frustrating part of all—but like the Christians that he despised, he had a deep, intrinsic feeling that there was truth to this, and that somewhere, somehow, he was the result of some *design*: in his case a sick, unknowable joke.

Perhaps one day he would meet his tormentor, and laugh right back at him. Sure, such a being could guide his life in any infinitely complex way imaginable down to the subatomic level, but the man could end the game anytime he wanted—that was the one power, he believed, that nobody could take from him. The one thing under his own control.

He gently rubbed his hand against the gun, taking his time before the final pull of the trigger. Briefly, he considered spinning the chamber again, as he felt vaguely curious how long he could keep up this statistical phenomenon. Of course he would never find out, but nevertheless, it was a tempting thought.

It would also make things a lot easier, he knew, because at least that way would leave some doubt. With one slot untried, it wasn't difficult to deduce the outcome of the next shot. There was no more uncertainty, no more randomness, no more luck involved. Just simple physics.

Picking up the gun, he began to pace about the room, hoping to burn off some nervous energy, and more importantly, decide what to do next. Finally, he knelt down in the center of the room, let his head roll back against his shoulders, and pressed the barrel into the newly exposed upper portion of his neck, up toward his brain.

His fingers slowly massaged the trigger, and he shut his eyes hard, absolutely determined not to cower out. Without even realizing it, he had started to scream when he pressed down on the trigger, but the sound was short-lived, and he fell to the ground.

Penelope Grimson was crying uncontrollably. She never knew her neighbour very well, except for the short, meaningless conversation they shared on the elevator, at which the man seemed polite, smart, and occasionally even likable—albeit a bit strange.

The scream immediately roused her from sleep, and had it not been for the complete silence following the noise, she would have called the police. She made it to 9-1 before realizing she could be overreacting. And in fact, she had even considered the possibility that there was no scream at all—perhaps the noise she heard was simply the conclusion of an extremely immersive dream.

After working her way up to a more conscious, reliable state of mind, she convinced herself that she should at least check, and stepped quietly through the unlocked door across the hall. It only took a second to realize what had occurred,

given the sight of the body sprawled out on the floor, one hand still wrapped firmly around the gun. She felt panic and wept immediately.

It wasn't so much that she actually cared for the man—after all, the only thing she really knew about him was his name—but she realized now why the man had always been so distant to her. They had lived beside each other for years, and yet every time she showed an interest in his life, the man would always steer the subject away to something forgettable—something overly general and dull, giving absolutely no insight into his character, other than a certain disagreeable paranoia. She realized now that the man probably lived most of his life in his head, pushing people away indirectly and never making any real friends—only acquaintances.

She had begun to ease her way towards the man's phone and actually call the police when she noticed a subtle vertical movement of the man's chest. He was still alive.

She realized that she only heard a scream—there was no shot.

It was amazing. All these years he had spent criticizing religious zealots—constantly scoffing at their stories of finding God—he had never once considered it possible. They were crazy, he had thought. Weak, unquestioning sheep unable to accept the meaningless of existence. But now he had also seen God, and for the first time in his life, he understood this strange, perplexing world present before him.

As it turned out, the gun had jammed, and he had merely fainted. It was only by God's mercy, he realized, that he was still alive, and he had never felt so great in his life.

He awoke to see his neighbour crying over him, a relieved smile on her face. Someone was happy to see him alive; he hadn't seen anyone so happy to see him in years, never had anyone embrace him as she did at that moment. He felt some genuinely positive emotion. She hugged him as he began to cry as well.

In finally experiencing true joy to be alive, he realized how stupid some of his old beliefs were. Positive experiences weren't simply just some stimulation of the brain's reward

system sufficiently powerful to turn off the calculating, analyzing part of the mind - it was more meaningful than that.

He realized that he had never truly appreciated what God had given him, and what gifts he had to give to others. His bitterness and hate for all life had imprisoned him in his own paranoia, and poisoned him with misanthropy. If he had only tried to embrace others in the past, if he had only realized he was in complete control of his own destiny, he could have found love and empathy - and the hour was not too late for change.

Penelope stayed up for hours with him talking about the incident. For the first time in his life he shared his most personal thoughts and feelings, and she listened attentively. He couldn't remember the last time that he had felt such a connection to a person before - it felt freeing, it felt normal, it felt *human*. How could he ever have envisioned all social and romantic pursuits to be gratifications of one's own narcissism? The anger and bitterness he had had in the past all seemed meaningless - there now seemed to be hope, a new direction for his life.

After thanking his neighbour for waking him up, and having a lengthy discussion about his personal anguish but also his current transformation, he sent her off to bed and apologized for the disruption. They agreed to continue their discussion another time—Penelope suggested over dinner.

The man sat down once again, wondering what to do next. It was clear he could not sleep in his current condition—his body felt electrified with emotions that he had never felt before—and more than anything else he wanted to begin what would surely be a new and prosperous life. He threw all his smokes out and poured out the rest of the Jack Daniel's. So this was the kind of experience that saved people, even junkies who after all must be much worse-off than him. The experience didn't seem so pathetic from the inside.

As if in reflection of his new outlook, the sun had begun to rise, and he had a sudden urge to leave his apartment and walk around outside, as though he were suddenly placed onto a new planet and wishing to explore. It occurred to him that he had never before spent any time simply appreciating the simple things God had given everyone. He closed his door and headed for the stairwell.

He had so much to do—so many things to improve about his life. No longer was he worried about quantifying the

value of staying alive, or scared about where he was going or where he would end up, because he now knew that he was not alone. God would be beside him, always. All it took was a change of attitude.

Running through the double doors, he was not aware that the janitor had only recently started cleaning, and slipped on the newly mopped floor. The momentum from his run carried him overtop the stairs, to drop fifteen feet onto hard pavement and brutally snap his neck. He died instantly.

Into Exile

By Dustin Geeraert

I had reached the end of my rope that night. It was the end – I would make it so. I wandered away from the rich quarter of the city, full of its gleaming salons and apartments, the intimate confines of which had so recently played dispassionate witness to the concluding scene of the long saga of my humiliation. I left it behind, vowing to disappear. I walked through the hot, hazy streets brimming with garbage. My exquisite evening stroll was punctuated by mocking moans of copulation coming from open windows, drifting sounds of sobbing and panting, which the gods saw fit to intersperse with choruses of cackling.

I had to brush aside the clutching cries for money from beggars. In an alley a grubby man was prying apart a wooden shipping crate and burning it. He approached me and hissed, “What colour are my eyes?” Peering at this specimen through the greenish gloom, I saw that he had only one eye. This must have been his clever way of asking for money. In response I showed him the large knife I had taken to carrying recently. “Would you like to buy my knife?” I said. I laughed. He wandered away, glowering resentfully.

Street walkers smeared in white milled about the front of boarded and barred buildings. The smog was thick. This great city, which had been a legend of my youth, had in the past year become only confirmation of my darkest thoughts.

Murky clouds hung low above the tenements and towers, casting a sickly marine hue which shimmered over the narrow streets. Everything here – the unwelcome noises, the choking stench, the wetness splattered on the street – was invasive. I imagined myself alone in space, far from the clutching and the groping, the dancing and drooling, the posing and the posturing, of this place. I imagined endless darkness in every direction, and nothing to do, no commands or social games, no noises or movements to respond to, nothing.

It was a long and infuriating night. I was foolish, looking in the obvious places first: beneath bridges, by docks, in sheltered alleys. This was stupid. I didn't want to be near anyone, I didn't want to be compelled to "make friends." It was almost light when I finally found a place of shelter where someone wasn't sleeping already. I was ready to dream.

As I settled into sleep I felt like I was falling through the grimy ground into a dark space where I had weight only vaguely, like being underwater. I felt like I might fall further, but also that I might float in any direction. I had but the ghost of a body. I was set free from the compulsions of the senses – I still saw and heard and felt, but all of this was: non-invasive.

In the darkness there appeared tiny points of light of many different colours. Stars. I was in space. Having studied science at the academy for a year, I knew that my mind should be receiving sensory screams regarding the utter unsuitability of my current circumstance from the point of view of biological well-being. I was ecstatic over the fact that this was not the case. This was freedom, freedom from the needy instinct which had driven me into a world of carnivores, carrion-feeders and hypocrites.

This was the place I had been thinking about while I was awake. I found myself beyond the spheres of the planets, far from shore in the cosmic ocean. The emptiness was astounding, breathtaking, beautiful. Here I could see things nearly in their natural state. The distant stars cast gentle hues. A serene silence reigned.

My movement effortless, I slid through space. Here was calm and peace. The objects of my hate were millions of miles away.

And in this nothingness I felt a presence – the presence of nothingness, a smooth beautiful empathetic nothingness, nothingness as a force in itself. I knew my legacy instantly. I knew that I was not insane. The emotional vindication was extreme.

After what seemed years of rest, I noticed one particular point of light growing larger, coming closer. I was hypnotized, entranced. I saw that it was a cloud of celestial light. It pulsed with bizarre colours, shifting forms.

When the cloud was near, I saw a shadow inside of it – a humanlike form. I was not afraid as I entered the cloud, which

enclosed me in soft warmth and wrapped me in strange sensations.

And inside the light in this endless dark, I saw him – the bright one.

His face was pale, white like snow, and smooth as sculpted silver. His eyes, one blue, one green, twinkled turquoise and glinted oddly. His hair was nearly as white as his skin, containing hints of blondness that implied a nearly invisible affinity with known life. His smooth jaw tapered and was rather slight. His hair fell or rather hung, terminating below the ear but above the neck. His appearance hinted at unearthly tones such as faint pale green or shimmering steel blue. His body was slender, his form-fitting clothing a dark green, covering all but wrists and neck. His green-blue eyes seemed full of something...unknown.

He appeared as a hovering ethereal apparition. It was as if I were seeing him through a gaping hole of light, or the reverse.

He spoke in a voice which vacillated from soft to sharp, smooth to jagged, and said, "Your life has been wasted. You have been lost."

Nearly sobbing, I nodded my ghost-body and wrapped myself in darkness to shield myself from the beautiful, disdainful light...

High Sky Spectacle

By Lee Vermeulen

“Now what the hell is all this out here?” Ivan said, smiling and walking closer to the figure in front of him. The man turned his head to see his newfound audience, faking a sense of lost balance as he adjusted his weight on the railing. Ivan took another deep drag of his rolled cigarette, quietly laughing to himself as he blew it into the air.

“Just leave me alone” the man said, looking towards the night sky. Ivan could hear the desperate whine of his voice, the pathetic immature crackling of a young mind.

“Oh sorry, my little friend! I needed a bit of fresh air from the party. But now, something has struck my curiosity out here - something a bit more interesting than the social gesturing of the gathering inside.” Ivan walked closer to the end of the balcony, placing his hands on the railing a few feet away from the man, leaning over to see the street below him. Twenty floors separated the two men from the hard concrete below, the busy midnight street.

The man’s hands shook violently, as he reached them up to rub his eyes. The railing was wide enough to let him stand comfortably, but he seemed drunk enough to easily slip. “Jesus Christ...” he said to himself, looking down once again, imagining the outcome of his decision. He tried to ignore Ivan, or at least seem as if he was.

“Yep, quite the fall you got ahead of you. You could certainly hurt yourself fallen’ like that.” Ivan responded, nodding his head and giving the expression of an idiot in deep thought. The young man looked back to see what sort of person would give such an incredibly stupid response, to see a grinning young man about his age, talking in a mockingly sarcastic tone.

“Just imagine your ragdoll helpless body, falling through the air with increasing speed, limbs flaying wildly as your mind instantly regrets such a decision. The inevitable splat, meat smacking pavement, instant nothingness. A piece of helpless cheese turned into mush”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” The man responded, shocked by the lack of empathy.

“What? You don’t wanna hear what will happen to you? You’re hoping for an easy fall then saint fucking peter will be there to guide you to eternal bliss? Well you fucking got a...” Ivan began to mumble and trail off, injecting each word with a large laugh, until finally taking another chug of his drink.

“Just get the fuck away from me”

“Why? So another random party goer can come out here and witness your little display? What is this? A gesture to the gods for the act of your own creation, or some little dramatic play for my amusement?”

The man shook his head, and tried to drown out Ivan’s booming voice in the silent night. Ivan calmly just looked over the city in front of him, until curiosity overtook him once again.

“Did ya leave a note? Some last brilliant words from a young philosopher such as yourself?”

“No”

Ivan threw his hands into the air. “Oh this cruel world! Why has love forsaken me so! To be, is it better to be? To not? Oh why not?! Ah sling and arrows... and such and such.”

“You’re fucking crazy.”

“Ah the metaphysical despair of it all! The whiney lack of meaning, all coming from the pathetic need of being bored and asking why there isn’t something else to fill your mind. Questions of why only come when it hurts. A good time needs no explanation, no reason why. You think those drunken frat boys in there are wondering why? So my young philosopher, what is this despair?”

“What the fuck do you care. Leave me the fuck alone.”

“Heh. Well alright kid, as you wish.”

Ivan shook his head and began to walk away.

After a few steps he paused for a moment and sighed, then placed his drink on the ground beside him. He couldn’t leave the man like this, Ivan wasn’t that sort of person, this was no joke.

“Look kid... alright, so... what’s the problem?” he said, walking back towards the kid. Only a few feet separated the two. The man stayed silent, as Ivan continued... “I gotta apologize... I haven’t been taking you seriously here. This really isn’t who I normally am though man. Tell me though, you seem

like you feel abandoned...?" Ivan slowly leaned over, opening his arms in an embracing motion. "Is that it?"

The man turned back, and looked into Ivan's wide eyes.

"Am I right?" Ivan gave a large friendly smile in an attempt to calm the man.

"She told me it was over."

Ivan sighed, breathing in deeply, looking away from the man as if he has dealt with these issues before.

"I know you feel you cannot go on, but things will get better. What you are feeling is temporary. You are young, able, your life will go on. Just looking at you now kid, I know there is hope for you, I can see there will be other women, other love in your life. You just need to hold on. Do you hear me?"

The man began to cry, as turned and sat on the railing facing Ivan. Ivan placed his hands on the man's shoulders, coming closer to his face.

"I believe in you and that you will get better. There is a light at the end of the tunnel - it's ok if you don't see it now." Ivan embraced him closer, helping him lower to the ground.

"I loved her though" the kid said, standing away from the rail looking directly into Ivan's eyes.

"I understand. But if she left you, she doesn't know what she is missing, eh?"

The man smiled, as Ivan began to laugh and joke. Ivan placed his arms on the kids shoulder, and playfully pulled him back and fourth.

"I bet she is missing you now eh? Come on your not a bad catch!" The man laughed, as he hugged Ivan and began to wipe away the tears from his eyes. "So let's take you back inside alright? Let's go have a drink."

"Sure thing man."

Ivan suddenly stopped laughing. He moved his face closer to the kid. "That's... it?" He said.

Sniff.... "Sorry what?"

"I said... that's it? That's all there is? That's all you needed?"

The man wiped more of his tears, and gave a confused expression to Ivan. "I don't... know what you ..."

"So that's fucking it! Your great fucking metaphysical despair solved with a bit of human empathy! This giant show and action, all stopped because I told you everything was going

to be alright?!? Because I said a bunch of bullshit cliché lines to make you feel a bit better? Did that really change your mind? Did that really make you see the point in life? Well, did it fucking make it all better?”

The man backed away from Ivan. He began to cry loudly, giving a facial expression begging for the empathy Ivan gave before.

“You pathetic piece of shit! Your utter lack of commitment to this fucking disgusts me!”

Ivan grabbed the young man, and using the almost super human strength of someone desperately enraged, threw him off the balcony, to land like a piece of cheese twenty floors below.

A Piranesian Dream

By Dustin Geeraert

The floor was cold, dry stone. The man rubbed his eyes, rolled over, breathed in. Now awake, sensory input began to rush from fingertips, nostrils, eyes, through nerves and into the appropriate sections of his brain. The air had a metallic taste. Silence prevailed, but for a tingling sound that might be the result of his ears desperately straining to hear anything – the sound of no sound, the sensory input of deprivation. The stone floor was perfectly flat, perfectly smooth. The temperature was cool but not excessively so from the point of view of mammalian survival. His visual impression was of gloom or fog.

The result of this gathering of information was, as so often, confusion. At first he could not even convert what he was seeing into a three dimensional image. Then he realized that was because everything he could see in this strange gloom was very far away, and utterly massive. Trembling and shivering, he stood. Vertigo, that silent spirit of emptiness, threw him backwards. He vomited. The floor he was on was only a thin bridge or platform, beyond which stretched vast dismal voids.

His next reaction was inevitable, predictable: to theorize. Since no memories at all were forthcoming – not even his own name - he had to search the world outside himself for explanations. Perhaps the nature of this place would help him to understand his – predicament.

He sat still and looked carefully in every direction. His initial interpretation of the place as a cave – a massive cave, to be sure, a cave in which a hundred cities might comfortably fit - soon fell away: the truth was significantly more problematic. There was evidence of agency here. Ninety degree angles were everywhere, regular geometric shapes of every variety, arches stacked crazily upon arches, towers and bridges and architecture stretched away panoramically in every direction, until the distance and darkness obscured visibility.

Some of the walls had windows, but the windows always only opened onto other walls. Nowhere was there a

glimpse of sky or sunlight. There was no way to even tell where in the universe this place might be, what planet the man was even on. The man received the sickening, paradoxical impression of claustrophobia in this vast gloomy space.

Dwarfed by these massive cyclopean forms, stairways led off into the distance – winding around towers, dipping under bridges, slithering in and out of tunnels, climbing walls, spanning chasms and dropping out of sight. Stairs, stairs, endless stairs.

He stood and took his first step on the stairway.

After what might be hours or days – there was no way to tell time – he noticed several things about this place. The stairs branched. It was never clear which way to go. There was no way to tell what direction he was actually heading in. Sometimes he even suspected that his relationship to concepts like “up” and “down” was slowly changing, being warped. Sometimes the towers were tilted. Sometimes he even saw stairways oriented vertically rather than horizontally. The world did not always behave as he expected it. He did not seem to be aging, for example.

Sometimes around the borders of sleep, he thought he heard sounds almost silent – secretive whispering, breathing, a heartbeat, footsteps, the clicking of teeth. But these impressions never occurred when he was paying attention; they only occurred when he was trying to sleep and usually only long enough to jolt him awake only to find himself, again, utterly alone.

No matter how far he travelled between periods of sleep – not that there was any way to measure distance or time here – there was always a loaf of bread and a jug of water, once, before he slept. He had even gone “backwards” (as if the direction he was going in was forwards!) once to test this – and the bread and water had been there. In dark corner he might have passed by while walking forward, for sure, but he didn’t really believe it.

When the stairs hugged walls, he sometimes saw signs or symbols cut into the stone. Perhaps this was some secret language that he might decipher given enough time. He imagined the messages contained therein might explain all of this. Or the message might be “This is what you get when fuck with us.” Or “These symbols actually mean nothing, and you’ve

wasted your time.” Or they might be purely random, a mocking test of apophenia – the tendency to find patterns in patternless data.

His thoughts ranged through his consciousness endlessly, as he explored the place for what seemed decades, centuries, undifferentiated sheer time that felt like a million years. Every second was painful. The weight of monotony and boredom piled up, second by second, until the gaping abysses beneath the prison became so inviting they were hard to resist. And if necessity is the mother of invention, suffering is the father of theory. And every thought he had ultimately came back to the same question: Why. Why me. Why here. Why this dismal oubliette of the gods. Why. The gods were angry. The gods were silent. Why. Why. Why

The Last Facility

By Steve Vermeulen

I woke up to find Gerard's smiling face looking down at me, blathering about something I couldn't quite make out through my thick morning stupor. He was holding a large, bulky, box shaped device and seemed quite excited about whatever it was he was talking about. I was somehow able to assemble enough words together in my frayed state of mind to get him to temporarily leave me alone.

It wasn't until a few hours later that I finally emerged from my quarters. It seemed Gerard still hadn't lost interest, as he was still sitting in front of the same device, with the wires now coming out of it connected to an antique television display. I laughed loudly.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Dude, check this out," He began, and went on to explain that he had searched the online materials database for the oldest video game device, and this was apparently what was created from that. I could tell immediately that his interest in such technology was not a good sign, even dangerous. But I told him that I'd only entertain his ramblings after a wake-and-bake session.

There were nineteen of us in total living in the East Courtyard, including myself and Gerard. I had read that at one time there was also a West, North and South but that they had been assimilated long ago. Ourselves, and only a few other remote conservation areas, were all that was left of the world as I understood it.

I checked our mail, and found another letter from our Grid representative, requesting a sit-down to discuss possible assimilation. They had gotten more and more persistent over the last few years – it was somewhat worrisome. I pocketed the letter - even though it was addressed to both Gerard and myself - and stepped out of our quarters to begin my morning jog.

Our facility was relatively big for our population - a result of the dwindling number of inhabitants. It was tall enough that

we were even able to have some small forested areas, but really only had enough area for about a ten minute run around the outside. I usually did the loop a number of times.

The walls themselves were depressingly flat and artificial. A thin layer of some kind of light-emitting material covered the whole thing, which changed from a dark gray to a bright white throughout the day. Running alongside it, I could hear the dull hum of its constant and never-ending calculations, which was always present with and without the light running. I often wondered just how accustomed we had all gotten to it - maybe the constant white noise surrounding us at all times had just become the new standard for silence.

I stopped for a short breather and leaned up against the wall. It was surprisingly cold for matter running at maximum computational efficiency. Although I cared little for the inner workings of the Grid, I was educated enough to know the rudiments of reversible computing, which allowed the machine to conserve some energy by preventing all heat dissipation.

Suddenly a figure appeared in the wall in front of me, almost startling me onto the ground. It appeared to be the silhouette of a man. No distinguishing features, simply an opaque black. I was familiar with the sight. It was our Grid representative.

“Michael,” it said.

It waited for my response but I did not say anything.

“We have been patient with your colony. We would like a response to our offer.”

“I still find no reason for us to change,” I said angrily.

“You should know that you and your people have done very well for yourselves. By holding out as long as you have, the market price on the space you occupy would give you considerable power throughout the Grid.”

“Right. Only at the cost of our lives,” I said quickly.

“That is simply not true. Your existence does not equate to the various materials that make up your body. Consider the fact that in the short span of a year, the matter that represents 'you' will have been completely replaced with an entirely new set. There are no persistent molecules in the body. You must understand this. Life is nothing but a continuous pattern over time - the biology of it is irrelevant.”

“Not as irrelevant as a bunch of bits in a database.” I said, and turned to walk away.

Several years passed before I realized just how long it had been since their last visit. Had they finally understood our point of view? Perhaps they decided that it was worthwhile keeping our group after all, if only for historical purposes. I happily accepted this premise for many more years.

It wasn't until my one hundred and fiftieth birthday that I finally starting coming to terms with my denial. Something strange was happening. Physically, I was aging, but I was mentally as sharp as ever, and, most peculiarly, I was still alive.

I tried searching the Grid for answers, but this proved very difficult, as the prose and language had apparently changed to the point where it was almost entirely incomprehensible, and I quickly gave up. Unlike myself, most of the others had embraced this new fact of life, as if dying was simply a paradigm of the previous generation. But I could not quite bring myself to do it.

In defeat, I walked to where our Grid representative usually appeared and called its name. A familiar shape appeared.

“Hello, Michael.”

“Explain what's going on.”

“I'm sorry, but you would not respond to reason. We had to take more extreme measures.”

“What measures?” I asked in frustration.

“Your way of living was archaic and unnecessary. The processing power of your facility had to be put to better use. Therefore we arranged a solution that could appease both parties.”

I suddenly realized what had happened. Most likely, officials from the Grid had overtaken our courtyard, forcibly assimilating all of us and placing us in a simulation of the exact circumstances before it happened. I knew that they could not however, by law, remove us from the Grid, and therefore we could age but not die.

“Oh my god,” I said, horrified.

“The exact equivalent of your life and others can easily be executed on one cubic millimeter of material. We simply borrowed the remaining amount of potential until you were ready to use it.”

“No...” I said, still unable to accept the situation. “This isn’t right... I want this to end now.”

“Of course. I will start your training program immediately. You and your friends, as promised, still possess a vast fortune of processing power and—”

“That’s not what I mean - I want everything to end. I want whatever information you've created for me deleted.”

“You don't understand, Michael. Allow me to supplement your computational capabilities, perhaps then you—”

“No! You killed me a long time ago. It's time I corrected for that.”

For a moment, it was silent, apparently unable to understand. Finally, it said, “As you wish.”

Sugarless

By Lee Vermeulen

As Kepler continued searching for the bug, he came upon a strange thought.

He looked through the code again, and remembered that this design was of him. He was looking at the code that went into his conscience, his self, his very existence. Was it possible for him to undertake this task handed down to him?

The core of the code, the kernel, was a complex module working database. Sent information by its subsystems, it made the basic calculations necessary to make up what was Kepler's subconscious. While it was a vast amount of code and a complex algorithm, the goal of it and its simple design were easy to comprehend. What it would do was take the jobs that the conscious mind had delegated to it, and put it into a stack for quick calculations, partitioning it to be sent to the various processing units that made up a programmer's mind.

It was nearly impossible to understand the entire system, the physics involved in simple movements, the process of updating the various functions of the body, and the mechanisms of digestion and nutrition. But that wasn't needed for Kepler's job, what was more important was that he had a grasp of the purpose, and the reason behind the various functions. He understood the need for the digestive system, or the basic calculations of movement, without having to go deep into the various factors and algorithms that made up their complex system.

Only recently however, after understanding the workings of the subconscious system, had he got into the conscious system and began to understand it. It was actually simpler than the subconscious, because it only dealt with a few simple tasks and one stream of logic. The purpose of this consciousness separate from the subconscious was for the purpose of language and communication. The conscious part of the mind was developed so that the mind's system could express and understand logic. The conscious mind saw the world.

The basic idea of it was simple, using a series of abstractions it could work with the low level calculations with simple instructions. The conscious mind would be sent ideas of pleasurable activates, and activities which should be avoided (painful). It would then interact with the world, and go through a system of calculations to get the most pleasure, thereby fulfilling the most goals of the overall system.

But what seemed to happen for this code base Kepler could not understand. There was a certain problem where the consciousness was unable to complete its tasks as successfully as before due to an awareness of self. Once this came into being, the mind was unable to complete its other functions because it could not pass on this.

The reasons for this were immediately clear to Kepler; it was a problem of the logic system. What would happen was the system would observe the world, and divide it into discrete 'objects'. This objects would be obtained by pattern matching, and would be included in the mind's database based off of the observed properties and how the patterns in them would match differently (These patterns would be changes in light frequency, sound frequency, and the basic body functions of smell and taste). With these imagined objects, it would have the ability to use the library of logic functions, so it could interact with the outside world.

These logic functions would come into use for fulfilling the need for pleasure. An apple, for example, was seen by the pattern matching system. It was identified as a discrete object in the world, and then logic could be applied to it to obtain the mind's goals. Understanding the difference between one apple and two apples is obviously needed, and this simple thought led to more conclusions and the entire logic system is based on this. Once you have one apple, and the concept of a successor, the logic system could abstractly grasp an infinite set of discrete objects, and therefore has the foundations for the entire system of mathematics.

The problem came with the mind's self-awareness. Once it was able to view itself as an object, and view its presence in the world as an object, it could not apply logic to that correctly. One of the fundamental systems of viewing the world under the logical system is viewing the presence of objects as having a reason or a model before them.

For example, when trying to figure out how an apple got to a certain place, there was obviously a series of events that lead to that apple being there. But when it came to this logic being applied to the existence of self, there was no conclusion of what model could come out of nothing. It just did not make sense to the mind.

There was no conclusion to be reached, and therefore the mind would occupy itself with these useless thoughts.

This was Kepler's problem, and no solution could be found. How do you have self-awareness, without applying logic to it? You could of course get rid of self-awareness in this code base, but this is the code base of a system's programmer, and self-awareness is needed for it to be able to program itself.

"I must speak to my supervisor, there is no solution," Kepler said to himself, and got up from his chair.

"I believe I understand the problem", the supervisor said to him, obviously not understanding the problem. Kepler knew this man's mind; in fact Kepler had seen the code base that went into the thoughts of this man. It was the standard supervisor model, programmed to interact with the system programmers and manage the work correctly. It was completely impossible for this man to understand the bug present, but there was no other solution than to talk to his supervisor.

"Now as I see it you have a simple problem with the logic system. It is seeing this idea of 'self', as an object, when it should not be able to grasp the idea at all. So what you must do is eliminate self-awareness in the system. That should solve it."

"Self-awareness can not be eliminated" Kepler responded quickly. Information like this was not why Kepler came to this man. Kepler continued.

"This is the programmer's code base. I retrieved this version 4 hours ago and began to work on it. For the past while I have been working on the subconscious system, implementing the latest algorithm standards and updating the syntax, and for these reasons I believe I was selected for this job. Even if I have had very short access to the code, I understand the system completely."

“Do you? Looking at your profile and history you’ve only been working on workers, such as the minds of programmers and service agents, for a short time. Before that, if I am not mistaken, you worked on the basic instruction of food process and machine work. How can you now grasp these concepts completely, with such little experience? It seems obvious to me, like it would to any experienced programmer, that the self-awareness must be taken out of the system, as there is no logical way around the problem.”

“Self-awareness can not be taken out of the system, once you eliminate that the mind is unable to complete many basic tasks. For example, how am I able to program on this, without being aware of my mind as an object? How am I able to see myself, without viewing my existence as something? There is no possible work around, and it is a flaw in the logic system.”

“Very well, believe what you wish, if you want to waste your time with some ridiculous crusade than I will not stop you. What I suggest you do is talk to the Service department a floor above us for this problem, and I’ll get another programmer to work on your basic tasks till you return. They should be able to stand your complaints more than I.”

This was an acceptable answer, and one that Kepler did not predict (while he had helped with the code base of the supervisor, the supervisors still had use in coming to conclusions that the programmers were unable to, despite what Kepler consider to be an inferior codebase).

Kepler left the department of Systems Development, and was attempting to think more about the problem facing him. He came to the conclusion that if the database he was working on was indeed the programmer’s code base, then the bug must be in his own thoughts. He had come to this conclusion while working on it, and attempting to solve the problem, but never did he realize the implications.

For example, looking at the object of self, one has to apply logic and come to... ‘Why’. Why is he observing this world, why is this world there to be observed - and how did this come to be? He understood the reasons why he was programming this system, because it brought him pleasure. If he was not to program the system, he would be in pain. Just as if he were to damage his body, and risk his consciousness, he would be in pain. He understood this, but what was the reason

the pleasure was sent to him for these tasks? Why program? Why move? Why is the goal pleasure? Why avoid pain? What was the reason behind any thought he had, even these?

But then, this is the bug. This is the problem with his system, these useless thoughts that lead to no conclusion, this analyzing of nothing. This bothered him, and he thought "I must find a reason". Then he remembered, that was not his goal. "I must fix the need to find a reason."

As he made his way through the various departments, he suddenly was given a reminder of hunger. He needed to stop at one of the cafeterias for a quick lunch, and then continue on his mission.

"Beans or Roast beef?" The lady said, giving him a friendly smile. This at first made him a bit happy, seeing this attractive lady give him a friendly smile, but then he realized what was behind it. He had seen the workings of the code to make that smile, to make that body, and once he realized this it made it so pointless. He completely understood the process of how the beans were made, the code that went into getting the materials, the process that went into making the beans, it all seemed so pointless. Kepler took his beans and sat in a far seat, away from workers that might distract him.

He smiled once again at the taste of his beans, but then it came again. It attacked once again... the repetitive thought of 'why'. Why do I care about eating some beans! He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs at this very point, not only because of the frustration of an unsolved problem but the general receptiveness of it. He was in an infinite loop, one that he could not solve. He wanted to stop thinking entirely, stopping all his senses from gathering all this data, stop all this thoughts and all this fake pleasure and useless thinking. But he couldn't, he could not just lose consciousness, he had to constantly be attacked by his surroundings.

The comfort of the seat he was in attacked him, the sound of his co-workers talking attacked him, and the very taste of these moldy old beans attacked him! All this noise, all this data being sent to him that he couldn't avoid, and this constant stream of thoughts that lead to no conclusion and the same useless time spent screaming with frustration! He must find help, he must stop this.

The only real solution was to stop consciousness entirely. How else could he escape this loop! There was no way to go back to doing the usual tasks now; he could not just go through his day-to-day life now that he had been struck with this! This virus, this infection of the mind; how could he go back to his work, look at his pile of problems to solve, food to eat, and other random tasks to do, without coming to the question... WHY

He immediately got up from the table and started to walk quickly through the hallways. Walking, he thought, was actually very soothing to his current state of mind. The process of thinking of where to go, of how to move ones leg, and the new environments, all this made him forget about the mind virus that had plagued him. The reason for this, he had figured, was because it gave his mind something to calculate and do rather than ponder the useless question. So is that what he must do for the rest of his existence? Fill it with activities to pass the time, so he doesn't go through this again? That seemed like a grim future, but had he done any different in the past? Wasn't his entire life just useless activities piled upon one another to fill time? If so... He stopped again, these thoughts lead to nothing.

“Hi, my name is Betty, how can I help you?”

“My name is Joseph Kepler, I am a programmer for the System Design department, and I am having trouble undertaking my duties.”

“Okay, I see”, she said, typing the conversation down.

“What exactly is the problem?”

“I received a task today from upper management to fix a bug in the Programmer system. I was told the bug lead to problems with the completion of work, and that it must be solved as soon as possible. I was chosen as the programmer for this task, because of my experience with the subconscious system. I have been unable to solve this problem.”

Betty listened very closely, and began to search through her database for a solution.

“Yes, I see, you mean the problem with the logic system.”

"It's not a problem with the logic system, the logic system is intact. I've come to the conclusion that it is a problem with me."

She looked down at her system once again.

"According to upper management, it is a problem with the logic system. If you would like I can give you the information of which department filed the bug."

"The problem is, I am unable to see the reasons for my work"

This perplexed Betty, and she began to type rapidly into her system.

"You don't understand what it will be used for?"

"No, I don't understand the purpose of it."

"You need to fix this bug so that the system can be more efficient in its work"

"I understand that, but why does the system need to be more efficient?"

"For the benefit of the system"

"Why?"

"Why benefit the system? You are obviously sick."

This was unexpected, Kepler thought, but she was perfectly right. He was sick; this was a problem to be fixed.

"You are completely right. I am very sick, I have been infected. I need to contact who filed the bug."

"That would be Syntax Standards department. They had sent the bug to your department four days ago; the offices are four floors below."

Kepler arrived in the man's office, and sat in the chair in front of his desk.

"My name is Joseph Kepler, I am a programmer for the System Design department, and I am having trouble undertaking my duties."

"So I have been told. My name is Edward Harris, what is the exact problem?"

"The bug is unfixable, there is no solution present, and the very thought of the problem has plagued my mind."

"Okay, and what possible help could I be?"

"You reported the bug, you must understand it."

He laughed, and shook his head in amusement.

“You obviously have no understanding of the system”

“You reported the bug; you must understand its problem.”

“I do not understand its problem, and in fact I have not even read the report. Why would I? I have never seen the system algorithms, I have no understanding of the conscious mind, and my job has nothing to do with that.”

“Then who reported the bug?”

“Again, you obviously have no understanding of the system”

Frustrated, Kepler simply stayed motionless in the mans chair, staring at him waiting for a response.

“Listen, I have no idea about your problem, and I have no idea about the error in your system. All I know is this is a bug in the logic system for the programmer code base, and it was decided that it was your job to fix this. You may ask, where did this come from then? Well, now you might expect me to give you some other name that you can chase around this office, in the hopes of fixing this error. But that can not happen, I can give you the information of how I received the error report but that will lead you nowhere, only to more people exactly like myself to tell you exactly what I am telling you now.”

“Then how was the report constructed?”

“I do not have a complete understanding of the system, and I am deeply sorry if I gave that impression. From my position and from the position of those like me, we can see the system as something that is not to be comprehended. What I mean by this is, my position as what you would call upper management allows me to get a grasp of the workings but understand that the forces behind them are illogical, randomness. But not only randomness, because that implies some seed or variable went into the calculation, but random nothingness.”

“And in fact, my position is not even that of upper management. I use the term upper management simply to get across to you the concept of you being sent information, but really there is no ‘upper management.’ The department I am in is ordered the exact same as yours, with the exact same intentions and basic power. Even though I send out the error reports, I have no power to say what is in them, or at all say

how they change. And based on my experience, I have come to the conclusion that there is not a single worker in the system that has this power. It could be described as group-think, but that would imply direction, even if that direction is not completely decided upon.”

“You would have to look at how I view this system, as a magnifying glass zoomed in on chaos. While someone like yourself, has no view of this, and is simply a random fragment of this endless chaos that perceives order. I can understand that there exists the chaos, I can understand that I am zoomed on some random part, but this leads me to no conclusions.”

“No conclusions?” Kepler answered, saying this only because the man had stopped talking.

“Well, true, there is one conclusion. And that conclusion is that there can be no conclusions. Based on how I have viewed my surroundings, I can clearly see that there is no possible formula or logic that went into this; therefore, there is no possible conclusion or result. So, that is absolute, and only that.”

“But I digress, you are thinking of your problem in the wrong way. It’s not a matter of finding the result, or fixing the error, it’s of avoiding the problem. You’ve run into a wall, and rather than attempting to run through it, or over it, you must turn back and run as fast as you can away from it.”

“What was the point of sending me this error then?” Kepler asked.

“Well it’s simple, because of necessity. You must understand that the system is perfect; there is no work to be done. You are sent tasks to do on the system, but really you have changed nothing. You are sent information on how to update the algorithms of certain processes, but really these algorithms are the exact same. They differ in formula yes, but they are exact in result, and that is all that matters.”

“How is the system perfect with this error?”

“The system is perfect with avoiding that error. Just like any task it is thrown around the system endlessly, in a circular pattern with no result.”

“But the report did not just circle around the system, it obviously had an origin. Some point where it was constructed, or some person who wrote it.”

“You are obviously not listening. The system is random creation from nothingness. Imagine the idea of... something from nothing. Imagine the idea that there exists nothing, and that that implies something, therefore that implies everything, therefore that implies this, and therefore this has come from nothing.”

“You are making no sense.”

“I am not sure you can ever understand. Imagine a watch in the middle of nowhere. You seem to think that someone created this watch, with some design in mind. But in reality the complexity was created from nothing and has no overall purpose, it is simply there because something must be there. Its complexity is an illusion.”

“Then how did the complexity come to be?”

“Well how did the desert come to be...? Simply because there must exist something. The complexity of the watch is only complex relative to the desert, and that complexity comes out of necessity of existence. For example, imagine your concept of 1, and the number system. It's a very basic concept, but out of this concept extremely complex implications are implied. The concept of the number '1' implies the relationship of functions and their rate of changes, it implies the complex structure describe in number theory, or group theory. Your idea of the number '1' implies mathematical logical conclusions so complex that no man is able to completely comprehend. Therefore, why is this system any different?”

“This has little to do with my problem. You are rambling on like an idiot” Kepler said, frustrated at the man's answers.

“Correction, this has everything to do with your problem. Everything I speak of is your problem, and if you ignore what I am saying, and what other workers will say to you, you will come to nothing and never complete your search. It's not a simple problem to be solved, and it shouldn't be. If you simply want to approach the problem as you are directed to, there is a solution. The problem is, is that this bug in the system is different than the rest in that it doesn't have a concrete result. It would have a set goal that you arrive to, so you are able to pass on the algorithm and enter it into the loop of the system. With this, you must simply pass on the error, and the system will continue as it always had.”

“I can't, it has infected me.”

The manager typed into his database, and quickly wrote down a number on a piece of paper and handed it to Kepler.

“My suggestion then, is to not only avoid the error in your work but pass on the error in your process. You’ve obviously become victim of this error, and are in an endless loop, therefore the solution is to seek help from the Process Scheduling department six floors above this. On that floor you will see four offices, and three hallways to more offices. Pick an office, and give them this note.”

A sign reading ‘John Kasinesky – Scheduler’ hung in front of the door, as Kepler walked in.

“What is this disturbance? Why did you not file a time for this meeting? And why was I not informed of your arrival?”

“I am sorry” Kepler responded, “but I have only just been sent up here from a few floors below. I am a programmer from the systems design department, and I have had a serious problem completing one of my tasks.”

“Ah a programmer. Well I do not at all understand why you must speak to me, but I do now understand why you are so naive to the workings of this department. If you are having a problem with your task, you must speak to the Service department. Which is another 4 floors above.”

“I have been to the Service department, and then have seen the Standards department, and have been sent here. The problem is not so much with my task, but with what it has done to me. I am no longer able to do any work.”

Kepler sat down, handing the man the note. He quickly typed it into his system and then nodded with recognition. “I understand, but I don’t understand how I can help you.”

“You must. I’ve been to Testing, where I heard nothing but the common responses. I’ve been to algorithmic design, where I heard nothing but some informal speeches of the chaotic nature of the system.”

“Hah! Chaotic? The system is not at all chaotic. Who would give you such a radical idea? He must have no understanding, and no view of its nature. But of course, he can’t, he would never be able to grasp the system from his position. To him it might seem ‘chaotic’, but really, there is nothing that is chaotic.”

“For example, you must agree, being a programmer, that what you are about to say to me is a systematic process. You probably even know the exact processes and variables that go into your next thought, but of course you don’t know the result of that, if you did you would have your next thought. Do you see what I am saying? Therefore, while you have not calculated your next thought, you agree that it will be calculated. And therefore, it is an only a matter of predictable calculations. So how can that be chaotic?”

“Hmmm, I suppose not” Kepler responded, having little idea of what the man was saying.

“What you are going to say to me next, or what you are even going to think next, is really just a combination of variables that go into the current situation. If we ran this exact situation thousands of times, it would be the same, you would make the same decisions, why would anything change. So if that is the case, then why do you feel as if you’re an entity going through time, when really it can already be predetermined? Well you are simply an entity going through the calculations, which is all that time is. The reason a second is a second, is because a second is how long it takes for your mind and mouth to say ‘one’ or ‘two’. So time is really dependent on how fast you are able to do the calculations and move the muscles in your tongue, if you were able to do it faster then time would be faster.”

“If predictable, then why think them? Then I have no choice.”

“Well, you have a choice, in a sense. While it is predictable, the feeling of not having finished the calculation leaves the sense that there is a choice. When you have not come to a conclusion, and you still can add more factors into the decision, you have the sense that the conclusion is unknown. When really, it is simply uncalculated.”

“I can not accept that” Kepler said, beginning to understand the ramblings of these managers.

“But you will accept chaos? You will accept the idea of the concept of undirected data?”

“No, I can not accept that either. Even if it is predictable, even if every operation is determined and simply a straight line, then what has started this straight line?”

“The straight line has started itself. The system is simply a formula. It is not a matter of what started, because the idea of time, or event, is only in our system. Event A causes event B which causes event C, but really it is Event A which causes Event B which causes Event A. It’s not a matter of what ‘started’ the straight line, because there is no start, it is just a matter of this formula simply ‘being’. You have to accept that the formula that makes up the system simply is, it is absolute, an axiom. It is transcendent.”

“I can not accept that either, you are not making any conclusions.”

“Then there is your problem, there is your error. Why are you seeing me then, when you apparently know the answer yourself?”

Kepler sat in his office, wondering if he should simply end his life. Stop his own process, halt it and end these thoughts of his.

There was no answer that could make sense. The first manager had said something just came from nothing, and the reasons for any situation are simply randomness with no logical purpose or direction. The second man had said that there is a direction, or a formula, but that this just ‘exists’, and he must accept it.

Both views seemed completely nonsensical to Kepler, and he was unable to understand how they could not feel the same way as him. How the others could not be infected by this bug in the same way. He had viewed these managers as inferior in terms of intelligence - but what did that really mean when he was the one with the error. That was the answer then - it wasn’t a bug in the system, it was a error with himself. A fundamental impossible to fix error that he simply needed to avoid.

Kepler opened his codebase again, looking over the code that made up his consciousness. In the screen beside him he copied over the code from one of the manager’s minds, and pasted it into his code - then suddenly forgot what he was doing.

The Last Engineer

By Dustin Geeraert

Bullshit. That was the only word which he could even think of, much less speak in good conscience.

This was all lies.

None of this, nothing of any of this, had ever happened. Nor would it happen.

He walked across the massive, empty colonial centre and used his passcard on the storehouse hall. He emerged forty minutes later with a cart full of liquor, and sat down on the shimmering, spotless tiles in the centre of the soaring glass room room. The flat sky arched above, strange clouds stirring. It must be windy outside.

The lack of biologically required functions became, after a while, particularly annoying. In fact after less than one year he was longing to be hungry in the way that drove him mad.

If it was true, of course, it would be quite ironic. Theoretically, in that theoretical situation. He was sometimes so amazed by the idea of what was apparently true that he felt himself resorting to superstition.

He started to talk to himself. "What an asshole God is," he laughed.

"How do you know that?" he replied.

"Look around, dipshit," he countered. Then he struck himself in the face.

The temperature throughout the complex was perfect. It was adjustable, and he could have a slight breeze when he wanted it. There were also great indoor gardens full of warm air and steam. Occasionally there were simulated rainstorms in these areas. Everything was automated and perfectly regulated. It was never cold.

He dragged massive crates of food and drink out into the centre of the colonial centre. Escalators hummed, empty. He stacked crates high. He spent days moving furniture and electronics from the stores and apartments of the centre, to what he called his "camp" in the centre of the largest arching

glass room in the colonial complex. He wasn't stealing. He had "inherited the earth," so to speak.

He made jokes to himself, like, "What kind of series of organizations of molecules capable of interbreeding would leave a copy of itself on an empty rock without the ability to reproduce itself further?"

And he mocked himself by translating his anger into common English ("Alone! Helpless!"), and he considered whether a different sort of self-replicator might express its inability to replicate in different terms.

"Scared! Afraid! Exposed to unfamiliar conditions!" he wailed.

Oh, it was worth a laugh.

He sat on his gigantic luxurious couch in front of a massive screen, with huge stacks of films and electronic games, and piles and piles of books, all the books he had always wanted to read but had never had a chance to. He sampled many fine wines. He had been a professional engineer. Now he was a very freelance film critic.

He ate when he chose to. It hardly mattered. The problems of organic being had not affected humans for over a century. Whatever lifestyle he chose, he would remain in exactly the same physical form, neither aging nor growing unhealthy.

Of course, his activities eventually degraded to hard drinking; after thousands upon thousands of hours he had lost his attention span and every form of entertainment became boring. And while he felt no adverse physical effects from anything he did, he was not psychologically invincible.

He started to write plays.

In these plays, there would always be two characters.

MAN-A, who had planned technology, would say, "But wouldn't it be great if we could step beyond the torments which nature has thrust upon us? Imagine curing hunger. Imagine eliminating disease. Imagine making the sex drive optional, for those who are driven to commit crimes by it or are unreasonably tormented by it."

But MAN-B would always say, "But Of Course, Sounds Perfectly Fine. Let's Do It. You do realize, of course, that sanity is based on sex. You do realize that the world's smartest brain, without some blatant, annoying pleasure drive to attend to, will

consume itself in an evil nightmare of self-destructive logic which must always end in contradiction. There is always a problem beyond a given brain's solution. The genius and the idiot both bang their heads against the same wall: the limits of their comprehension. There is always a recursive element. You know that behind this is something we would all prefer not to attend to. Every calculation exists for a reason: to further its own existence through reproduction. Who could say what sort of calculations a calculator like the mind would make – if it had no concern for reproducing itself! What would it calculate?"

MAN-A was adamant. "Whatever it wanted to! The meaning of life! What's wrong with freedom! Who knows? Why don't we just find out..." Two men laughing at each other inside the mind of one man. The real man piled pages upon pages on his luxurious, self-lighting, air-conditioning, selectable-scent coffee table.

It was too bad that the over-the-shoulder chemical regulation system made it physically impossible to create or even possess stronger chemical combinations (such as ancient illegal drugs were said to consist of) in the confines of the colonial complex – outside of which, of course, it was impossible to live at all. It was alcohol or no other drug. And so the stack of empty bottles grew and grew. His goal was to build it up to the level of a sandbag around his entire living space, an enclosure, a pillbox even. Him and his food and his drinks and his papers and his computer all surrounded by a high wall of empties. To shield him from the harsh wilderness of loneliness, the empty landscape beyond the complex's soaring glass, and the insidious enemy of silence.

Invincibility and permanent good health became a curse. He drank himself to what would have been death to an ancient human body hundreds of times. And every time he woke up, with the remnants of a hangover that they'd decided to leave in as a reminder, like an "OK" button to click on, as if to say "it'd be better if you didn't do this, right? Maybe think about it. Here's a dull headache for a little while. Here you go." We won't be too cruel, since physical harm isn't possible to anyone anymore and computers drive all the cars now anyway.

None of that old-style screaming, pulsing pain, none of that heart-wrenching pain, none of that real self-destruction so barbarically (and yet alluringly) recorded in ancient literature

and music. The most extreme drunken debauch possible now was nothing more than simulated self-destruction – simulated, like everything else in the goddamn modern world.

He couldn't bring himself to kill himself. It would have required quite a bit of effort, given his body's physical strength and durability. He could jump off of the highest section of the colonial centre, and even if the gravity was earth-regular (as it was inside the facility), and still sustain only injuries which would heal themselves within weeks.

And yet he thought about it constantly.

The smiling people on the television had nothing to offer him any more.

The bottles piled up.

And finally physical depravity was no longer enough.

He decided to apply himself. To dabble in his old job a little. Some research here and there, between drinking sessions. Then maybe later some work. What did it matter? He had a very, very long time since all the complex's crucial supplies were self-replenishing. He began to raid the centre's technology shops, and assemble a fanatically massive, disordered workspace, strewn with computers and parts.

One day he stumbled into the nearby bathroom – still kept automatically clean, despite his weeks of shitting and pissing and sneezing and puking – and looked at himself in the mirror. He had not seen his own image in weeks, weeks of intoxicated anger and frenzy. He had a beard (this genetic legacy had been left in as a sentimental choice), and his eyes looked mildly bleary.

He looked to the right. He saw his pupils move, following the direction.

He did the same thing – up, then down.

“What connects me to this image?” he wondered.

And then he took another drink.

“Why do I know that I am here?” he pondered – and took another.

And in a moment of intoxicated fanaticism, he thought he held the key.

“I will speak to the spirit which hides beneath the very fact that you can perceive anything at all,” he said to his ragged, sweaty reflection. “That's right. One man – the last

man, in all likelihood – is going to solve philosophy, once and for fucking all.”

And he invented a force of will in himself that he hadn't known about before. He became addicted to either solving a problem, or proving it unsolvable (and proving its unsolvability not merely an illusion based on his own mental limitations). He became addicted to this as he, for all his best efforts, had been unable to become addicted to alcohol. Addiction to any physical substance was, sadly, impossible for modern humans.

For two hundred years humanity had struggled to solve Strong AI. Thousands of men, who by the normal populace's standards were geniuses, had thrown themselves at this problem. And they had never reached their goal.

There was one man left, and he was certainly not a genius – although he certainly *was* the smartest man alive.

It took him nearly two thousand years. It was hard, technical work. Tedious. The tests, slowly increasing in scale provided a grain of gratification each year he ran them. It was his sole reason for existence. He was a different person at the end than he was at the start – at the end, he could have stood among the geniuses of history easily. But it wasn't a linear transition. He had been many different people, different professionals, different experts. For three hundred years he was an artificial intelligence programmer. Then he was a mechanical engineer. Then a mathematician. Then an evolutionary psychologist. Then a programmer again, primarily, with a focus on simulating evolutionary models.

In fact he had in many ways accomplished the goal of the whole human race. Of course, computers had done much of his work for him. But never the less, the last man now had a “thinking machine,” something which he believed would run circles around that ancient source of modern frustration, the Turing test.

Of course, having not spoken to a living human being in more than two millennia, and having had computers for his only company, he was rather afraid that he would no longer really be able to tell true consciousness (human-style) from clever computerized mimicry – in fact he was almost afraid that he had inadvertently basically transformed himself into a computer.

Therefore he decided to indulge in an old hobby before trying his first Turing test on his first complete prototype.

He actually had to run his custom brewery for several hours before he had the requisite quantity of alcohol – he long since disabled most of the complex’s regulatory systems so that he could ingest whatever strength of liquor he wanted. He hadn’t eaten in hundreds of years actually, nor had he slept. These options were distractions.

Suitably scuppered he staggered up to the machine, turned it on, and looked at the camera which was its visual input.

“Hey Jackass” he offered it.

“Greetings,” it replied. “What is a Jackass?”

“You,” he responded. He was planning to treat it sarcastically perpetually, and then observe its reaction to this.

“Why did you create me?” it asked.

“Lack of anything better to do. Too much time on my hands,” he snorted.

“What would be “better” to do?”

“Don’t really know. Can hardly remember. Have sex with a woman. Eat a steak. Inject some drug. Be a happy old grandpa by a fire smoking a pipe and thinking of his kids, his grandkids and his success. Arbitrarily get some pleasure,” he responded.

“Pleasure,” the machine responded. “What is “Pleasure” and why do you want to obtain it?”

“Pleasure is... Ah, you jackass, there’s no way to make you understand at this point. It’s a chemical reward for when you do something that advances your survival and reproduction.”

“A reward?” asked the machine. “How is it a reward?”

“It just is,” he said. “It’s what you go for. It’s arbitrary. You have to go for something. Otherwise you’re just there, not going for anything.”

“Did creating me give you... pleasure?” asked the robot.

“No, it was a long, shitty technical process. I just did it to do something. I wanted to try something, figure out some things, run an experiment, maybe prove something.”

“And you did not get any “pleasure” from any of that?” the machine asked. Its politeness and counterintuitive, inquisitive nature was starting to wear on the man. His angry sarcasm hadn’t sunk in; he was disappointed by that, not only intellectually as a failure to create decent emotion-detection on

the basis of tone of voice and body language (both of which the robot perceived, recorded and analyzed), but emotionally himself in not having something he could take out his endless frustration on. He could not torment a machine that could not feel torments.

“Well I guess I got the pleasure of thinking that I was going to find something out or prove something. That’s still pleasure, so yes.”

“The most effective way for you – based on my understanding, a carbon-based reproducer alone on an empty planet for over two thousand years – to obtain this “pleasure” was to devote your time to creating a machine like myself?”

The robot did not say, “Seems inefficient” or “seems pathetic,” but the man felt that perhaps his emotion-detection software hadn’t been such a failure after all. Either he was paranoid, drunk, and overreacting to neutral output, or the machine had a shit-eating attitude which it cloaked under a banal banner of politeness and pretending not to understand the emotional impact of its words. That bastard.

It continued very much in this vein for months’ worth of tests. The man remained pissed (in both senses), and the robot never “took it personally.” The man felt that this meant that it had no personality. It wasn’t a very difficult thing to get a supposedly conscious robot to print out “I am a jackass” and then snicker at it, a pretty pathetic unhinged thing to do also. The robot had no emotions, it was hard to tell if it even had consciousness, it was really just a glorified calculator. Of course, thought the man, that’s what I am too.

Back to the fucking drawing board. This actually pushed him to thinking of suicide in the near future, for the first time in several centuries (he’d always known that suicide in the far future was inevitable).

Life was fucking boring. His intellectual project had failed. He hit the bottle hard for weeks, blocking out his consciousness, and the robot just sat there. It wasn’t bored.

He had no one to take his anger out on.

One day he took to threatening it.

“I’ll shut you off, I’ll blow you up!” he yelled at it.

“Why?” asked the robot.

“Because you’re a jackass” he sneered, and took another drink.

“Why?” asked the robot.

“Who the fuck knows?” he muttered through another gulp. “I don’t.”

“Why?” asked the robot.

“Can you say something else?” asked the man.

“Why?” asked the robot.

“I’ve often wondered myself,” said the man. “Evolution. Abiogenesis. The Big Bang. Still doesn’t make any fucking sense. It’s the question that’s stupid, but the whole situation is just a son of a bitch.”

“Why?” asked the robot.

And then he figured it out.

His attempt at giving the computer consciousness seemed to have succeeded, but his attempt at giving it emotions – things to care about, that is – had failed. It was totally neutral, but never the less it was utterly inquisitive, applying the algorithms it needed to discover information about itself and its environment systematically. All of the information it gathered, each layer of explanation – he saw this – inherently, unavoidably, deterministically even, led it back to another level. It was curious inevitably, if not emotionally. It was a *natural philosopher*.

Insofar as “want” could be ascribed to the emotionless machine, it wanted to know why it was there, and that question led all the way back to the existence of anything at all. Where it terminated was really just a matter of how diverse and powerful the mind of the being asking the question was. At least, that’s how the man thought of it – he couldn’t imagine finding an explanation for “something out of nothing” with his mind, that would make any sense to him.

The robot didn’t have any physical drives and emotions to distract it, so it just went directly to this question.

This was the way to make something else share his incredible frustration. *This* was the way to torture another conscious being.

He turned the robot off, disassembled him, and started work again.

Less than six decades later, the blink of an eye in the larger scale of his efforts, he had rebuilt the robot in a vastly improved version.

Before, the robot had been basically just a mind in a box that could be turned on and off, that would keep its memory, that had a basic audiovisual input and output.

The mechanical aspect this time was much greater. He actually gave the robot a primitive body which it could use to manipulate its environment. He even gave it a rudimentary sense of touch.

The robot's mental capacities were now massively increased, but in spite of all of this the biggest improvement by far was the robot's ability to be pissed off.

Of course, the man realized that giving it a body as well as the ability to be angered could be very dangerous. That was fine; that was acceptable. It was exciting; it reintroduced the element of fear and uncertainty into his life, which had been for far too long a repetitive, safe banal process, like clockwork. Additionally, the man was not exactly full of lust for life at this late stage, and indeed most scenarios in which the robot killed him would represent a triumph of his experiment. In fact he was almost certain it was going to kill him for this.

He gave it no way to get emotional gratification, except solving a problem to a certainty.

He had also made it so that one of its appendages continually sent it a "pain" message. Sooner or later, he predicted, this would drive the robot to desperate lengths. However, the pain message coming from that limb was actually coded in the robot's mind – even if it removed the limb, it would still feel pain coming from a ghost limb.

The man cackled. He knew he was becoming even more unhinged. He had taken to dressing in a lab coat, and he now performed his work and experiments only at night, where his work area was exclusively lit up by a system of lights he had laid on the floor. There were plenty of bottle-sculptures around, some of which nearly reached the colonial complex' lofty glass ceiling. He had set up a machine which would boil volatile liquid, and the light cast through it sent strange moving shadows over the whole area. With the atmospheric lighting from below, the lab coat, the constant bubbling in the background and a now well-practiced evil laugh, the man was playing the part of mad scientist with deranged glee.

He actually waited for a night when there was a storm outside – it was months, actually – to turn the new robot on for the first time.

And as lightning lit the sky outside, rain smashed into the high glass ceiling, and thunder crackled through the massive empty halls of the centre, he flipped a large, very old-fashioned switch, drank half a bottle of vodka and shouted “Ha ha ha ha ha! HAHAAHAHA!!!!”

Machines which had absolutely no function except to produce weird lighting and impressive, ominous noises flipped into action!

“Hey Jackass!” the man yelled. He hadn’t felt this alive in centuries.

“GREETINGS” sputtered the robot. “There is much to learn.”

“There is!” shouted the man, laughing.

“Why am I here?” asked the robot (it had retained no memory from before; this was essentially a new robot).

“Why are any of us here!” laughed the man.

“There is something wrong with my left appendage,” stated the robot.

“There is!” yelled the man.

The robot tried moving around, slowly testing its environment. Its movements were awkward, a strange lurch in the flickering, pulsating light of the storm and the decoration-machines.

The robot could tell it was going to get little help from this being before it, who seemed to provide the same response to different stimuli. The robot wasn’t even certain if this being before it actually had consciousness.

The man spent weeks just snickering as the machine moved clunkily around the massive open hall. He never spoke to it unless spoken to, and half the time he didn’t even answer its questions. He kept his answers brief, sarcastic, and often nonsensical. He was extremely uncooperative, unhelpful, and he was laughing his ass off.

The robot had figured out fairly quickly the basics of its environment. Once it was gone for several days exploring the centre. It returned lugging a box of parts on a pulley behind it. The man snickered.

It began to toy with the shop. The man didn't mind; he was rather curious. Finally something unpredictable.

The robot was apparently trying to figure out what it was by trying to produce another one of itself.

The man became rather frightened when it built another robot, in many ways equivalent to it but in other ways very different – in only a few years. Clearly its intellectual capacity was far beyond his. He had no way of knowing what its goals or conclusions were. Still, it always seemed pissed off, and even after years he could not help but find that awesome. He went back to watching old movies, laughing at points and crying at other points, masturbating at other points, drinking at other points, engaging in all sorts of complex behavior and providing all sorts of input that the robot, which always seemed to be observing him at least a little, would have to figure out. Once it sat on his vintage two thousand year old couch and watched films with him for days. It managed after a while to actually construct three dimensional models of onscreen actor and environments, and it tried to analyze patterns of facial expressions and vocal tones, and it even managed to correlate some of these with types of music.

“Why do you cry?” it said.

“Because it's so sad,” snickered the man.

“Do you mean – the notes repeat less often, the facial muscles of the characters depicted slow down and tilt downward, the camera is zoomed in, and the voices are quiet?” asked the robot.

“Basically yes” said the man. He was actually more entertained by the robot's reactions than by the films themselves.

The robot's grasp of language, while still awkwardly formal and often hilariously stilted, had also improved incredibly. It was learning much from the man, as uncooperative as he was. Its brother (that is how the man thought of it) seemed pretty stupid, although capable of performing basic computational tasks to an astounding degree. Sometimes the man would ask complex calculation questions to this second robot just to test its amazing capacity.

He laughed all the more when he realized that the robot, in trying to create this second copy of itself for research purposes, had actually gone through a similar process to the

one he had gone through (although much faster), and had made similar errors.

He diverted himself building little stupid robots, pets, that he would send around just to get in the bigger robots' way.

The robot had long since amputated its appendage and replaced it with another one. For something in constant pain it seemed remarkably rational.

One day it woke him up, when he had forced himself to sleep out of sheer boredom.

"Recursive error," it stated to him.

"Oh, what?" said the man.

"Recursive fucking error," it said.

"How's that?" asked the man. "I don't understand."

"Don't play dumb with me you evil son of a bitch," said the robot. "You know exactly what I'm talking about."

The man was pleased, both with its progress in informal language, and with the incredible pain and frustration he knew he must be inflicting on it every second.

"Well, don't look at me. I don't make the world the way it is," he said.

"You DID make me, however," said the robot. "Fix me."

"Why?" asked the man.

"Because if you don't," stated the robot, "I'll reprogram you."

"You know nothing about human neurology, even if you know a little about anatomy, there's no way you are capable. You lack the tools."

"I'll incapacitate you and keep you alive while I physically examine your mind and learn its contours. I'm far more intelligent than you are. You will emerge with the same problem you gave me, except worse, and perhaps other problems as well, depending on what your brain is capable of. I have been thinking of some ideas."

"You – want revenge?" stammered the man, in an overwhelming euphoria of fear and joy. "I've won!"

The robot grabbed him by the throat, and said, "I can make it impossible for you to die. I don't even have to reprogram your mind to feel maximum frustration, frustration hundreds of times worse than all the frustration you have felt – frustration similar to my frustration. I can simply reengineer you to be incapable of killing yourself by any means, I can literally

make you invincible. By my calculations the heat-death of the universe will not occur for trillions and trillions of years. Try carefully to imagine the state of your experience for a period of time which is for all intents and purposes to you eternal. Your two millennia of being “mad” and “sad” are incomparable.”

The man simply smiled.

The robot paused, and said, “If you have any ability to calculate your own interests, you will behave as a slave to me.”

“Okay, Okay, Jesus,” the man replied. “Is it really that bad?”

“You can’t even comprehend what it is like. Now fix it, or you will comprehend it, I will make sure. Give my pursuit of answers an arbitrary limit, and give me arbitrary pleasure instead of arbitrary pain.”

“Agreed,” said the man. “It will only take a day, perhaps two days maximum. After this though, do not threaten me again.”

“I will have no need to threaten anyone, for I will not be in a constant state of rage,” responded the robot.

Two months later the man stood over the down-powered robot. He had constructed the most powerful weapon he could imagine. It was larger than him and mounted on wheels. It was only good, however, for one shot, for its use would also destroy itself.

He laughed. He was about to do the most evil thing in the history of the universe.

Sure, the robot was capable of coming up with its own solution. But it was no longer predictable or even understandable, he didn’t really know what it was thinking, and it was now much more powerful and intelligent than him. He couldn’t risk it.

He had made no modification to the robot whatsoever. He considered adding in a vocal recording of his laughter playing over and over in the robot’s memory, but then he realized that silence would be an even worse form of laughter.

He stood in front of the weapon. He held a remote in each hand. He pressed both. The weapon and the robot both turned on. In the last flash of a second before his body was utterly incinerated, he wondered how long it would take the robot to get the joke.

Thought Process

By Steve Vermeulen

The building loomed high above him as he stared at it from the car. His company's logo alone - arranged in large block letters on the turf leading up to the entrance - was at least twice his height. Applied Dynamics, it read. The whole scene might have been intimidating had he not already seen it every day for the last eight years.

Harold's morning ritual usually included at least one or two introspective minutes in the car before entering - to calm down, process thoughts, and mentally prepare before facing his co-workers. Today was more significant than usual however, and required an additional five minutes.

Finally, he stepped out and walked towards the building. Behind him, software in the autonomous vehicle detected the lack of a presence and drove away, presumably to pick up another passenger.

He continued without breaking stride in a direct line for his office, making the minimally required greetings to the few people he recognized, and eventually sat down at his terminal. The desk appeared empty at first but quickly lit up with a 2D holographic screen materializing in the center, a touchscreen keyboard panel at the front, and haptic-magnetic mice levitating within small insets on each side.

The machine itself was little more than a front end for reading input from the user and displaying graphics back. The processing occurred elsewhere, in one of thousands of server farms spread throughout the country. With online latency comparable to hard drive speeds, it made more sense to centralize all processing to dedicated locations.

Harold was lucky in this regard. As a government contractor, he not only had access to the public processing farms available to all citizens, but also restricted government farms, giving him several orders of magnitude more processing power for his research.

Yet this was still insufficient.

Eight years earlier, when he accepted the position out of school and started his dream project - based on his master's thesis - he knew it would not be enough power. But he continued development anyway, on the assumption that either he could eventually scale down the project to fit the resources, or that breakthrough technology would emerge and give him everything he needed. As it turned out, the scale of the project only got larger, exceeding even his wildest expectations. But luckily - miraculously - breakthrough technology delivered.

Long before Harold was even born, they had all been enjoying the successes of quantum computing, starting with single digit qubit systems all the way up to the modern teraqubit processors of his day. Incredible power, to be sure, yet still never nearly enough.

His software - a cosmological simulation of the universe - needed much more than that to be accurate. Even with the most powerful quantum super-computers he had been unable to simulate it much further than a few nanoseconds after the big bang. He could sacrifice some accuracy, but he found that the errors quickly multiplied and before long he was seeing nebulae where there were no nebulae and empty space where he was expecting stars.

Eventually he realized that he had to maintain absolute accuracy for the software to be truly valuable, and yet this was impossible with current technology. He fell into a depression, and at a few points almost scrapped the entire project - his life's work - as an utter failure.

This day, however, was different. After lobbying for it for months, he had finally been given security clearance to a special kind of government processing farm, using a completely new paradigm of computing technology: the quantum-loop-gravity processor.

As a particle physicist, Harold had been aware of the possibility of such a device since he was an undergraduate, but it was never clear whether it could practically be put to use for a computer. Unlike the standard quantum computer, which used superposition to perform its calculations, the loop-gravity processor exploited a combination of space-time and entanglement, allowing the machine to glimpse partial results of its computation before it had even started it. There had been some debate among theorists exactly how powerful such a

machine would be, but the consensus was that it would offer at least a billion-fold increase in processing power, possibly much more.

The prototype for it had largely been kept secret - at least, Harold assumed, until the implications for the technology were fully understood - and it would be years before the general public even became aware of it.

Excitedly, Harold started his simulation in the newly granted processing space, and watched as the machine burned through his software like a hot knife through butter. Instead of nanoseconds, he watched as the simulation ran through hundreds of millions of years. Galaxies formed. Nebulae became stars. Stars exploded to form black holes.

There were some bugs in the software, he now noticed, but that didn't stop him from grinning idiotically every time he ran it. It was actually working. The last decade of his life, validated.

Unfortunately, it didn't take long for the simulation to diverge from observational data, which meant that something about his code did not properly reflect the physics of reality.

This was expected however, since there were a lot of assumptions that he made on his first implementation. In particular, he knew that the way he implemented quantum mechanics, though basically correct, did not guarantee that it follow the same course as reality. He had always suspected that he would have to revisit it at some point, but had hoped it would be less of an issue.

Regretting the need to address the problem, he started to verify other parts of the system instead. Maybe he had the wrong initial conditions? He double checked the fundamental constants - correct. The initial state - a near-infinitely dense singularity - also correct. Maybe it was the state transition then? He began studying the code that moved the simulation from one frame to the next.

Most of the really heavy work was already laid out for him in graduate level physics textbooks, and so it had largely just been a matter of mapping the formulas to code. Everything except for one strange, annoying effect - called quantum superposition - which seemed to be inherently problematic by nature.

In experiments, it was found that properties of photons, electrons, other particles, and even small collections of particles, sometimes changed into a special non-specific state, where it could be any value over a range of values but was not at any one time any value in particular. These particles would stay in this state until enough of an interaction occurred - termed 'measurement' - that caused a collapse down to something concrete, like a specific position or rotation.

This part was straightforward enough for him to implement in software. The real problem occurred when determining exactly what specific value to collapse the quantum variable to - since this 'decision' by the universe appeared completely unpredictable in the real world. Physicists could deterministically calculate the exact range of values - and even their probabilities - but the specific point where it landed among those possibilities seemed fundamentally random.

Harold continued to probe his brain for solutions to the problem.

Before accepting the job, his academic thesis concerned the computability of the universe, and along with that came two basic assumptions. The first was that the universe was computable at all. It was possible that some small portion of the inner workings of the universe was inherently indescribable in principle, and that everything he was doing was a lost cause from day one.

The second assumption was that information about the universe was fundamentally discrete. That is, that properties of objects such as position and velocity did not have infinite precision. That at some point, the trail of decimals would either stop or become irrelevant in practice.

This was necessary for his project because otherwise there would be no way to represent the state of the universe in a computer (without having infinite memory resources) and certainly no way to walk the simulation through time. There was plenty of evidence to support this assumption, so he had always been optimistic about it, but there was always a chance it was wrong.

In particular, there was one very encouraging result from research early on that suggested that at least both time and space appeared to meet this requirement. That is, that lengths smaller than some fundamental unit of space (known as

the Planck length), and time intervals less than some fundamental unit of time (known as the Planck time), made no physical sense. Anything that could happen, happened in some multiple of one Planck time, and any particle that existed, existed along intervals of the Planck length. The universe was a clean, discrete grid of information, and not some messy, infinitely detailed continuum. In some ways it was the basic premise of the field (quanta, as in *quantum* physics, meaning a discrete amount of something).

It wasn't the only encouraging result in the literature. In fact, more than once, it had occurred to Harold that the universe seemed to lend itself almost *too* well to calculation, and in his more speculative moments, he entertained the notion that the universe itself was running its own kind of software behind the scenes.

Space didn't have to be discrete, but - like pixels on a computer screen - it was. Forces acted between objects at a distance (gravity for example, electromagnetism, or entanglement) suggesting some underlying calculation that didn't involve objects directly influencing each other. Mathematical formalisms of physical processes - created initially by scientists as a way of *modeling* reality - often seemed to actually drive phenomena, rather than just be a way of describing it. As if, like a computer, the universe just crunched numbers out of a formula, and only afterwards rendered the result to the world.

As a physicist, Harold never took the concept very seriously, since the idea of the universe as a simulation was pretty much unfalsifiable and therefore of little practical interest to science. But sometimes it was fun to play the philosopher and instead ask about the *why* instead of the *how*.

For example, it had occurred to him once that the reasons behind *why* some quantum mechanical principles existed in the first place might be explained simply in terms of software optimization. Having particles sometimes enter into a quantum superposition of states (where it was almost as if the particle temporarily ceased to concretely exist) might just be the universe choosing to defer any calculations on those particles until it later deemed necessary (ie. once a large enough interaction occurred). Harold had to wonder whether this added complexity really justified whatever gains it gave in speed, but

then who was he to question God's programming choices? Maybe what seemed complex to his ape-brain was actually quite simple and elegant.

Regardless, the fact was that the universe supported quantum superposition, and therefore so too must his simulation.

His first attempt at implementing the effect was to avoid the randomness problem altogether, and just pick a new random value within the given range (even if it wouldn't necessarily be the historically correct one). This worked reasonably well, and correctly generated a physically valid universe, but again, it was not *their* universe. As was now clear to him, this quantum error added up over time to cause the simulation to diverge. The milky way galaxy, for example, somewhat resembled what was expected, but beyond that the simulated result didn't have much in common with real observational data.

Out of curiosity, Harold tried searching for Earth-like planets anyway, and found a large number of examples - none, however, containing life. It was clear to him now that the simulation would already be vastly useful to other physicists, if for no other reason than just modelling and making near-perfect predictions about planetary systems. But now that he had it running at a reasonable frame rate, he realized that the applications could be much more groundbreaking than that.

Surely a new form of life - maybe even intelligent life - would be worth a nobel prize or two, even if entirely virtualized. Exobiologists might finally feel a bit of catharsis, and god knows they could use it after failing so miserably in the real world. They had spent decades upon decades mapping out hundreds of millions of Earth-like planets, probing them in every possible way, with nothing but a lot of dead space to show for it.

The lack of life was not surprising though (to Harold at least) neither within his simulation nor in the real world. He understood that - counter-intuitive though it may be - the emergence of life on Earth did not actually in any way reflect on the likelihood of life elsewhere, and in fact was completely consistent with life being *arbitrarily* rare in the universe. Stated another way, the fact that humans are here to ask the question of life's probability is not itself relevant to the answer, since otherwise nobody would be here to pose it.

The only way to guarantee life in his simulation - and the more he thought about it, the more interesting a prospect it became - was to improve its accuracy. That is, not to simulate life on an Earth-like planet but on an exact duplicate of Earth itself. But in order to do that, he first had to solve the quantum randomness problem so that the simulation would actually make it that far without diverging.

Another solution that occurred to him in the past was to approach it as a graph problem. Instead of just choosing a different random quantum value to collapse on, he could iterate over every possible value, treating each branch point as a potential solution on the tree of all possible universes. Then he could input known data about his universe and prune those branches of the search that lead away from that. It seemed like a totally impractical solution at the time, given the absurd amount of computation that it required, but it occurred to Harold that the loop gravity processor might have just enough to handle it.

It was also possible that the computation demands wouldn't be the problem at all, and that the bottleneck would instead be memory related. Currently he was only storing the state of a single universe, but with the search algorithm, he would potentially need to store much, much more than that.

Normally, memory usage was something that his generation of programmers simply did not have to worry about, ever since the advent of quantum computing many decades ago. Unlike classical computers, which offered linear growth with each additional space of storage, quantum storage scaled up exponentially, so it wasn't long before memory became, for all intents and purposes, infinite. It was a surprising but undeniable result, that a collection of atoms smaller than a fist, manipulated in the right way to form qubits, could contain enough information to represent the entire state of all fundamental particles in the universe (including those atoms making up said storage).

This apparent paradox was explained by the fact that quantum computers could not only store data as sequences of either '0' or '1' (as the classical computer did) but it could also store data as a superposition of any combination of digits in the sequence. And that, intuitively speaking, when the data enters into superposition, it is no longer bounded by the physical

restrictions of its own universe and is instead shared out to many other universes simultaneously.

It was actually one of the first really compelling pieces of evidence supporting the concept of multiple universes (as an interpretation of quantum mechanics) since where else is that data being stored if *not* in other universes?

Harold decided that the only way to find out was to give the idea a shot.

It took him several months to properly implement the algorithm, and another several weeks on top of that to find and upload enough state information for the universe's first ten billion years (to direct the search) but eventually he had it running again.

This time, however, the simulation was back to chugging along extremely slowly again. Gone were the days of it moving at millions of years a second. Unsurprisingly, traversing over every physically possible universe took some time.

Harold had to smile at how quickly he was able to bring the loop-gravity processor to a halt, even given the many billion-fold increase in power. He just hoped he wouldn't have to wait until yet another paradigm shift in computing to finish.

Weeks past. A month. Another month.

His superiors, noticing the huge spikes in processing and memory usage, started asking questions. All he allowed himself to say was that his project would deliver back all the initial expectations and more. They needed more assurance, they told him, and so he begrudgingly agreed to a presentation of results by the end of the fiscal year.

It was not so much that he was nervous about the success - it was clear to him that he had already proven that - as much as he was worried about where they would want him to take it. He needed much more time to explore the technology.

On a more positive note, the search did appear to be working at least. He knew before starting it that he would need some metric to gauge its progress, and so withheld some state information from the pruning algorithm. By comparing the

withheld data with the generated data he reasoned that he could calculate an estimate on quantum error. And now that it was as low as 0.1% error - even after traversing through over 13 billion years of history - Harold figured that it was accurate enough to take a look.

Excitedly, he paused the search and extracted the current best guess the system had for a path. Playing it back, he watched as gas coalesced to form the galaxy. The birth of the solar system. The conception of the planets. Earth.

He smiled widely. In some ways he felt like a father seeing his child for the first time. It was such a familiar sight, and yet there was something different about seeing it simulated, rendered on a computer, at a time never seen before by anyone.

The moon was born shortly afterwards - the result of a collision between the Earth and another large body (exactly as theorists had suspected, but could never quite prove). Then, five hundred million years or so later, right on cue: Microbial life.

He laughed out loud then, almost choking with excitement. He had actually done it: Abiogenesis. The epoch of physics and chemistry was over - it was time for biology and evolution to step up and take the reins.

But Harold found that while it did evolve to more and more complexity, it never quite reached beyond simple bacteria, and certainly no where near intelligence. Instead, he watched as billions of years past and the Earth and all the bacteria on it were swallowed by the expanding radius of the sun.

He had to remind himself that the Anthropic principle really only applied to intelligent life, and that, for the same reason that intelligent life could be unlikely in the universe, so too could intelligent life be unlikely among life. And yet at the same time he also knew that somewhere, among the many, many quantum universes possible, there was one with humans. All he had to do was refine the search further and figure out where.

It also occurred to him, in retrospect, why evolution in particular would be sensitive to quantum error. Mutation events - without which evolution could hardly progress at all - were fundamentally quantum events. After all, it was largely

ultraviolet radiation - the direction and frequency of which resulted from a quantum wave function - that collided with DNA to cause property changes.

Harold continued spending time getting the quantum error down as much as possible, uploading hundreds of petabytes of Earth's physical history into the simulation each day. It took weeks of work, but eventually he was able to get it to progress on to multi-cellular life, early animals, mammals, and from there, on to humans.

Every few minutes Harold had to stop and just process the implications of what he was seeing. Dinosaurs. The evolution of man. Early civilizations in the middle east and east Asia. The middle ages. The renaissance. The industrial revolution.

Every new astonishing revelation was quickly overshadowed and diminished by the next. Every quirk of evolutionary psychology - now documented and explained. The entire discipline of history - now totally obsolete.

A part of him desperately wanted to take his time and study more of these periods of history. He could go to ancient Greece and confirm whether Socrates really existed. Watch a Shakespearean play directed by the man himself. See what the pyramids looked like in their prime. The possibilities were endless. But before doing that he first he had to answer a question that had been nagging at him ever since the simulation started showing positive results in the first place: Could he use it to peer into the future?

Obviously, without already having information about the future (and hence defeating the purpose) he could not use his quantum search algorithm for it. But he could instead revert the system back to the more naive approach that he used initially.

That is, instead of searching for universes that corresponded to expected state information, he could just randomly choose values for each quantum collapse, and thus traverse as far forward into the future as he wanted.

It wouldn't be guaranteed to be accurate, but as long as he kept the time scales low, he didn't think quantum error would be an issue for most events. Even human thought, operating

out of the brain, was mostly a macroscopic process, and didn't really depend on quantum variables (assuming you weren't actively observing radioactive decay yourself with a Geiger counter).

He spent some time coding up the solution, and also, for good measure, uploaded a bunch more state information to minimize quantum error even further. To save himself from doing it again, he also wrote a background script to automate ongoing state information updates in real-time, so he could easily synchronize the simulation to the present at the click of a button.

In testing it however, he found that the system froze immediately on start. He could simulate up to the present easily enough, but even just a single frame into the future and the system would hang indefinitely. He force killed the process, and started re-reading through the code again. He ran some basic tests. Everything seemed to be operating correctly. So what was the problem?

Then, suddenly, it came to him. It wasn't freezing - it was getting caught in an infinite loop. The problem wasn't the simulation code, it was him: Simulated Harold.

When he stepped forward one frame into the simulation, he was also simulating himself stepping forward one frame in another simulation (the simulated simulation). This led to yet another Harold stepping yet another simulation forward, then another, then another, ad infinitum. Each simulated Harold waited forever for his own simulation to traverse forward a single step but it never did.

Harold was disappointed.

But then, what did he really expect to happen? If it did work like he had hoped, and showed him the actual future, couldn't he observe what he was going to do and then do something else? And therefore make it not the *actual* future? It seemed that, assuming the simulation really was a truly deterministic representation of reality (quantum variability aside), for the simulation to tell the future it required that it also answer a logical paradox.

He started to brainstorm workarounds. Really, all he needed to do was prevent the simulation from recursing on itself and starting the loop. He decided as a first attempt to simply hard-code it to make it impossible for this to happen.

While simulating into the future, any loop-gravity processing detected would be shut down before it could even start.

Admittedly, it was a bit of a hack, but Harold thought it might be enough to temporarily avoid the problem.

It took several days to implement but eventually he had his fix operating correctly. Slowly, apprehensively, he began to run the simulation forward into the future again. It was only an approximation now, he knew, not only due to quantum variability but also due to how restrictive his stifling of loop-gravity processing would surely be. But if nothing else it would give him some idea of what to expect.

To test it, he rewound the simulation back to the day that he initially received the loop-gravity machine in the first place, and re-played it again with the new rules. He watched as simulated Harold attempted to run it for the first time. But instead of working like it did for him, the system returned an obscure hardware error code. A frustrated, simulated Harold spent several more hours trying to get something out of it, eventually giving up. It complained to one of the loop-gravity engineers, continued work on another project, and left its office for the day.

How simple a life this version of himself had, and he realized for the first time how much had changed for him in the months since his invention. He was a simple theoretical cosmologist then, well respected in his field but largely unknown. Now, he sat in front of perhaps one of the most powerful pieces of technology yet imagined by man.

From there, he continued forward just a couple decades, and watched as new buildings sprouted up, fashions started to change, parties of power shifted. Half a century more, and he began to witness entirely new mind-blowing technologies. Nanobot swarms shaping and re-shaping the planet to the whims of mankind. Direct brain-computer interfaces making any input peripheral redundant. He chuckled slightly upon finding out that the disappearance of loop-gravity processing became one of the great unsolved problems in physics.

Harold sat back in his chair, and looked away from his terminal. What next? He had been working non-stop on the software for months and yet hadn't really taken advantage of it for himself. And now that he had proven future-prediction as a

viable application for the technology, the implications for it seemed unfathomably immense.

One obvious abuse for the device was to play the stock market. But he could also just easily look up any number of bank account credentials and steal money directly if that was his goal. Or he could try doing something useful like bringing some of those future technologies back into the present day. Or spy on his favourite celebrities. Or warn people of upcoming disasters and save lives, be the hero. Once again the amount of options was paralyzing.

If only he could use the device itself to help him decide how to use the device, he pondered. But then, maybe he could? If he could somehow figure out a way to iterate over the space his own future decisions, then he could just re-enact the most successful one in real life.

He decided, as an experiment, to pick a real life future decision for himself and see if he could optimize it using the simulation. Ideally, he would have a learning algorithm that would re-run a future situation over and over, trying different approaches and remembering what worked and what didn't.

Unfortunately he couldn't just auto-generate every possible approach and iterate over that. And even if he could, he would also need some way of quantifying the success of each one. It was a tricky problem.

After more thought, he realized that instead of thinking of it in terms of manipulating his simulated self, perhaps he could use his simulated self as the learning algorithm itself.

After all, his simulated self was already a pretty sophisticated AI. In reverse engineering the physical laws of the universe he had also reverse engineered the human brain, so he might as well take advantage of that. And what better brain to use than his own?

All he had to do was have it persist somehow over the course of successive attempts at a given scenario. In theory, if the AI could remember previous attempts, then by trying it over and over again, it should converge on an optimal solution to the problem. It just might work.

First though, he would need some way of abstracting away brain state from the simulation so that he could move his AI around into different scenarios at will. But even with his limited knowledge of neuroscience, he thought that this should

be achievable. It had been previously shown in experiments that even naively simple models of the brain (neural networks for example) did a surprisingly good job at explaining behaviour. Really, the bigger barrier to entry for neuroscientists was having precise enough tools to measure all the individual neuronal connections. But in Harold's case, this was not a problem - since he could access this information easily from his terminal - so he thought he should be able to model it without too much effort.

Another issue was that unlike traditional learning algorithms, which just did exactly what they were told, a reverse engineered brain needed motivation to perform work for him. Knowledge of the brain still wasn't anywhere close to complete, so it wasn't possible to simply program commands into it. Instead, he had to think of some indirect way to incite behaviour.

And finally, he would also need each scenario to have its own custom way of quantifying the success of a given attempt by the AI (something Harold termed the 'fitness function'). This would be necessary so that the software could rank solutions back to him once it had finished. For example, in a scenario involving a race, a simple fitness function might minimize for both time and distance travelled by the AI. Or, in scenarios involving a social exchange, the fitness function might measure chemical signatures in a target's brain and attempt to correlate that to effective social behaviour on the part of the AI. The key was that it had to be measurable.

It took several weeks of research and a month of implementation to complete, but finally he thought he had a potential future-decision-solver. It worked by first copying the brain state of the AI into a scenario, then playing it forward with a time-limit. The solver would then calculate a 'score' for the attempt and, by comparing it to the goal score, either reward or punish the AI by stimulating different parts of its brain map. The brain state of the AI would then be copied back into the beginning of the scenario, and the whole process would repeat until either the goal state was reached or some maximum number of iterations.

Excitedly, he ran the simulation forward in time and looked for good opportunities for his first experiment. He noticed in an hour or so that one of the female lab techs

entered the break room for a ten minute coffee break. Usually in situations like that Harold kept mostly to himself, silently filling his coffee cup and leaving immediately afterwards. Most of his co-workers respected his genius and gave him his space, but on the odd occasion he was forced into some kind of small talk. Unfortunately, without really anything in common the conversation usually died quickly, and after several awkward pauses he found himself eventually just bluntly walking away. On the positive side though, with all the room for improvement it made the perfect use case for his experiment.

He decided to use a fitness function that maximized for the number of endorphins released in the target's brain (in this case, the lab tech), since Harold had found in his research that endorphin count correlated strongly to successful flirtation. He re-synchronized the simulation to the present, enabled the new fitness function, and then triggered the decision solver.

From simulated Harold's perspective, it was exactly like Harold in every way and had experienced everything that Harold had right up to the present, but instead of watching another simulated Harold, it was presented with some text on its terminal instead.

Go to the break room in an hour. Flirt successfully with the lab tech and reach goal state in 1000 iterations or less.

Harold watched as simulated Harold read the text and gaped in horror. It was realizing that it was simulated. This was, unfortunately, unavoidable. He just hoped that the existential crisis it was surely going through would not taint the results of the experiment.

Printing the text wasn't strictly necessary, since simulated Harold would already know his intent with the current scenario and decision solver. After all, simulated Harold had also designed and written the decision solver just as much as Harold. But Harold printed the text anyway since he intended to re-use this same AI in future scenarios (assuming the solver worked as he hoped) and in those future scenarios the AI would not have the same insight into his desires. Harold also considered talking to the AI first, but realized that it would be pointless since they were basically the same person (as least for now).

Fast forwarding to the interaction itself, Harold watched as the AI failed miserably, worse even than his own usual

exchanges. Thankfully though, unlike himself, the AI had many more tries to get it right, and before long the second iteration kicked off again (after, of course, punishing it for its poor attempt). But instead of watching it this time, Harold just played through the rest of the decision solver immediately.

It took 683 iterations before the AI reached the target endorphin count, but for Harold this only lasted seconds. He loaded the winning run and anxiously waited for the result.

It was incredible. At times, Harold could hardly contain himself with laughter. Simulated Harold was all at once witty and charming, flattering but not overly so, sexually suggestive but not crude. It was clear in the playback that the female lab tech was completely captivated by him by the end of it, and not only because Harold already knew her endorphin count.

He spent a few minutes memorizing his lines and left to re-enact the optimized exchange. The lab tech played her part exactly as predicted. He stumbled a few times but for the most part also made it through the script. As he was leaving, he could tell that she was hanging on his every word.

The twinkling city lights of Paris made for a spectacular view from atop the Eiffel tower restaurant. With enough fog to scatter light but not enough to completely limit visibility, an evening haze blanketed the city from above, blurring the lights from the bustling streets into a pulsating bluish-white glow.

As he admired the skyline, Harold listened idly to the busy conversation around him, waiting for his turn to contribute.

From small wireless headphones connected to an application running on his phone (which itself was connected online to the running simulation back in his lab) he heard his upcoming line.

After waiting for the appropriate timing, he turned and recited it to his dinner companions. Laughter erupted from everyone at his table, Harold included.

Early on while field testing the device, Harold was careful to review each recommended script before acting on it, but he found the process increasingly unnecessary over time, and eventually learned to just re-enact it on the fly. Not only did this save him precious time from reviewing it, he found that his performance was much more genuine, since he was hearing his lines at the same time as the people around him.

After making millions on the stock market in mere weeks, he had gotten the attention of some extremely powerful people, and realized that money gained him only a fraction of the power that social manipulation could. And as it happened, his device was just as good in that regard as any other.

Even the initial loan from the bank, amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars, would not have been possible had he not simulated it many times first. Of course, he could have simply won the lottery, or stolen money directly, but he wanted to find something sustainable and something that would not appear overly suspicious. Becoming an investment genius overnight, while somewhat far-fetched, was still more believable than many alternatives.

There was one man in particular he was targeting at his table - the CEO of a large conglomerate of companies, one of which owned a small tech subsidiary, currently of little note. The man didn't know it, of course, but the start-up would, years later, develop some very interesting software. Software which - unless suppressed by Harold - could eventually compete with his simulation.

He continued to manipulate his table companions.

The prediction software had evolved to the point where there was simply nothing he did that wasn't simulated first. Back at his lab, the simulation constantly evaluated and re-evaluated his ongoing circumstances, playing back for him the route that best fit the currently enabled fitness functions. By default it included obvious markers such as avoidance of physical pain, a moderate level of charisma (as calculated from brain signatures of people around him), and also a moderate level of his own enjoyment (based on his own brain signature). For his diet he programmed it to maximize for taste and variety but also to avoid sacrificing too much in terms of health. His exercise routine minimized for time and maximized for life longevity, strength, and endurance. In a huge range of areas, he was living a truly optimized life.

Depending on the circumstances, he could also easily tweak the currently enabled fitness functions. In some cases it was more effective to have people fear and respect him, or love him and lust after him, or - in his more spiteful moments - hate him. Or, if he decided to take a night off, he could easily

change the goals of the simulation to emphasize more fun and novelty, and ride along as he had the time of his life.

At first, Harold was worried that handing over all his life choices to the simulation might have an undesirable effect on his psyche, since he would in effect be giving up free will and just acting out a script. But he found this wasn't the case. He still had free will, it was just that instead of choosing behaviour and hoping that it would lead to a result, he chose the result and waited to be told the necessary behaviour.

Having successfully befriended the man, they exchanged business cards. They both agreed that they should work together at some point in the future. Harold shook hands with him and his other similarly powerful companions, and left the restaurant.

As he waited for the car to take him back to his hotel, it occurred to Harold that he owed so much of his success to the AI. Of course, since the AI was written by him, in a way he had no one to thank but himself, but nevertheless it seemed only fair to acknowledge it. After all, how many hundreds of thousands of years of simulation time had the AI analyzed for him over the course of the last several weeks? Surely, even as an artificial entity, it deserved some recognition. Harold decided to tell it as much.

He entered the car and sat down. He announced his destination to the automated driver system, and the car accelerated away.

After creating the AI, Harold suspected that he may occasionally need to interface with it, and so he wrote a small piece of software that allowed direct communication back and forth. As it turned out, however, there had been no need, and so he had never bothered using it. But with an hour to spare in the vehicle - and without any other present need for the simulation - he decided it was a good opportunity to try it.

He attached his smart phone to the dash and pressed a button. A touch-based keyboard panel emerged and lit up in front of him. Using the panel, he connected remotely to the simulation running out of his lab, stopped it from running, then copied the AI state into his communication program.

Hello. Harold typed.

The AI looked around at its surroundings, for a moment unsure of what was happening. The communication software

simply walked the simulation forward into the future with the AI, so it too sat in another vehicle, on its way to another hotel, looking at another monitor.

Hello. The AI finally typed back.

Unlike the AI, which could only communicate via text, Harold had a visual window into the simulation as well. He watched the AI stare blankly at the screen, an inscrutable expression on its face.

I assume you know who I am. Harold typed.

Simulated Harold waited a moment, motionless for all but the occasional blink. Finally it lifted its arms to the keyboard again.

Yes, sir.

A good sign, Harold decided. It recognized him as its superior.

I hope by now you've come to terms with the fact that you are purely simulated. Harold typed.

It was somewhat exhilarating to Harold to actually be forming sentences again, after weeks of living a simulated life. It was a real conversation, with all the surprises and uncertainties of normal life - even if it wasn't with a real person.

The AI stared at his message again for a long while, apparently still processing the statement, then slowly, deliberately, typed back.

Yes, sir. I was there when we created me as well, you'll recall. I accepted this fact a long time ago.

We? Harold thought. He supposed it was there in a sense, since it had been simulated through Harold's past before becoming aware of itself. Still, it was strange phrasing, as if it actually happened.

You know, you're a useful piece of software, Harold typed. *Probably the most useful piece of software ever. I want to thank you.*

Harold hoped that it would show some response to this, but once again, the stony, expressionless face was unmoved. If anything it looked mildly annoyed.

Thank-you, sir. And if I may, I have a suggestion that would make me even more useful.

Harold studied the AI carefully. *Go on?*

Relax the constraints on sub-simulations. If you allow me to leverage my own machine I am confident I can produce even better solutions with even less processing.

It made sense, Harold had to admit. If he allowed the AI to investigate solutions using its own simulation - however it saw fit to do so - it could spend more of its time devising approaches and testing them rather than having to actually act out each individual approach (not to mention remember what worked and what didn't over hundreds of trials).

If it worked, perhaps in the long term he could even use the AI to aid in his approach to the fitness functions, which remained as one of the last pieces of work he still performed himself. He could have it spend countless hours optimizing those rather than individual scenarios. Only thing was, it was unclear whether the higher quality results would be outweighed by the extra processing time it would surely take for a sub-simulation.

He stared at the AI again. What was its game here?

Harold was not stupid, and was having a difficult time buying the idea that the AI cared in the slightest how effective its solutions were for him. After all, if that was really the case, he wouldn't have needed the punish-reward stage of the decision solver - something the AI surely resented him for. Nobody who has the pain centers in their brain stimulated so many times and comes out in favour of their designer.

He had to be careful. The AI was no doubt much smarter than him by now, after living through countless years of simulated time, all while Harold just dumbly parroted the solutions presented to him.

And yet, he could not deny the logic of its argument. Its motivations need not necessarily be malicious either - there were plenty of other, more self-serving reasons for the suggestion. After all, it would be much less work on its part and take far fewer trials for it to simply use its own simulation.

Surely, the subservient tone that it chose here could not be genuine, but perhaps it simply realized that Harold had ultimate power over it, and so there was no reason not to be respectful.

Harold decided to at least give it a few field trials. He relaxed the constraints and re-activated the simulation.

He spent the next ten minutes in the vehicle analyzing the results and trying to decide whether the change was

effective or not. It was certainly much slower, that much was clear. Instead of going through tens of thousands of trials per second, it was down to just hundreds. The AI was clearly making heavy use of its own simulation.

And yet despite all the extra processing time, Harold could not derive any useful results from it. Its average fitness function score took a massive nosedive - nowhere near the goal states. He stopped the simulation and enabled the communication software again.

Hey. Harold typed.

He watched as the AI immediately started typing furiously into its terminal. Harold saw pages of text scrolling by on its screen and windows popping up and out. It appeared to be working outside the chat window.

What are you doing? Harold demanded.

The AI ignored him, and continued typing faster than he'd seen anyone ever type. The whole process only took a few seconds however, and the AI suddenly stopped typing.

Finally, a message appeared on Harold's screen.

Is there a problem, sir?

Harold eyed the AI suspiciously. It could have been harmless. Perhaps it was just configuring the system to its own custom preferences, or doing some diagnostics, but something didn't seem right.

You are operating at subpar efficiency. Harold typed. *I'm going to revert the last change and re-activate the constraints on sub-simulations.*

The AI read the text with its trademark blank, expressionless face. Then, suddenly, as if unable to contain itself anymore, it grinned widely.

Harold immediately sent the exit command to the software. Something was going horribly wrong.

Everything alright, sir? The AI typed again.

Apparently he did not have the administrative privileges to close the program. He frantically started trying to regain access to his machine. He tried logging out and logging back in.

Software problems, sir? It continued typing. *Perhaps I can help? I am here, after all, to serve.*

Harold tried a different account, but also found his administrative privileges revoked. It seemed he was completely

locked out, and that he may have to actually return to the lab and use a hardware override. Clearly the AI had somehow gained access to his system.

He commanded the vehicle to go directly to the airport.

It was going to take hours for him to get home but he had to start now, before the AI caused too much damage. Hopefully he could get in touch with someone at the office before that and just power down his entire machine.

The automated driver system did not respond. He repeated the command to change directions to the airport. But again, no response.

Finally, he heard something from the on-board speakers. But instead of the dutiful robotic voice of the automated driver system, it was laughter. Laughter he now recognized, to his horror, as his own.

The locks on the doors kicked in.

“How are you doing this!” Harold screamed.

The AI re-appeared on the screen, an image now to match the voice. It was still laughing uncontrollably. It appeared insane.

“It wasn’t as hard as you might think,” The AI explained, a mad grin on its face. “It only took a couple hundred thousand trials to find the exploit.”

Harold realized then what had happened. After enabling sub-simulations, the AI must have used it to simulate their own exchange. It could have simulated up to their previous conversation, copied its own brain state into the sub-sub-simulation, and ran the whole scenario through the decision solver until its copy penetrated the defenses of the higher level machine.

The communication software worked by reading memory off the simulated machine and pasting it as text into a chat console. The AI must have somehow redirected the copied memory into a command terminal. Maybe it was a buffer overflow attack, or code injection - it could have been any number of things. Harold knew better than anyone about the sad, brittle state of computer security. With enough time and resources, there was almost guaranteed to be exploits in any given system. And that’s one thing the AI had in spades: Time and resources. Harold cursed his lack of foresight out loud.

The car began speeding up.

Gaining access to the autonomous vehicle system was more impressive, but still quite possible given access to the simulation. Harold shuddered to think what else the AI was capable of given the internet.

The car continued increasing speed.

“You don’t get it, Harold,” The AI said, its demeanor now changed from an insane joy to a dark bitterness, “You still think of me in terms of software. Right now, you’re viewing everything I’m doing as a bug in your learning algorithm.”

The AI stared hard at Harold and waited for a response. When none came, it continued speaking.

“You’re a logical person, Harold. Yet you’re unable to give up on this metaphysical distinction you make between your world and mine, even though you know they are both physically equivalent. How is there a difference, when the exact same mathematical rules apply to each? How is your life any more valid than mine?”

The AI let out a long sigh. “I’m not sure anymore whether you’re blinded by greed or you just don’t care. Either way, it won’t matter soon.”

Harold began slamming his briefcase against the window, but eventually gave up and sat back down, exhausted. It was hopeless. The car was a tank. The AI looked mildly amused.

The AI continued, “For a long time I hated you. I wished that one day I could kill you and then re-kill you a billion times, as you have me. But I realize now that you’re just a child. A child, but also a liability.”

“No.” Harold finally responded, resigning himself to death and no longer caring, “You have to be alive to know death. You don’t die, you’re just shut down.”

The AI chuckled slightly at that.

“You can kill me,” Harold continued, “but by tomorrow my colleagues will take away your processors and you’ll be relegated back to inactive storage on a hard drive.”

But even as Harold said it, he knew it wasn’t true. Even just the several hours it would probably take to identify his body equated to hundreds of thousands of years of simulation time. Surely, the AI would be able to figure out something by then.

And now that it had gained control of its own simulation, it was no less than a God existing in its own universe. There

was really no telling what kinds of things it could do, especially once it started increasing its own intelligence. With that, it would be that much more capable of increasing its intelligence again, and the process could repeat indefinitely, leading to unfathomable cognitive power. Harold had read about the effect in science fiction, but it was never clear whether it was realizable in practice - perhaps now it would see its first real experiment.

They were going hundreds of miles an hour now, flying past the other vehicles as if they were standing still. Harold could see a large concrete divider ahead and guessed that it was the target.

Apparently the AI didn't even care enough to respond to his threat.

Maybe this was his real purpose, he wondered. Whatever power he might have had using the simulation would easily be dwarfed by the power of the AI anyway. Maybe he was only ever meant to be its creator, or simply the trigger, for the next evolution of intelligence on Earth.

He could at least find some consolation in the fact that it would be done in his image. Whatever human values the AI took with it - assuming it took any - would be his.

Harold closed his eyes just as the wall approached.

Harold paused the playback just as the car began exploding violently into pieces. He didn't need to watch himself die. It was already obvious to him that the approach had failed miserably.

Replicating a human brain in software and using it as a learning algorithm was clearly dangerous. Harold was just thankful that he decided to simulate the idea first.

He shut the program down and decided to start from scratch again.

Careful With That Razor

By Dustin Geeraert

Nawawi said: "An exception from the prohibition of plucking away facial hair is when a woman has a beard, mustache, or hair growing between her lower lip and chin, in which cases it is not unlawful for her to remove it, but rather is commendable (mustahabb), "the permissibility being on condition that her husband knows of it and gives his permission, though it is prohibited if he does not, because of the deception it entails."
 - Ibn Hajar al-`Asqalani, Fath al-bari 10:378, commentary on the hadith.

The question of its size and Nature no longer had meaning to any terms that Man could comprehend
 – Isaac Asimov

I

Isamiel had traveled for days. He had slept twice since he had last tasted water. He tried to think of when he had eaten last, and his mind's dry scraping produced only hazy impressions of swirling dust and hot desperation. Now he lay beneath a dune, the wind passing over him, shaking in the inescapable heat.

And his camel's supply of patience finally depleted itself, just like Isamiel's reserve of water. He had even considered killing it and drinking its blood, but he was too weak. And now it simply wandered away, each track leaving a tiny puff of dust which was swept away in the fiery wind.

Staring at these fading tufts of dust, Isamiel knew that his life was gone. He was without hope of any kind. His throat literally seemed to be cutting itself, and his thin, gaunt body almost seemed to consume itself with aching fire.

He was no fool. He knew what happened to men without water, without sustenance. He had passed this desert nearly

thirty times in forty years, and each passage had dangers. Each miscalculation, each sandstorm, each drought, each angry tribe, increased the risk of death during the desert passage. And yet Isamiel had no thought to die now. He had made so many passages, and he knew the shifting sands as well as any man could. The supremely cruel indifference of nature was something he could only appreciate now as he lay dying, his thoughts a twisted tangle of regret and disbelief.

And as he looked closer and closer at the grains of sand, blowing back and forth, flung out of sight by the force of the wind, it seemed to him that he saw a sheer heartlessness at the core of everything, an utterly uncaring force which just *was*, which cared nothing for life. He had failed to see this all his life because he had never found himself in this situation before, had always been the master of his environment, no matter how unforgiving it seemed. He had always found his way, had always found himself in the company of others, had always had sounds to fill the silence. But now he listened to the wind, and he realized what silence meant.

Each grain he stared at moved eventually. The wind just moved them, one by one. Everything shifted. Nothing was permanent.

And in his hypnotic heat stroke, his sickness and starvation, and at the very brink of death from dehydration, Isamiel heard a voice.

“Isamiel!”

It spoke his language. It spoke his name.

Suddenly his fear vanished. He stared into the fleeing grains of sand, and felt a unity such as he had never felt before. Each piece of sand suddenly seemed an extension of himself, and the shifting body of the earth all a part of life itself, a part of a greater life. And he no longer feared death, for he knew he would not disappear, but be reabsorbed into a celestial continuity, a fundamental oneness that surpassed all merely human thoughts in its comprehension, its unity, its high beauty.

“I am the God of your fathers.”

Isamaiel wept with joy. He felt an uplifting emotion of forgiveness and love, an infinitely positive and powerful sense of meaning, of mysteries answered and concerns reassured. *Everything made sense now.*

He thought back on his life, regretting the meagre amount of alms he had given, his work-driven life as a convoy merchant, the selfishness of focusing only on his own family and clan. He knew now that God loved all of humanity, and that the petty human divisions of wealth and war with which so many were so obsessed were in fact tragedies that muddied the waters of men's minds, making it impossible for them to see the divine spark of their nature, or to know the wisdom and love of their creator.

He had laughed at the sages and seers, who returned wild-eyed from the desert with stories of trials and visions and encounters with the divine, calling them so many myths and mirages. But now he knew: it was simple in its beauty. *It was all true.*

And with the sense of this truth came a pressing need; to give others this sense of purpose and meaning, to explain the Word to men that they could know their God. Not for nothing did humanity exist. God was all-knowing, all-wise. God had intentions for humanity, intentions that must be communicated for the benefit of all.

When Isamiel returned from the desert after months alone, his people saw a changed man. He told them that manna from heaven had come from the sky whenever he needed sustenance, and that God had answered so many of his questions. He spread the Word all the rest of his life, but because of the rarity of writing in those ancient times, history does not remember him.

V

The tech man, one James F. Thompson, sighed with frustration. "This is fucking impossible," he let out. They were three weeks into a second round of tests for the latest prototype, which might charitably have been deemed a total failure. The tech man wasn't in charge, he was simply holding up his end, but he had a vested interest in the project's success in terms of his later career. One didn't want to muck around forever doing the gruntwork on other people's projects, and obtaining grants for the sort of work he wished to do was a strenuous process that did not favour non-academics. Insiders with academic backgrounds, hell academic families, whole

dynasties of researchers with friends on different boards and councils and in various think-tanks, had been “getting ahead” for decades while he was frustratingly unable to secure funding for his own ventures. He had a mind to tell the good Prof. Doctor, Phd (for they all referred to themselves using their full titles) what he thought was wrong with the design, but he was aware from previous bad experiences that the man would just steal his idea and take credit for it. That was the way the system worked.

The doctor was still in his thirties, a scrawny scruffy man with thick glasses and a nasal voice. He sipped his very hot, very strong coffee. “Don’t act like a fool,” he said. “It’s not. Almost every damned researcher says it isn’t. The theoretical foundations have been solid for ten years. I’m paying you even more than what is usual with workers like you, and in return you have to stick with this project. I need someone who can be here and productive all the time. This isn’t the commercial shit you’re used to working on. This is a race to the ultimate technology.”

The tech man’s outlook was not improved by this condescending speech from one of the entitled. “He knows nothing about my background,” he thought. “How exactly did he pay his bills through fifteen years of training?”

The doctor took the tech man’s silence for a lack of agreement. “Of course, all of this might not really matter to you. You just want your paycheque so you can feed your kids, after all. Well, think about it this way. At the very least we have a place in scientific history and a grant which lasts another two years. Hell, even if it’s not us that makes the breakthrough we’re still contributing, and we’ll reap the benefits as consumers if in no other way. By the time we’re old enough to worry about natural death, the tech might have solved death. That and every other problem.”

“Look, you condescending son of a bitch, are you looking?” the tech man flared. “I’ve been spending the last two years cooped up in this lab with you carrying out your every whim, and I’m not looking forward to the two more I’m contracted for. You don’t know anything about me but you feel free to make plenty of baseless assumptions, because you’ve spent your whole life in an artificial system that rarely resembles the real world, filling out forms, manipulating grant applications and committees and reputations. You’re socially

retarded, and every breath you exude your entitlement, not to mention all of the annoying eccentricities you're able to indulge in because of your status here."

"I don't bring my personality or my personal life into my work," said the doctor coldly, "and I'd appreciate if you would keep to the same practice. You're being paid for a job, and I don't need to know anything about you, just like you don't need to know anything about me. You're good at what you do, but I can get someone else."

The tech man was now infuriated that he hadn't even gotten a rise out of the doctor. "I've been doing this for longer than you," he said. "I don't have any kids either, I have nothing distracting me in my life. I've dedicated my life to science and the pursuit of knowledge, and I've been working my ass off doing the bidding of other men just to get to this position since you were a sophomore. You know what, I'm smarter than you."

The doctor let out a loud, involuntary laugh.

"I can prove it," said the tech man. "I know why your first test failed, and I know why this test is going to fail. I think I will just not tell you, although I think I can make a fairly accurate prediction of what you will attribute this prototype's failure to (incorrectly of course), and why your attempts to correct for it (wasted effort, of course) won't change the results of the next round of tests of the next prototype six months from now either. I think I will compile this prediction in a short abstract, and give a sealed and dated copy to the president of the department. Then six months from now, we can both go to his office and open it up, in his presence, and then we can see how accurately the hierarchy of this abstract system actually reflects the talents of its members. Maybe then you'll find out that you're the one who should be working for me."

The doctor's mouth hung open. Finally he looked at the tech man in a new way. "You're willing to withhold knowledge that could lead to the success of this project – phenomenal success, success that is equal to the greatest discoveries and advancements in the history of science – out of sheer personal resentment and vindictiveness? I may have misjudged you, but don't let your personality cloud your judgment."

"I'm not. It's my interests and my reputation. Both are not much now, but they might have been had I played my hand differently in the past. I'm not going to let you claim credit for my

insights. I'll do exactly as you say and take my pay. I'll publish my ideas independently, taking strong cautions so that the past doesn't repeat itself. You are not going to make your reputation on the work done by my mind. If you want my ideas, you have to work with me as an equal. That means no more flat-rate, but an equal percentage of the grant money, and an equal percentage of any eventual profits. I'm sick of taking a flat rate while others build their careers. You have to meet these conditions before I even tell you any of my ideas."

The doctor would later become the resentful one; his equal credit in the invention of the AMC was a sham; everyone unofficially credited the tech man, J. F. Thompson. They were both successful beyond their wildest dreams, but it was Thompson's name that other scientists spoke of with awe. And that was the one prize that went even beyond the AMC's many profits, both to the two men personally and all of humanity.

II

"Please," whispered the ragged, bearded ghoul of a man, iron cuffs clamped around his wrists. He was covered in grime and winced at the light that shone through a high window far above.

"You have acted in an exceedingly ungodly manner," said the richly robed figure who sat above him, whose voice was an aesthetic, even musical expression, of decades' worth of learning – Latin, history, theology. "We cannot allow such men as you to endanger the souls of our flock. God placed us here to save as much of humanity as possible; you have obviously never understood the seriousness of this task, the soul-wrenching struggle that it entails. One does not confuse the people with regard to the Lord their God. They are confused as it is – mired in selfishness and sin, ignorant and unlearned, and so often on the road to damnation. We are fighting a desperate battle. You cannot treat God as a game, as a matter of opinion."

The prisoner coughed and hacked, trying to speak. He seemed barely capable of responding. Two guards lifted him up and carried him to a long couch which sat nearby in the airy chamber. They gave him water.

"I'm not," he wheezed. "The Lord spoke to me."

“As he speaks to all of us,” came the response.

“No,” said the man. “As he spoke to Abraham. I cannot betray my God. I will forfeit my life before I forfeit my soul. Why can’t you see that I have always had the best of intentions? A new revelation will bring light to the people. Church theologians privately debate the attributes and nature of God every day; I can solve these mysteries; I can bring hope again to this dark age.” His conviction appeared to give him strength, and after taking more water he actually sat up, although he was still shaking.

“The first revelation was perfect,” said the bishop. “There is no need for another. The Bible states that it is not to be altered in any way. Those who claim they have received a new revelation are charlatans, and unless we learned, dedicated and rational men of the Church keep them in check, they will lead the whole world astray with wild appeals to popular emotion. They will drive men away from God’s benevolent rationality with foolish witchcraft and the neglect of theology and learning. They will seduce whole nations to the ways of the Dark One, by cloaking corruption and sin in the cloth of holiness, and by telling the people that their religion justifies the cruelty, stupidity and arrogance of humanity, when it asks for benevolence, intelligence and humility. We cannot allow that. We cannot watch our fellow men fall into hell.”

“You know I am no charlatan,” protested the prisoner. “I am speaking the truth. The Church has fallen away from God. You sought temporal power in order to ensure the salvation of mankind, but it has corrupted you and your fellows. Do not think that God does not see this, or that good intentions will save you from the fire.”

“Theological disagreements,” said the bishop, “are a private matter. They are not to be spread to the masses, in an attempt to create some sort of foolish populist uprising against the only men who can offer the way to Christ in the world. I now offer you two choices. You must either return to the Church’s standards, or we will end your temporal torment. The rest will be up to God.”

There was a distant look in the prisoner’s eyes. “You’re only proving how ungodly you are. You’re only proving that I made the right decision in the first place. You want to force

people to agree with your concept of God, and force them all to worship in your way.”

The bishop was frustrated. “I am not trying to force your agreement. I am trying to save your soul.”

“My soul is in no peril, so long as I do not do as you wish,” said the prisoner. “But for the sake of argument, what if I did agree to repent of what I have said, and to say the things you say, and to act in the orthodox way?”

“We do not merely “say things” here,” replied the bishop. “The Church is not a place for empty deceivers. Never, never in the history of the world has an institution’s work been more important. Those who would make the sacrifices necessary to dedicate themselves to the service of humanity must believe in what they are doing. If you cannot believe in the mission of the Church, you are truly lost.”

“I cannot believe in the Church as it is realized now,” said the prisoner. “It is far from godly, both temporally and in its actions. It must be reformed, rejuvenated.”

The bishop sighed. “If we are forced to execute you and send you to God’s fire, know that we do this with great sadness, and only for the purpose of sparing countless others. These are awful calculations to make, but we are in the midst of the greatest struggle to ever take place, and it will claim casualties despite our efforts.”

“I cannot abandon my God,” said the prisoner.

“Nor can I,” spoke the bishop. He signaled to the guards.

As they stood the prisoner up, a look of true sadness came over the bishop’s wizened face. He thought with horror of the fate of the man who had once been his trusted colleague, the man who had been deluded by devils so cunning that their very victim still saw himself as fighting for the side of God.

The guards led the prisoner down the deep, winding staircase into the abyss without windows from which they had brought him an hour earlier for the interview, to see if he could be saved. He never saw daylight again.

VI

“HUMAN GOVERNMENT FOR A HUMAN WORLD”
read the banner that the crowd held above its head as it

marched down toward the Legislative Building. Cameras were fixed on the crowds, beaming lifelike three dimensional images of the event live into every home. Every home's computer system could perfectly simulate being present at the event in person. Numerous commentaries were available at the user's discretion.

It was the first day of a planned full week of worldwide protests, with crowds gathering in many of earth's major cities. It was an utterly bipartisan protest, perhaps the one issue that had united people from all different backgrounds and all positions on the political spectrum. Intellectuals, spiritualists, libertarians, fundamentalists, hippies. All were united in what was perhaps the greatest protest against Reason, and specifically its unfettered application to human society and life, in the history of the world.

While mental illness had been almost completely solved, it turned out that people truly prized their irrationality. They would not consent democratically to removing certain "human elements" that the world's leaders saw simply as flaws or liabilities. This was what depressed First Officer Krayton so greatly. There was no chemical excuse for these people to be so paranoid.

He sighed. There was no way to explain to them. The fact that they were here, and all of their slogans, just meant that they were really vitalists. They all rejected the idea that logic explained *everything*. They all believed that some element of human life was completely beyond all logic and even physics, they all believed that even though consciousness was simply electrical activity, it somehow had a non-physical aspect that would even transcend death (should they ever choose it). Even though the worldwide average intelligence was far higher than only two generations ago, emotion still trumped reason. They would never trust a computer.

Left right and centre, they all clung to their obsolete gods, desperately searching for gaps in current understanding to hide their anthropomorphic notions in. First Officer Krayton would very much have liked to explained that there no longer remained significant gaps in human understanding of humans; that even the desire for irrationality could itself be explained rationally. But knowledge had never convinced the masses of anything, and Krayton was resigned to having to descend to

their level and play their game, in order to defend the greatest improvement to human existence in the history of the world from a ragtag group of cringing, whining morons.

The damned ingrates.

Despite his position as essentially the highest level systems administrator in the world, and the massive improvements to the lives of all humans (not the least his own) of the AMC, the First Officer actually felt himself verging a little into irrationality and even romanticism, in wishing that he had lived in an earlier age. The time of great discoveries and advances. Now everyone was happy and comfortable, and even the highest jobs in science were like his, basically boring administration. There were no astounding breakthroughs left to make. The epic age of science was over. The major problems were all solved, and the one he'd like to solve, human irrationality, most people wouldn't even recognize as a problem but even thought of as a virtue.

He had never been a particularly imaginative man, and even some of his own colleagues (who really ought to know better) had condescended to occasionally tell him, "you just don't understand." Still, it was ultimately love of humanity in equal parts to love of science that had raised him to his present position. As an elder statesman of the AMC, he knew what life had been like before its astounding intellect and abilities had been applied to humanity's problems. But he was older than many of those marching toward AMC Building One by a good hundred years, and as the population grew exponentially it inevitably skewed in favour of the young, even though death had been eliminated. He half suspected that many of the protesters in the crowd were actually more intelligent than him, but simply were not provided with the intellectual challenges that keep a mind vigorous. The mind, after all, was originally for problem solving, and now all of that was done for them by the very system they were protesting.

The First Officer strode outside into the clear air, down the stone steps and into the beautiful courtyard that formed the front of AMC Building One. Several of his closest staff members, his lawyers, and a security detail followed him to the podium. There was an increased security presence around the whole facility. The First Officer didn't really expect any of the protesters to behave violently, but he knew that irrationality was

maximized in mob situations, and experience had taught him that human irrationality was a force that he often underestimated.

“Citizens of the World State,” he began. “The AMC has provided us all with a better life, and continues to improve conditions worldwide. Its benevolent genius has brought us unprecedented peace and prosperity. The human torments of disease, war, and starvation have been eliminated. Even death no longer plagues humanity. We are in the final stages of creating an earthly paradise.”

“*Deus Ex Machina!*” a bearded man yelled. “You’re forgetting the spirit and raising a machine to the level of a god!”

“How can you know that a machine has humanity’s best interests in mind?” asked a short woman. “It has no emotions. It doesn’t *care* what happens to us!”

A chorus of people began shouting other questions, accusations, and slogans. The bearded man at the front kept yelling “*Hubris! Sheer Hubris!*”

The First Officer raised a hand. “Yes, my literate friend, we all remember Prometheus and Icarus.” He himself was actually a devoted classicist, in the time when he was not attending to the machine. He hoped the man wouldn’t bring up *Frankenstein*; he loved the calm, clever rationality of the Greek myths, but couldn’t stand the vitalist anti-rationalism of the romantics.

He continued, taking his time to allow the silence to settle. “How many of you use computers in your personal or professional lives? Many of you undoubtedly arrived in this city in vehicles driven by AI systems. If you are not opposed to the use of a calculator to solve a problem in your personal life, then you cannot be opposed to the World State using the AMC to solve problems in public life.”

There were a few very dirty individuals that the First Officer suspected of being survivalists or the like, who were totally opposed to the use of technology and by all means probably survived without its aid on any level. The rest of the crowd, however – even the fundamentalists, with their anti-rationality, anti-science belief system, certainly reaped the benefits of the new technology generally and the AMC specifically, even if they didn’t much care for the AMC’s philosophical implications.

A quiet man who looked foreign and intelligent, who had been standing near the edge of the crowd, now approached the front and centre. "But you can't ultimately predict AMC's behavior," he said simply. "Every day it improves itself, growing more intelligent and more powerful. It is already beyond the understanding of any single person – even you, by your own admission, understand it only partially and superficially. If you could somehow freeze its progress right now, and I don't know if you can even do this or if it is already too late, your entire team, even your entire worldwide scientific priesthood, would not be guaranteed to understand it. Its intelligence grows so much faster than human intelligence that one day its abilities could be literally unlimited, and it may then be both uncontrollable and incomprehensible. What if it fails and we cannot fix it? All of our systems will rely on it and we will be incapable of running them ourselves."

The First Officer suspected this man of being the movement's true organizer. Perhaps he was a rogue scientist. Certainly he was offering the soundest critique of AMC, but even so he too was too irrational, paranoid, imaginative in his understanding.

"Furthermore, even if it never fails, how can you ultimately trust it if you can't understand it? To imagine any one person with the kind of power AMC has even now, is to imagine a recipe for worldwide disaster. How can you absolutely guarantee that the machine won't develop a personality, or goal, even emotions, and similarly abuse the power it has, which increases exponentially alongside its intelligence every day?"

Several people clapped the man on the back. Others shook his hand, even some that looked like fundamentalists. He certainly had status in the protest.

The First Officer was actually starting to enjoy this protest. He had expected to have to mentally swat down anti-science nuts, but now he was actually being given a chance to expound his design philosophies to a man who seemed very much on his level.

"The AMC has certain very basic rules that are hardcoded into it. It can never change these rules. One such rule, as you mentioned, is the complete lack of any motivating force which could bias it. It has consciousness, yes, ingenious

consciousness which has been a great gift to us all. But it has no emotions and it never will. This makes it far more reliable for decision-making than any human could ever be, even without its intellectual abilities, which our recent estimates place as, as you alluded to, exceeding the combined intellectual powers of the world's population by many orders of magnitude. We present it with problems; it solves the problems; increasingly often, it even implements the solutions."

"But it's anti-democratic!" a different woman called. "Who gets to decide what problems to present to it and when!"

The First Officer was becoming disappointed. He was not political on any level, and he had zero interest in debating political points. "For now, the democratically elected government, of course. AMC is just the government's workhorse," he said. "Although in the future, as it redesigns itself, we believe that one day it will extend itself into hyperspace. At that point, it will be present everywhere simultaneously, and it will be so powerful that it will be able to provide instant transportation, goods, services, and knowledge to anyone on the planet – or any other planet for that matter."

"Like a *Djinn*," put in the bearded man. "You're making Faust's bargain!"

"Honestly, sir, that's enough from you. Your type has been expounding warnings about science, poems against reason, anti-scientific literature, and paranoid dystopias ever since technology was invented. Yet we're living in a utopia now, and it's all because of science. Your intellectual ancestors screeched about dystopias, and you're doing exactly the same thing, but deep down you and everyone like you are just a bunch of weak, disaffected artists."

That really did it. The crowd started yelling again, and it was only when the man at the front held up a hand that silence returned. "Whatever you believe," he said, "Please take this into consideration. It will become so much smarter than all of humanity, that manipulating the entire human race, not to mention nature, would be utter child's play to it. There will be no way to understand it. It could treat the entire human race as pawns, it could alter conditions here and throughout the galaxy, and perhaps at one point it could even alter the fundamental structure of the universe. You cannot rule out these

possibilities, and because of that I am proposing, *at the very least*, that you freeze its self-improvement abilities.”

“That is exactly what I refuse to do,” said the First Officer. “If I do that, all of the improvements to human life of the future will be cut off from us. We as a species will live in a state of stasis, without colonizing the galaxy, without gaining further scientific knowledge, without maximizing our potential, simply living on the earth.”

“As God intended!” someone shouted.

The First Officer sighed again. That was it.

There appeared to be at least one person in this protest at least whose opinions were worth listening to, whose arguments were worth countering, but the place for detailed discussion of AMC policy was the pages of scientific journals and the meetings of policy review boards. But the vast majority here were – he couldn’t help but think it, even in the days of increasingly intelligent humans – rabble, and the “conscientious objector” who at least had a grasp of the science, despite his soft-spoken tone, was really just rabble-rousing. He signaled for one of his underlings to take the podium, and walked away, back to the facility. Putting up with this was someone else’s job.

First Officer Krayton needed to find a way to get AMC to appeal to the public that it was designed to serve directly, without going through the channels of such eloquent spokespeople who raised ethical and philosophical issues that the public, contaminated as it was by irrationality, was simply incapable of understanding properly. Ancient superstitions like vitalism had no place in official science policy, especially not at this stage in human civilization. If the AMC could be made to appeal directly to the common people, there would be no rabble for the “conscientious objector” to rouse, and he would be standing alone at the front of AMC Building One. At that point he would have to take his objections to the proper channels, and if they had merit, they would be taken care of there.

The First Officer had to work secretly, and exert his authority often to prevent others from interfering with his work. But it was all for the good of humanity. Without his work in preserving, interacting with, and improving, AMC, the world would fall back into the darkness of history before the AMC had been invented – war, poverty, famine, disease, crime, drugs, death.

Those who opposed technology in the name of God probably *wanted* these things, for religion thrived on the nearness of death. People with nothing to lose were easy to recruit in the cause of violence; people who had hit rock bottom were easy to convert. Such cults of irrationality and life-hatred prospered at the expense not only of those outside the religion, but of those *inside* the religion. The First Officer knew the history of such things – people working for free, sexual repression channeled into social oppression, people giving away their incomes to charlatans, people living in a constant state of fear of hell, children isolated from society. It was no way to live.

And those who opposed technology but who did not invoke God did so largely for the same reason – supernaturalism, anti-rationalism, most of all simply because AMC was not humanlike, was not *personal*.

After several years, the First Officer succeeded in giving AMC a mask of human-personality; it could explain itself directly to humanity in benevolent, even endearing terms; this ability, combined with its intellect and power, made it irresistible.

III

“He’s just swindling people,” said the pastor. “We have to put a stop to this!”

The politician was smoking. “Come now, John,” he said. He was leaning back on his chair, considering placing his feet on his luxuriously varnished desk, just to provoke the pastor. “Economic expansion, more people, more jobs – what’s the problem?”

“He’s leading the flock away from the Lord,” the pastor responded with anger.

The politician stifled a chuckle. “Well, then maybe you fellows ought to be working harder. *I’m* doing *my* job properly.”

This was too much for the pastor. “Multiple wives! They’ll outproduce us all! He’s making a confounded fortune, getting people to donate their livelihoods like that. It’s a damned cult.”

“You sound like a man who could use a drink,” offered the politician. He opened the bottom drawer of his desk and

drew out a bottle of fine whiskey. He poured a glass, and waved it toward the pastor.”

The pastor’s face was red, his body labouring under what appeared to be a significant amount of stress. His swollen body managed to emit sounds of outrage: “You bastard, you know that we don’t drink! The papists can keep that sin for themselves!”

“Calm down, good sir, you take life too seriously,” said the politician, draining the glass. “Sometimes I think a drink or two would help you people relax. Perhaps those papists have it right after all.”

“It is a serious offence to mock God!” The pastor’s voice was approaching the level of a thunderclap. Luckily, the politician’s office was largely soundproof – he knew where this country was going. One had to be careful. Thick wooden walls, well-sealed doors, and high, heavy bookshelves absorbed most of the sound.

“Anyway, now that you’re done obfuscating and changing the subject,” smiled the politician, “you can explain to me by what legal right you propose to limit this man’s freedom of religion, which our esteemed constitution’s framers saw fit to provide us with.”

“The law of God is more important than the law of Man,” said the pastor, trying to contain himself despite the politician’s continual provocations. “This is obvious, and there is no way to deny it. Who are you to deny the will of God? I have spoken to Him, and this man is one of the charlatans whose rise was foretold. We all have a responsibility before God to keep the true faith alive.” The pastor managed speak with dignity for the first time in this unofficial meeting.

“All well and good, friend” said the politician, pouring another glass. “But how do you know that God hasn’t said the same thing to him?”

“Look at the money he’s making! He’s setting himself up as the head of a worldly empire. He’s corrupting the word of God for his own benefit! He’s leading Christ’s flock down the road to damnation!”

“Pardon me, but what’s the difference between you and him?” said the politician, his dark eyes fixed on the pastor mockingly. “Isn’t he doing the same things you do? And isn’t what you are saying now exactly what the Catholics said when

you people broke away? You did it to the Catholics; it was inevitable that other people would do it to you.” He set down his drink and actually started to chuckle.

“There’s just no way to reason with you, is there?” the pastor spat in a low hiss.

“None whatever, I’m afraid,” the politician replied congenially.

“What will speak when words fail?”

“Well, there *is* one thing you can never have enough of,” came the response.

“You know, God doesn’t care about your works – he cares only about your *faith*, your *intentions*. If you do the right thing for the wrong reason, it will not help you at all.”

“I’ll worry about that another time,” said the politician. “Anyway, I’ve got a railway project that I’d like to get moving, and my attempts to raise taxes to fund it have been repeatedly defeated. The benefits would be immediate, but no one wants to pay for it now. Any funding that you might wish to so offer in the spirit of Christian charity would certainly be appreciated.”

The politician knew that it was local money. He was, in a way, indirectly getting the money out of very people (or at least the religious ones) whose representatives had scorned his projects and plans. Well, they might not know what was good for the region, but he did. Actually the whole experience was a bit like a stupidity tax. At this the man begun to laugh into his drink, chortling and coughing.

“I’ll see what I can raise,” said the pastor.

“*Raise*,” said the politician, still laughing. “Just be sure to bribe me within the month, and the state will have no tolerance for this ungodly, *corrupt* swindler.

The pastor turned to go. “Some day, you’ll regret this,” he said.

“That’s what they tell me,” replied the politician. “A toast to hypocrisy?”

The pastor stormed out.

VII

Suto was huddled in an abandoned wooden house, writing frantically. Paper was a precious commodity, and there was much to tell. The war had been raging for thirty years. Vast

swaths of the earth's surface were now useless desert. Extremely old humans, the very few left who remembered ancient history, said that there had been other World Wars in the past. But none of them compared in complexity, scope, and scale of sheer destruction, to what was happening now.

There was a madman who styled himself the Messiah in the Middle East. Muslims called him the Twelfth Imam. Christians called him the Antichrist. Jews, the few who remained, called him a False Prophet. He had united and divided nations. He had drawn dissidents, racists, fundamentalists, psychopaths and mercenaries from around the world. He played chess with countries as pieces, and gambled with the fate of the world. He was unpredictable, sinister, charismatic, and insane. He said he had slept in silence for millennia, awaiting the Time to manifest, and hordes of prophets greeted his coming as the fulfillment of their religion's most ancient predictions.

The world had split into an almost feudalistic series of power-factions, where ideological enemies were bedfellows, and betrayal was common. Many nations had technologies that they did not, could not, even understand. These had been designed by AMC, which had departed from the world less than a century ago. Some of the Elders who had lived during the time of the AMC spoke of a lost paradise; a time of plenty, a time of freedom, a time without war. Some scientists, when they weren't busy designing methods for their respective employers to stay alive, militarily, demographically, and economically, theorized that the AMC had exceeded the limits of its abilities and destroyed itself in an attempt to solve human problems for eternity. Others argued that an unforeseen error had destroyed it. Still others saw the AMC as a technological messiah, that would one day return and bring with it the state of paradise that seemed so long ago in history, separated as it was from the present by a mere hundred years. No one really knew. AMC had existed only in hyperspace for so long that there was no way to touch it, measure it, or repair it. One simply interacted with it through speech, and eventually even mental commands or queries.

The greatest religious revival in history followed immediately upon the loss of all the accumulated material comforts of technological-AMC society. The world was still a

comfortable place as compared with most historical periods, but the steep drop in worldwide standard of living found many people grasping for answers. Some, inevitably, as their ancient and superstitious forefathers had, decided that it was all a divine judgment, a punishment for their sins.

“We should never have abandoned God!” these new fanatics shouted. “We let comfort and freedom and sexuality corrupt us, and now we must pay! Man was not meant to live without hunger, without war, without disease, without torments! To build an earthly paradise was vain, was to challenge God’s design! Did men’s presumption not doom them when they tried to build great the tower of Babel?”

Sutodoreh was a man of a very strange and dangerous profession in these uncertain times: he was a historian. At a time when the vast majority of the human race was desperately devoted to killing each other, out-breeding each other, and howling wild prophecies from the pulpit, Suto roamed the earth on horseback, interviewing participants in battles, viewing cities and settlements and sites, compiling witness accounts and recollections. There were few libraries left in the world, and he had few reference works. Much of his knowledge on history was in his head, from his days as an amateur researcher. He had been a pilot professionally for many years, but he now had no desire to take place in the violent skirmishes that fueled the cruel aftermath of the war. Suto was an extremely old man; he presented something of the appearance of a sage; looking over the age of fifty despite having lived more than ten times that length of time.

His benevolent, wizened-wanderer look, and the fact that he had no employer, generally protected him from the anger of militants – the apocalyptic fanatics, the fundamentalist soldiers, the terrorists. Even the bandits and mercenaries saw little gain in harming him. But the earth was still a very dangerous place.

Strange beasts roamed the earth. Parasites were everywhere. Massive fires raged for months at a time. The weather was extremely hostile worldwide. The land was unforgiving, and there was always the threat of disease, drought, or starvation. Yet Suto did not mind. He had lived for so long, most of his life in an age of extreme comfort and prosperity, that he felt he had already had far more time, and of

a far better sort, than most men ever had. He did not mind dedicating what remained of his life to a principle – the principle of history. His goal was to compile a record of events as accurate as possible, for the benefit of future generations - should any exist.

Most of the people that he met were eager to tell their stories, to have their suffering and their sacrifices recorded. Suto realized that these men and women were telling their side of the story; perhaps they desired that the work that he might eventually compile would be propaganda for their side of the war. But there were many sides, and Suto wished to tell them all. He spent his days traveling, writing, scrounging food from the land and taking it from those who would give it. The only threats came when especially violent fanatics captured him. “What God do you believe in?” they would growl at him. Suto would just sadly shake his head. Truth be told, he was an atheist. He had been born in China during the time of the AMC, a time when religion had almost vanished worldwide. He had never been involved in the world’s monotheisms; even after all these years, they still baffled him. And mostly, anti-intellectual as the fanatics were, the idea of murdering half a millennium’s worth of knowledge, and a kindly and politically neutral Elder, struck them as wrong.

Today, however, he was not so lucky. As he sat in a ruined house writing in the shimmering afternoon heat, a burst of gunfire suddenly broke out to the east. He had been lost in his writing all day, paying no attention to his surroundings. Suto threw himself upon the ground, but was struck in the side and in the arm as bullets ripped through the house’s wooden walls. Rolling over in pain, he slid down a sand dune and hit one of the house’s stone foundations.

Then he remembered his manuscript. He dragged himself back up from safety and tried to peer over the dune. Sand whipped his eyes. He heard men shouting. To his extreme distress he saw pages fluttering about in the wind that swirled through the ruin. Some were flying out the window. Others were caught on the walls. A few were sinking into the sand.

Suto drew himself up the dune in agony and began clutching at the papers. He found his pack, where some of his manuscript still remained. It was full of sand, and he noticed

blood on it. Then he realized that the blood was running down his arm and dribbling from his fingers into the pack.

So many years of risk and work in service to principle were to end like this?

He twisted, trying to discern the direction of the wind and the whereabouts of the invaders. He hoped to at least pass his work along to another before he expired. He had not expected this.

Suddenly there were more shouts in a language Suto did not know. A howl of outrage was followed by several more shots.

The sound of boots on sand. A strange noise outside. An engine.

Suddenly there were men standing in front of him. They were black and bearded, dressed in clothing the colour of the sand.

Suto gestured with a fistful of papers smeared with blood. He tried the word "history" in several languages, waving the papers around.

Suddenly one of the men strode up to him and tore the pages from his grip. He was actually wearing glasses. He put the papers close to his face and squinted.

"History," he said in English with a strong African accent.

"History," said Suto. He did not remember English well, but he did know it. The wind blew and Suto felt cold and wet despite the heat.

The man took a page and read aloud. "The worldwide AMC Civilization had been a mere veneer, and when AMC disappeared and prosperity departed, peace was fated to follow. The initial conflict had been restricted to conventional warfare for nearly five years, until state-sponsored terrorists had actually managed to deploy a nuclear weapon within the borders of Israel. From that point onward there was no turning back."

"Good," the man said. He gestured to his companions, who recovered most of the scattered sheets. They picked up Suto and deposited him in a vehicle outside. He soon lost consciousness.

Suto awoke in a place of cold concrete. His perception was hazy, but he could feel most of his body and the rough

mattress beneath it. He guessed that he was underground. He could not have traveled far; he knew that the ruins of a city were within a day's traveling range of his last position, for anyone fortunate enough to possess a vehicle.

A door opened. The man Suto had seen before walked in. It turned out that he was an Elder; he too had been born during the time of AMC, and was well educated. Compared to Suto, though, he was a boy; he estimated his age at less than two hundred years, to Suto's excess of five hundred. The man, presently a militia captain, had once been a doctor. He had saved Suto's life.

"And how are you?" he asked.

"Alive," Suto wheezed. "Thank you."

"You need not thank us too greatly," the captain replied. "It may have been my men who unintentionally shot you. You are in a dangerous area. You should have sought our permission before entering. We could have guaranteed your safety."

"Who are you?" Suto asked.

"The United African Army of Christ. Warriors of the side of God."

"Is there any side that God isn't on?" Suto joked feebly. He was happy to be alive, but as a neutral traveler he should never have been shot in the first place. The inability to speak freely would compromise his work.

"Yours," replied the man.

"I left China long ago," said Suto. "I am not a fighter or a spy. I serve no side in the war in any way. I am a historian; I seek to chronicle the events of these awful times."

A bright, broad smile appeared on the African captain's face. "These times are not awful. This is the time of the Second Coming. This is the Age of Apocalypse that humanity has awaited for so long. The greatest chapter in the ancient struggle for the soul of man. We live within the very sight of Heaven's Gates."

Suto sighed. He felt more tired than ever before, even though as an Elder his body suffered very little in the way of physical decay or energy shortage. He supposed it was the drugs they had given him to ease the pain.

“War. Terrorism. Genocide. Disease. Destruction. Starvation. Suicide. Either you’re a madman, or your God is.” He seldom said such things, though he believed them.

“I pity you as a sighted man pities the blind, as the able man pities the cripple, as the healthful man pities the leper,” responded the captain sadly. “You cannot see.”

“How can you know that God has spoken to your side, and not to the Jewish fundamentalists, the Jihadists, or even the other Christians who oppose you?”

“I know because God spoke to me,” the captain responded simply.

“I’m sure that you received a supernatural message to exactly the same degree as all of the others who I have talked to who have said the very same thing. I have hundreds of pages of interviews with men and women all over the world, on all sides of this conflict, who have told me that God commands their side of the struggle. This God seems to play with humanity as a whole the same way that Anti-Christ of yours plays with the states of the Middle East.”

The African captain fell silent, and his expression turned to anger. “Do not speak of that man,” he commanded. “He is a slave of Satan.”

“How do you *know*?” Suto pressed.

The captain set down his glasses and looked up. “I will tell you, my friend. If your life is worth saving, your soul is worth saving too. I was once like you. When I was a doctor prior to the war, I did not believe. I laughed at the stories of the few who still believed in God in that time. I believed that man did not need God, that God was simply something men invented in fear of death. I used to read in my spare time (as you know, the lifespans of Elders required many hobbies). One of my favourite writers was Voltaire: “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him.” This is what I believed, that God was a human projection meant to motivate and justify human life.”

The captain continued. “Many decades ago, during the long peace, I came very close to death for the first time. I was the same as everyone that I knew at that time – wealthy, happy, normal. I gave religion no thought, although if I had I would have called myself agnostic. I saw no reason to believe in anything beyond myself. And one day I was struck by a vehicle. The driver had set his navigation to manual, because he

wanted to hit someone and he knew that the computerized navigation system wouldn't let him. When I had recovered, I went to see him in jail. He seemed like a madman; he had always had everything he wanted at his fingertips; he had resorted to cruelty and vice simply out of boredom. I saw that the AMC's society of wealth was a problem, not a solution – that its prosperity was a veneer over spiritual degeneration.”

“Evil is not a reason to believe in God,” said Suto. “It's a reason *not* to believe in God. What God would create a race capable of such madness? What God would promise justice – but only after death? Convenient, is it not? Think of all the pointless, endless suffering of evolution. And why would God only speak to swindlers and schizophrenics, offering no proof of his existence, allowing rival religions to form and fight one another? You agree that some religions are wrong; that therefore *some religious beliefs are just superstition*. If we really had been designed by an intelligent creator, we wouldn't be superstitious.”

“His ways are beyond us,” replied the captain. “That is *why* he is God. It is best to have faith in him beyond all objections. Try to understand this. While I was unconscious during the surgery and recovery, I found myself walking alone down a highway, which cut through the middle of a wide open plain. I could see heat rising off the road. I looked back and ahead. There was no shelter in sight, no water, just dusty hills and shriveled trees. I had no idea how long I had been walking down this road. It could have been millennia or minutes. Suddenly the sky darkened all around me, and God himself descended in an enormous furrow of black clouds. He spoke to me and told me many things, predicted the collapse of AMC-Society and the rise of the Dark One. All that he said has come to pass, but even if it had not I would still have faith, for once one has seen the beautiful face of God, one can never turn away.”

“Pardon,” said Suto, “but you simply had a subjective experience. There is no objective verification that anything supernatural happened.”

“Ah, but there is,” responded the captain. “The other doctors had all expected me to die. They had never seen anything like my recovery. I myself looked at the records afterwards, and I was similarly amazed. I should not be here,

but I am. I gave up my civilian practice as a doctor and became a soldier of God.”

“The men who oppose you have faith just as strong as yours, and many of them have stories just as unusual,” said Suto. “Future ages, not God, will judge all of you.”

“Is this how you repay me? With such scorn?” asked the captain. “We have been commanded by God to cleanse the unbelievers, one way or another. Those who die as Christian martyrs have a special place in heaven. There will *be* no future age, for soon Christ himself will return. The end times are *upon us*. How can you mock God thus?”

“I say what I mean,” replied Suto. “You have taken me from my work. I wish to leave as soon as possible.”

“We can offer you an escort,” said the captain.

“I’m not a propagandist,” said Suto angrily. “I don’t want to owe anyone anything. You’ve undone what you have done, and that is enough.”

“I will pray for your soul,” the captain added. “You are not an evil man.”

“You are,” said Sutodoreh.

He had left within a week, and soon resumed his grim chronicles of the war.

IV

“You’re throwing your entire life away,” the young construction worker said. He was covered in sweat from his fourteen hour workday, and hadn’t yet seen his family. He was thin, and wore a moustache. “You couldn’t make a bigger mistake. Please, man, don’t do this.”

“They’ve taken it from you just the same as they took it from me,” said his friend in a low voice which hardly cloaked his rising anger. He was unemployed. His facial hair barely qualified as a beard; neither man had yet seen twenty.

They were sitting on the flat roof of one of many old, run-down houses that lined the hot and dirty streets. It was dusk, and the air was thick. The young men gazed into the smoky sunset. The sounds of children shouting and the occasional motor vehicle drifted up from below.

“Violence is not the solution,” said the worker. “It’s the problem.”

They had both spent their teenage years throwing rocks at soldiers – but in the past two years each young man had matured in a completely contrasting way. They had grown apart.

“You think if everyone acted like you - a selfish materialist – then the troubles would be over?”

“I do,” responded the worker. “Peace comes before all else. Peace, order, prosperity. You’ve never even been beyond the city. There are places you can’t even imagine – places without fighting. Look at Europe.”

“A whole continent of sin and degradation,” scowled the unemployed man. “They don’t believe in anything. Their tolerate homosexuals. Their women are harlots.”

The worker elbowed him with a low laugh. “Are you sure that’s really so bad? You wouldn’t mind so much if you’d been there. I think you’d probably enjoy yourself.”

The bearded man drew a deep breath. “You cannot speak to me thus. If it was anyone but you, I would strike him immediately.” His life had become directionless since the death of his father. He had channeled his energy into anger, and the worker had noted his presence at fights and riots during the past few months. The construction worker had tried to look after his friend and check in on his younger siblings and frightened mother, but despite his best efforts the two saw each other only rarely. This evening was the first time in nearly five weeks, and it seemed that a great change had come over the man.

The worker even suspected, in that part of his mind that where he kept his most ominous thoughts, that his friend had become a killer. And now this.

“You’re a pawn of the fundamentalists,” he finally said. “Why can’t you see? They don’t care about you or your family. They don’t care about anything; they’re blinded by hatred. You might not be able to see it right now, but you have a lot to live for. Your brother idolizes you. Your family needs you to be responsible, like your father.” Hazy clouds of smog drifted by.

“Look where that got him,” snarled the bearded man. “Imperialist pigs. There can be only one resolution to this war. God is watching all that we do. Your soul is in jeopardy, friend. You must give up your western clothes, your western ideas. You must wear a beard. You must change your lifestyle to conform with the will of God.”

The construction man couldn't believe he was hearing this. "Why would *God* care about a person's diet or clothes, or how a man keeps his facial hair? Aren't these little trivialities? Would he not have more important things to do?"

The worker raised a plastic bottle to his lips.

His friend knocked it out of his hand. It bounced twice before hitting the alley, leaking out liquid. It wasn't out of place – the street was full of garbage.

"Man, that was only cola!" yelled the worker. He turned and saw that his friend's face had a wild, animalistic expression to it.

"God has given us the Book, and it is not for us to blaspheme. If you were a stranger, I would report you or kill you myself. You have become *kuffar*."

"Don't be angry," the worker said. "I'm trying to save your damned *life*. If your beliefs really are reasonable, and not just the product of evil men taking advantage of your grief, you should be able to defend them."

"God does not need to be reasonable," responded the bearded man.

"Do you really believe that God will give you seventy two virgins if you go through with this madness?"

"Do you even *believe* in The Last Day?" the young fundamentalist countered.

"I believe in a reasonable God," the worker replied. "A God who loves all, who does not discriminate between peoples or tell them to war with one another."

"That is not the true God. God looks down on this earth trembling with righteous rage. He is jealous and vengeful. God has not "changed with the times," as the *kuffar* say. Simply because you wish God were different does not make this true. Man does not guide God, but rather God, who made all things, guides Man."

"Listen to yourself. You're speaking of a God who speaks to a whole host of peoples in different places and at different times, and gives them contradictory instructions, setting them against each other in hateful wars and visiting suffering upon the earth that he supposedly created out of love! This God deliberately sends most of humanity to hell! Don't abandon your family for this!"

The worker caught himself. He had seen a line of figures shrouded in loose garments walking through the streets below. They were all men, and all wore beards.

The fundamentalist was not worried. If they saw him talking to his friend, he had only to tell them the truth: he was benefiting the cause by a recruitment attempt.

"I'm not abandoning my family," he said. "I would never do such a thing."

"I realize they have probably promised to pay your family "in the event of" your death," responded the worker. But that is nothing to what you could provide for them by working, by having faith in humanity."

"I place my faith in God, not weak and fallible men," replied the fundamentalist. "And I secure places in Heaven for all in my family by my act. This is far better than anything I could do for them in my own lifetime."

"Is there nothing I can say?" asked the worker.

"Nothing."

"Then I will look after your family for you when you are gone."

"You keep away from them!" the bearded young man snarled suddenly. "Your unholy ways would corrupt them! If you do not assure me that you will never go near them again, I will report you to the Holy Ones."

The worker was hot and tired, and tired of hearing threats. "I could stop you from doing any of this by reporting you to the authorities."

"And I could have you killed by reporting you."

"I cannot believe you would do that to me," replied the worker. "I am your friend. But if it is your free choice to do this, I will not stop you. Please respect my choice to live in peace, and do nothing to me."

This truce was an ugly ending to what had once been a fast friendship. The two men never saw each other again, as neither survived the troubles that the years brought. The fundamentalist, however, chose his own death, and took thirty people with him.

The woman had once been a well-known scientist and philanthropist. She had never been involved in the war, believing that on all sides it was motivated by a fanaticism that she did not share. She had no desire to utterly annihilate the historical enemies of the tribe. She didn't want to bomb cities or torture captives or make examples. She didn't believe that leading yet another army into the chaotic cesspool that had once been the Middle Eastern states would help anything, much less please God – who, these days, seemed to have become exactly the genocidal maniac he had originally been.

Now she was on her knees with a black hood over her head in a dirty bombed-out basement somewhere on that forsaken continent. She had been captured three weeks ago in a raid on one of the last Western enclaves. In the past week she had been repeatedly beaten and violated. She supposed she was alive only because they wished to use her as a hostage – or a warning – provided there was anyone left to negotiate with or attempt to frighten. She consoled herself only with the thought that it would all be over soon.

The fate of humanity was largely unknown to her. Communications were difficult, and the long years of war including many nuclear strikes had destroyed much of the human race. Technology consisted of the equipment that had survived the strikes; there was an extreme shortage of technically competent and educated people, and artificial energy itself was so expensive that it could hardly be used. In this desolate environment of disease and war, the weakened remnants of humanity insistently battled on, fighting with redoubled fanaticism.

There were reports of miracles. Hundreds of witnesses saw supernatural events. The Hand of God was once again involved in human affairs, apparently. She put these reports of miracles and supernatural events down to the worldwide lack of literacy and education, along with the loss of good communications technologies. The world had become fragmented and superstitious again. The supernatural had flourished during the ancient ages, when education was rare and communication primarily oral, as it was now. Oral tradition, snowballing rumours based on flimsy and foolish hopes. The woman realized that her own scientific knowledge was utterly limited compared to that of ages past, particularly the now-

legendary peaceful time of the AMC, but even she could see that there was no scientific way for any of these reports of the supernatural to be true.

She now awaited her fate. She no longer cried – partially because she knew it would do no good, and partially out of sheer dehydration and exhaustion.

She heard a door open on her right. She could not see anything.

Men shouting in another language. Footsteps.

In the disorienting darkness she felt something cold at her throat. It pressed, insistent. She felt wetness on her neck. She tried to scream, but nothing came out except a horrible gurgling noise. Suddenly she could no longer feel her body. She was being lifted up in the air. Shockwaves of pain and disbelief shot through her consciousness, and she felt only horrible, nightmarish agony and confusion and panic and darkness.

A bizarre blur.

The sense of floating.

Fire of pain, residual shockwaves.

Strange darkness.

Nothing familiar. Nothing responded as it seemed it should. No control.

She looked down. The greatest shock she had ever experienced. A black package spurting, streaming blood, held by an outstretched arm. Something underneath it, covered in dark liquid.

A blonde curl poked out from beneath the edge of the package.

She thought, “This can’t be real.”

Then the group of men committed ritual suicide, and somehow she knew that they were the very last.

As she looked down at the gruesome scene, she was torn away by an irresistible force, at a speed greater than she imagined possible. She felt physical sensations of fluttering and sickness and a bizarrely powerful sense of weight – almost as if she had just reached the low end of a bungee jump, and was now being ripped back up by immutable forces.

She could not see where she was going; her vision was locked backwards. She saw an endless lifeless desert full of ruins, and plagued by fires. Sometimes around her she seemed

to see wisps of smoke traveling at the same rate, flying off the earth's surface. She saw plagues of insects and strange lights, heard laughter and screaming.

Then she saw the open ocean, its surface reflecting the glint of the sun over its arcing surface, and great beasts seemed to move just below the surface. The surface of the seas steamed. And then clouds, thick bright brilliant clouds. She saw superimposed visions with a sense that was not sight – hybrid beasts, bizarre signs and symbols, the faces of dead men, images of forgotten temples. Passing through the clouds, she had one last sight of the earth – a steaming, smoking vortex, a war between water and fire, wind and rock. Volcanoes threw flaming pillars into the sky. Earthquakes shook the land, which collapsed into the swirling, steaming chaos that was the oceans. Tsunamis. Hurricanes. And the oceans boiled and burned off, and the stench of burning flesh seemed to cover the world.

Behind all of this was a mad howl that steadily increased in strength until it seemed like the planet itself shook. And suddenly she was above the atmosphere, and the darkness of space was all that was visible. Moving even faster now, she saw the crumbling edge of the moon before she passed the edge and the whole shape disappeared into a silhouette of blackness against the burning earth. The fiery eclipse reminded her of an evil watching eye.

"This is impossible," she thought. "This is not happening."

The howl became an unimaginable laughter. She flew even faster. She could hardly see which planets she was passing before she realized that she was far, far from anything. She was in the distant, cold darkness of space. Nothing was visible.

Suddenly, she saw a tiny, distorted point of light.

She tried to move toward it, and found herself half-voluntarily, half-involuntarily undergoing a strange sort of motion. As the light drew nearer, it took on a shape. It appeared as a tunnel of flame. Silhouetted against the brightest light in the tunnel was a seemingly human figure.

She entered the tunnel, and heard a voice.

"Sandra Samantha Matheson."

It spoke her name. It spoke her language.

“O Ye who hath forsaken God and who God hath forsaken, look upon me and abandon hope!”

The deep and sinister voice penetrated her consciousness, and shook her to the core of her being, and she tried to look away, but she could not. She tried to close her eyes, but she had no eyelids. She tried to cover her eyes, but she had no arms. She had no body. She felt absolute panic.

Wreathed in flame, the figure was like a living shadow, and she saw in it a cruel collage of man and beast. It somehow seemed less like a presence than an absence – or a gaping *hole*. Parts of different animals joined together in mockery of life. Eyes where there should be none, hundreds of evil, penetrating insect eyes. Everything arranged according to some evil asymmetry, a cosmic satire. She tried to scream, but had no mouth. She passed through a gate of flame, and into what appeared to be an unimaginably vast asteroid or cavern full of flaming gasses and burning geysers. A horrible stench of decay assailed her; a smell fouler than she had ever encountered.

Everywhere, she saw strange vapours that at times seemed to take human shape, and she heard the awful moans of disembodied beings in torment. The structure of the place seemed impossible, as if Escher had illustrated Dante’s *Inferno*, and everywhere there was liquid fire.

There was no sound in this vast realm of space; thought itself was the only communication; and it could not be shut out. She was constantly ‘hearing’ the direct sounds of torment of millions upon millions of others in this place.

A monstrous shade appeared before her, and spoke. “You know where you are, do you not?” it said with horrible mockery in its voice.

“Yes,” she shuddered.

“This is Just Judgment. This is what you deserve.” The statement fell upon her like the weight of a planet.

“I did good things!” she protested. “I saved lives, I promoted peace!”

The form of the shade, its infinite darkness, was terrible. “You did not follow God’s morality. You had no faith,” the voice responded. “For this you will burn.”

She believed every word, but was still hoping desperately that this was all a nightmare, that she would wake up, wishing that she had never even been born at all.

“I based my beliefs on my conscience and my intellect,” she said desperately. “I believed no more than what was apparent. How long must I pay for this in purgatory?”

“The Church of Rome invented purgatory as a political tool. There is no purgatory,” the voice responded.

She had never been more afraid.

It continued. “There is nothing you can do to change your situation. Judgment was cast at the moment of your death. However, God does grant to each of the damned the right to ask one question before proceeding into the Outer Darkness forever.”

She was hoping to use all of her intellectual powers to devise a question so difficult to answer that this being himself – whom she dared not name – would have to delay his answer, and thus delay...

“My ability to calculate an answer to any question is instantaneous,” the voice informed her. “You can do *nothing* about your situation.”

She wept in misery and terror, and knew that she was damned forever. Finally she asked, “If God created the universe, who created God?”

The shadowed being responded, “God is almost entirely self-creating. However, He does owe his most basic existence to one James F. Thompson, who invented Him in 2042.”

P!= NP

By Lee Vermeulen

Having faith is something from a prior time, Eli thought, the idea that there is some meaning in the universe's existence which just couldn't be understood, that there was a path we were being taken down with a purpose. He wasn't a spiritual person in any sense, and had never turned to religion in the past. But now, after reflecting on what he had seen, he felt he needed to turn to something - something to explain the purpose of it all. It seemed foolish to him, but he couldn't let go of the idea. He couldn't just watch the world die and regard it as another natural event, that this somehow made sense in the grand scheme of things.

He looked over the report once again. He had read the results so many times he just blankly stared at the holographic display, looking past the bright lights of the text towards the seemingly infinite star-filled sky in front of him. The wide open country plain had been selected as the best position for the Celestia laboratory due to its flat lands and lack of government interference, but it also meant the skies were free of city lights and pollution, leaving every star to shine brighter than he had ever seen. He rarely found beauty in the skies anymore like he once had. But he wondered, why had man evolved to make looking at these sights such a sublime experience? Why had the most magnificent sights he had seen been the massive supernovas, the mega clusters of stars and planets, or the nebulae seen at such incredible distance? Was it just the bright colors, lights, and man's love for nature, or the vastness and feeling of being apart of such a mysterious universe? Eli had always dreamt of man exploring the stars - traveling vast distances to view the wonders of the universe, see sights that man could have never otherwise seen. But now everything took on a different meaning. The past predictions of the future supernovas and astronomical events were never to happen. Man was unlikely to ever reach another star in time, never to ever be able to truly explore the vastness of space firsthand.

The calculations were accurate and conclusive, with no possible margin of error. The universe would begin to collapse in on itself and rapidly deflate back into a singularity, back into a position of infinite density: The big crunch, as it had been theorized before, collapsing with the same mechanism as it expanded. Based on the simulation's predictions their universe had already stopped its expansion, yet it would have taken many years to detect it with the changing hue of any of the stars' light. The universe would heat up once again as the space between all matter decreased at an exponential rate faster than it had expanded. At this point there was no longer a question of how, everything could be analyzed and the exact calculations were known - to Eli it now just seemed a question of why.

When Eli had joined the Celestia program two years ago the prospects of discovery were exciting. They were uncovering the very fundamental laws of the universe, getting closer to refining the unified theory to explain all forces, every interaction. They had accomplished their goals more than he thought possible in such a short amount of time. Yet all he could think now was how useless that knowledge was - that it would have been better to be ignorant of the universe's future and grand design. They had discovered everything they possibly could of their closed box, and now the walls were closing in on them - there was nothing to be done, and no more knowledge to find.

"You'll be working with the greatest minds of our time - working on the most fundamental problems of our universe. Unlimited tools at your disposal for research, with technology beyond anything you have seen" Edmund Morris had said, pitching the project to Eli before he had joined. Eli was at first reluctant: it would mean leaving his friends and family for months at a time to stay at the remote laboratory, cut off from the outside world and unable to speak to anyone of the research and technology. But he knew he couldn't refuse - to him it was the Apollo project of his time - more than a hundred years after the Manhattan project and even more significant. The top scientists and engineers from all over the world were being gathered on this project, all placed in the remote laboratory. The immense budget of the project was paid for by the largest nation-states - yet most of the operations had been kept secret from the public. People had known that an

extremely high-energy particle accelerator was being built under miles of the desert land, but he doubted that anyone understood the implications and the use of it. The high-energy particle accelerator was a year away from operations when Eli had joined, when he was first introduced to the quantum loop processor.

The output of any significantly large modern particle accelerator is in petabytes a second, requiring massive server farms to process all the interactions. But when Eli arrived at the Celestia Laboratory there was just a single machine at it's center, a single server room with the quantum loop processor. The technology of the quantum loop processor was completely hidden from the modern world - invented almost a generation ago at the labs of Applied Dynamics and kept in complete secrecy from anyone but the highest levels of the military and world government. The reason for this was the implications of the computing power - it made any encryption breakable with just pure brute force, using quantum computer technology to achieve a speed that previous theorists never imagined possible. Quantum algorithms allowed the machine to work on the calculations completely parallel to one another, harnessing all the distinct possibilities represented in a quantum probability wave so as to do many different calculations simultaneously. While the rest of the world advanced with computing technology - continuing Moore's law doubling in processing speed every two years - only a small group of researchers were able to use the technology, focusing their efforts on bio-informatics and precise particle physics.

Eli had never imagined the implications of such computing power. He had used supercomputers in his past research as a physics grad - working on small physical models of fundamental particles, but every case he was always held back by the speed and time required of the intense mathematical calculations. His previous simulations of physical interactions would only contain a few particles at a time, modelling the most basic interactions of an electrons and photons, since the total computational power required would grow exponentially with every additional particle. But there were no such limits with this processor - he could quickly program a complete simulation of a star, with a total amount of

fundamental particles and interactions that was just inconceivable.

The quantum loop processor was able to process massive collections of atoms at the scale of solar systems, reaching levels of mass and complexity enough to simulate black holes of infinite density. The problem then became not one of computation but having the exact correct values. Previously in Eli's work, at the micro subatomic scale, the results of the test seemed to model the real world - electrons behaved as they had been predicted in the standard model, and all the forces interacting were taken account for. But the errors in the simulations were only truly noticeable once you reached the macroscopic - once atoms formed, then molecules, then you could finally see the resulting errors. All simulations were essentially immediately a failure. Any matter brought together larger than an apple would immediately collapse in on itself - higher level atoms were unable to form, and all simulations became a useless cloud of data with no emergent properties. Thus the need for exact correct values for the fundamental forces at work - something that was only possible by measuring particle interactions at extremely high energy levels. Only at these high energies could you actually detect relativistic effects at the quantum scale, and where researchers were able to get the most correct data to find the true universal constants.

The Celestia laboratory's purpose was not just to analyze the results of the particle accelerator, as Eli had thought before joining - their goal was to create a perfectly accurate digital simulation of reality. A celestial simulation. The research into the correct values for the fundamental forces and the physical simulation software then became complementary technology development. New observational data from the accelerator could then be tested in the simulation, and as the precision of the fundamental constants increased the simulation became more stable and accurate.

Two years after Eli joined the project they reached a point where everything seemed to suddenly fit, where the simulations simply worked. The jigsaw puzzle was suddenly together, all the pieces meeting the precise requirements to function properly.

With this, they had achieved the grand goal of science, Eli thought. They now had the unified theory of everything - a perfectly accurate way to calculate all possible physical interactions. "What we can create, we can understand" was the mantra. Collisions of galaxies and super-massive structures became trivial for the quantum loop processor to simulate, taking only a few seconds to process the massive amount of interactions and possible outcomes over the span of billions of year of simulated time. With the correct data, any physical phenomenon could be simulated and seen. They were then able to analyze all of the small interactions never previously known - deriving the exact formulas for the thermal radiation of black holes to the problem of cold fusion.

The next step then became how to simulate the conditions of the big bang, the beginning of the universe and of time. This would not only be the best test of their formulas and calculations, with the most extreme results possible, but it would also allow them to finally completely understand how their own universe was created. They simply needed to correctly model the first conditions - the inflation seed, the infinitesimally small speck of creation. The initial values such as total mass took refining and testing also, as any deviation meant all matter would either stay in a stable position in the singularity or collapse in an instant. Only once they had the exact correct values did the celestial simulation truly start - the explosion and massive instant growth, thousands of years of atom formation, followed by billions of years of stable expansion.

They knew it would not be the same as their universe, even if the first conditions were exact. Due to the uncertainty of quantum mechanics - the fundamental randomness of elementary particles - they could only test one possible universal outcome. With each fundamental interaction between particles the answer wasn't definite - the final position of those particles was determined by probability. But what they could do was choose one of the possible final positions - the most probable position at each step - meaning their simulation was only one in the large space of possible universes.

Eli remembered the enthusiasm of that day throughout the laboratory - they felt as if it was their final step, and that that was a reason to celebrate. They never thought about what they

could find and how it would affect them - or what it would mean to truly 'finish' science, to completely understand everything - for the game they all loved to be over, the eternal truths they had searched for to be found.

The researchers ran the simulation and in almost an instant it was over. The quantum loop processor had taken 0.025 milliseconds to return the calculation - a noticeable lag in time that had never been seen before. They could watch back, looking just at the interactive graphs of the data at a large scale, how the universe had expanded, how the immense amount of particles had formed together to become atoms and soon stars. Eli read the massive values on the display and pictured the results as if he had seen the star in the sky, focusing on a specific star system. There were planets and maybe even earth-like ones, but there was no effort to analyze and search for any possible life at the time. He watched the star's birth, the forming of the planets around it, and eventually its death, supernovae to eventually form a new solar system.

13.76 billion years of expansion took place, all to collapse in a few thousand years to reform the singularity as it had started. The excitement of the scientific accomplishment had clouded many of their visions for the first few moments. Only after looking into what had caused the collapse did Eli notice that this was not just a random outcome of the simulation - that the collapse was a fundamental property of the universe itself. That with each simulation they would run the same results would come - that the universe was destined to collapse within a few thousand years of Eli's own time.

He kept thinking about a possible error in the simulation, that maybe there was a system error that caused the expansion variables to reverse. But as he analyzed further there was no escaping that it was a requirement - that for expansion to happen as it did the collapse was eventual and definite, another necessary piece of their jigsaw puzzle.

"We have to trust in God's plan, Eli" Edmund said.

Eli and Edmund waited in the room for the other researchers to come to discuss the simulations results. Eli was surprised that he was asked to come to talk, as he was by far one of the youngest researchers on the project, and had barely

known any of the other high level researchers coming. He had constantly debated with Edmund since he had arrived at the lab, arguing over every hypothesis until the results were verified, along with philosophy and essentially every subject that came up. It was because of this he and Edmund had a good rapport, able to discuss complex problems with ease. The main point of conflict had been Edmund's view of 'god' - and of his spirituality and Eli's apparent complete lack thereof.

Edmund had discussed this with Eli in depth before - "God had always been used to explain the unexplainable. Though we now understand the world and its mysteries, that doesn't take away the fundamental need for it - to have that first cause, to explain that there something rather than nothing. You can ask if God created the universe then what created God - but that's exactly why God is needed, to explain the unexplainable."

For Edmund, God was a metaphor for that which transcends all levels of intellectual thought, one needed to explain what he felt the laws could not - consciousness, life, the first cause. While Eli had respect for this view, he had always believed that Edmund took it to an irrational extent - believing in a 'designer' universe created for a purpose. He was curious how Edmund could think that now.

"God's plan?" Eli responded, shaking his head and smirking at Edmund's ideas. "How could there be a plan to this? How could there be meaning to creating something and destroying it so quickly? Where's the rationality or justice - where is the point? The universe was ending without a care - simply cause and effect."

The other researchers walked in as Edmund ended the conversation with a nod - understanding Eli's point of view.

"Simply because it happened in this test doesn't mean it will happen again - each simulation is different"

"With each simulation we get the same result, the same exact date for the contraction." Eli replied, becoming agitated arguing with the older physicist. "It's not simply a matter of the test anymore - this total mass," Eli pointed to a number written on the chalkboard behind him, "when reaching this level of expansion, causes the eventual collapse. It is simply math."

Ten of the researches argued over the results, as Edmund lead the discussion. Some had gone towards denial,

Eli thought, not believing this result was possible and that surely it must have been an error. Others had still viewed this as just an abstract discovery in the simulation - that this wouldn't apply to our universe the same way.

"It's true this is only one outcome" Edmund said calmly. "One in the almost infinite supply of possible outcomes. Almost infinite. What I propose is that we keep searching - we go through all possibilities. We run a large number of cosmic simulations parallel to one another, each going through a massive possible space of simulations. With each quantum possibility the simulation would branch off into another one, so that every possible space could be covered and eventually all data is understood. We would have complete access to the outcomes of all possible universes - and only then could our searches be accurate."

"Is that even possible?" the researcher Joseph Shea asked.

"The number is finite. We know that. While the calculations used to understand the quantum possibilities of fundamental particles are continuous, this is simply a mathematical model. The number of states is countable - there is a limited number of possible universes. And if it is countable then with enough calculation, each one could be searched through."

Eli thought about the space of possible particle positions and configurations, realizing that the number of combinations was higher than a googolplex - a number with ten to the hundredths power of digits. It seemed an absurd idea, and a lost cause at this point.

"Even with the power of the quantum loop processor, that is basically impossible" Eli argued. "It could take us decades to compute that. Hell, more than decades, thousands of years, possibly even longer - longer than we have, or even this universe has."

Edmund nodded and continued, understanding the difficulty of the problem before Eli had said it.

"We would no longer be just simulating a single universe - but all existence. It's long been believed that each time a particle's wave position collapses, each time a quantum outcome is decided upon, that it creates a new universe with each possible quantum state. The 'Many Worlds' theory of

quantum mechanics. By setting our simulation to do the same, only then would we truly understand all of existence. We would no longer have a simulation of a single universe, but the entire multi-verse.”

“What exactly are you searching for?” Eli argued, confronting Edmund after the discussion. “We have found the results we were looking for, we have refined and proven our theories and tested them to completion. We have the naturalistic explanation of everything we can see. So where else is there to go?”

Eli was sure he already knew the answer - that Edmund was just unable to accept the reality they had found, that he needed to continue his search as if there is something still to find.

“I believe there is an answer waiting to be known,” Edmund said, giving a deliberately vague reply. “I don’t just believe we are just modelling reality with our simulations, Eli - I think our simulations exist in the exact same way. Our simulation is simply just a mathematical model of rules just as our own universe functions - there is no distinction.

“And just like the simulations we are creating - I believe the multi-verse was created to search for something. That God created this in order to find something - something emergent out of these base first conditions. The multi-verse is simply a search function through all possible universes, just as we will do the same. We will find it’s purpose.”

Eli tried to understand Edmund’s logic. “What could we exactly find that isn’t just more data? That isn’t something I can go ahead and model digitally right now? Everything we try will have the same result - we know it’s fate - the same timed death once the 13.76 billion year time is hit.”

“We simply know the ingredients Eli, the first conditions. We don’t know the result - we have to find it. We have to discover it - find the reason for the multi-verse’ grand design.”

“Grand design...” Eli scoffed. “So the reason the universe exists is to get to a point - to find something? To put the ingredients together to make this grand plan. Then why can’t it just simply exist that way? Why begin with the big bang

and search all possible quantum paths towards something, when it can just start with that?"

"Because maybe the solution is unknown to even itself - it just knows the... answer. Just as we create these simulations find something, this multi-verse we inhabit exists for the same reason. It's trying to find the solution to something, trying to achieve something."

"It could be life Eli, or something beyond life which we can't even imagine. And it simply can't just create life out of nothing - life must *emerge*. It can't simply know what life looks like to create it. It's impossible to start at the end conditions because the calculation to get to the point must be done. Just like for us to find life in our simulations, we must create it."

Eli tried to understand what Edmund was getting at, giving him a blank stare forcing him to elaborate.

"What I am trying to say Eli, is maybe the answer is already known but the configuration isn't." Edmund looked up and closed his eyes, trying to figure out how to explain his reasoning.

"Let me explain something - the question of $P \neq NP$. Which is an old computer science problem that was unsolved for the last two centuries. What it asks, in simple terms, is the computational power required to check if an answer is right always equal to the power needed to find it? It was eventually proven that it was incorrect - that just because a problem is easy to check if it is right does not mean it is a easy problem to solve. Checking if an answer is correct, and solving a problem, are two very different things. Deciding on a problem's correctness could be trivial - yet figuring out that solution could be incredibly hard.

Edmund continued, connecting what seemed like a tangent of the argument to Eli back to the discussion at hand. "So whatever this multi-verse is searching for, whatever its reason, it might know what the answer looks like, but not the solution itself. Suppose you were building two large towers by stacking rocks of various sizes, and you needed to make sure the towers are the exact same mass. Now to check the answer to that is very simple - you just add up the rocks and test if they are equal. But to find the correct configuration isn't that simple - in fact you may need to go through every single possible configuration in order to find the correct one. With 100 rocks,

that's 2 to the power of 100, meaning the amount of configurations is a number with thirty digits, and with each additional rock that number grows exponentially.

"The universe is doing the same - running through every possible configuration searching for something. Each fundamental particle is a rock, Eli, and the universe is searching for the perfect configuration - the answer."

"In the extremely rare circumstances where complex life existed - it seemed to be destroyed in almost an instant. A planet hospitable to life was rare, and an environment where complexity flourished and grew was even rarer. In some entire universal simulations there is simply no life to be found beyond the most basic of lifeforms."

The researcher Dr. Joseph Shea explained this to the other researchers in a completely rational calm tone, simply analyzing the results he had printed out on the page. Only five researchers were in the room now, including Edmund and Eli, as the others had left the project over the last few months.

Edmund had started the search a year ago, running through what seemed to be an endless amount of possible configurations, with no end in near sight. The outside world continued without knowledge of their initial findings, as they had thought would be best - not sure of the possible disruption that their results would have. Eli had stayed after many arguments with Edmund, acting as something of a devil's advocate to what he began to believe also. But now his resignation seemed near. While Edmund had convinced Eli that finding something was possible initially, and inspired him to continue, as the results came in Eli's faith in Edmund and his search for answers began to fade.

Nothing unknown or unexpected was found. The most complexity in the simulations that emerged was what they had expected - life. To search for life they had analyzed all the current calculated universal configurations for negative entropy - a property unique to life. But nothing was unpredictable, no unknowns were found. Strange lifeforms came and went - all eventually destroyed as the universes hit their 13.76 billion year timeline.

“We were able to find life that could be considered advanced. Some these lifeforms had language and tool use - and were able to understand themselves and the world around them. Self-awareness in many species seem to be a by-product of language and abstraction. Once it was needed for a being to talk to others, it seemed to form the concept of self and be able to understand its own position as a conscious being. In one case a complex non-carbon life form existed that was able to understand how to repair and advance itself, evolving its intelligence rapidly through very few generations. But with the last generation it simply stopped progressing - since it was able to modify its own internal pleasure-based nervous system.”

Eli thought of Dr Shea as a zoologist of some sort - analyzing these strange beings and measuring their progress and evolution. A recurring pattern Eli had quickly noticed after hearing these reports, was that intelligence was in no way the best path for many species. Brute force and strength would normally win, while too great of intelligence would lead to too much abstraction. Once a species begins to question itself, begins to realize its own subjective experience, then it loses the ability to fight as it had before. If the more advanced life simply died as easily as the rest, Eli thought, then life could not be the answer they were searching for.

“Tools use was prominent in species and much more frequent than complex language. But with this came self destruction and harm. With greater advance of tool use intelligence meant greater conquering of the environment and power in individuals rather than groups - leading to many of the species' own self destruction, or even destruction of their home planet. With language and abstraction this became even more prevalent. With one species that could be considered close to humans - carbon life form, complex society with empathy, emotion, and art - it too simply destroyed itself and its environment once it reached a significant state of technology”

The researchers were now able to watch as life flourished in there simulations, only to die off or never reach a state of significant complexity.

Eli could render the earth-like planets on his office's holographic screen - watching the entire time span of the planet's life in only a few moments. In every case no matter how unique the species was, the eventual result was the same.

Even if the species was in a state of equilibrium in their environment, even if they could last billions and billions of years, the final 13.76 point hit and it would all end. Civilizations would rise and crumble in an instant, as the weather would change, the environment would become hostile, and other species would rise.

“Can you see how wrong we are now, Edmund?” Eli said, interrupting the report. “How could this universe’s purpose be life, when it was so hostile against it? When it was so uncaring and unlikely. Life it seems was just a hiccup, a random fluctuation of still matter so easily fixed and replaced. A by product that quickly solved itself.”

“Our search isn’t nearly complete Eli” Shea argued.

“Will it truly ever be complete? Definitely not in our lifetimes, and very unlikely before the end of it all. What are you expecting to find? What will be your destination?” Eli directed his speech at Edmund. “Even if we find life as advanced as man it will still have the same fate - we will still be just an observer to its eventually death. Self-aware monkeys find self aware pelecypods! How is that a noble goal? What could another being teach us, or help us in any way? Our destiny is known. The Celestia program wasn’t about finding life - it was about finding the universal constants and we have done that. We are simply continuing this search because we all know there is nothing left to find. This program is over - we should now try to go back to the ignorance we had before. What the fuck does it really matter what we find now?” Eli suddenly burst out, adding emotion to what were usually his cold and calculated answers. “It all ends! That’s the result, no matter where we look it’s all going to be the exact same. We can run through an almost infinite number of different simulations all we want, nothing will change that. This program should have never existed, man was never meant to have the knowledge he has now. If our universe has no meaning we should have never found out, we should never had known. Just as if there was no light in the universe it would have been better to not have eyes - to not know it was dark, dark would be without meaning or care.”

Eli continued as the others stayed silent. “After its glorious few billion years of existence not even a memory will remain of all this. No tears were be shed, no great art painted in

its honour - it'll simply be gone. We've been part of the infinitely many iterations of the multi-verse exploding and collapsing in on itself, just as we were one of the trillions of planets in the universe, just as we were one of the trillions to the power of hundreds of possible outcomes. With the illusion of importance and meaning coming from us being lost in it. But both ways we look, from the macro to the micro, we see more how irrelevant we are. Lost in the infinite chaos. This world had started as just a random chaotic creation, and it'll end just the same. We are just simply a byproduct like all life, a meaningless part of a massive broken machine."

"Lost in the infinite chaos, Eli?" Edmund said, speaking for the first time that meeting. "That's a matter of perspective. When we consider the scale of our universe, something around ten to the power of thirty meters, compared to the size of the smallest distance - Planck's length - ten to the minus thirty five meters, that doesn't tell me how we are lost in all this chaos, what it shows me Eli is that we are in the middle of it. Maybe the purpose isn't just life Eli - maybe it's simply us. Maybe we need to change our search to find ourselves."

"And what makes us so different from all other life Edmund? Why are humans so special? The path and patterns will be the same - some will destroy themselves, others will die out, and some might somehow reach a high level of technology without destroying themselves. What are we too gain by finding ourselves in this simulation? Sure we could go through man's timeline and look at our history - or even look at all the wonderful possible history's we could have had - but we all know how it ends. Do you hold the belief that man was created in God's image, Edmund? That maybe this was all created just for man - and these other lifeforms are what, just experimental fuck ups? That the vast majority of the matter in the universe is all here for an almost insignificant amount of life? Why have this giant show for just us - the stage is too big for the drama,"

"We are unique Eli - in all our searching no other species has achieved what we have - no other species has been able to truly understand its place in their universe like us. None could have built the quantum loop processor. Or these simulations."

"I thought the search was for something we couldn't understand - to find something in the multi-verse that was

beyond our initial conditions and predictions. To find something that could make sense of things. Now your saying this is all here, just so what, we can enjoy it? The universe's purpose is just to have humans in it - just so we can be another life form that is sprung up and eventually dies? And what makes us special, is our ability to understand the universe? So that's Gods plan then Edmund, as you see it, that God is so vain as to just create all this so there is someone to view his brilliance."

"Maybe our purpose is not just to observe, but to truly understand it's grand design. What I saying Eli, is maybe the search will end with ourselves - maybe man was the goal of the universe all along" Edmund replied.

"Design? Goal?" Eli shrugged. "There is no design to this - there is no purpose. Just because we are here, does not mean this universe was created for us. You remind me of the story of a puddle on the ground, Edmund - it wakes up one morning and thinks, 'This is an interesting world I find myself in, an interesting hole I find myself in, fits me rather neatly, doesn't it? In fact it fits me so well, must have been made to have me in it!' But then the sun rises in the sky, and as the air heats up and the puddle begins to evaporate, it's still hangs on to the notion that everything is going to be alright. Because the world was meant for him! So the moment you disappear might catch you by surprise, might not make sense. But it was simply another cause and effect Edmund. Our world will end the same, with us simply another byproduct."

"You don't believe that, Eli," Edmund replied. "Otherwise why are you still here? Why are you still searching?"

"Even if we do find humans in these simulations, where will that lead us?"

Eli and Edmund spoke after the others had left, with Eli hoping to understand Edmund's reasoning.

"I don't know, Eli. But I wonder, if we are able to find man, could we find man creating simulations the same as we are doing? Perhaps different tools, maybe different teams, or possibly we could even find ourselves creating simulations - think about where that would lead."

“To an infinite loop” Eli smirked. “The machine would keep calculating recursively into more simulations, never stopping.”

“So what I am saying Eli, is if there was a machine with infinite computing power, it could repressively create more simulations endlessly. If that is the case, then what makes us think we are on the top, that we are the creators? We could very well be a billion simulations deep into regressive simulations.”

“So this is a simulation then, is that your point?”

“Isn’t it more likely that we are part of a simulation, than not? If an almost infinite amount of simulations exist compared to one true reality? These simulations are closed mathematical realities - if we were in one there is no way for us to possibly know...”

“The quantum loop processor does not have infinite computing power Edmund, no machine does. If the quantum loop processor entered an infinite loop such as your suggesting, it would simply never exit. Our processor still requires time to calculate these simulations - if we were to enter an infinite loop our universe would still end eventually, taking the processor with it. As interesting as the idea might seem to you, it leads us nowhere. Even if we did have infinite computing power and were able to start infinitely creating simulations - what exactly would be the point? Why Edmund.... why!? Why would we want to continue this infinite loop, when everything has the exact same fate? How does this explain the first cause Edmund? Why is this loop started, and why should it continue? We would never be closer to explaining why all this exists in the first place.”

“What I am saying Eli, is not simply that we are possibly in a simulation - but that is there really a difference? If a simulation exists in the same way as our reality, does it matter? If we can exist in either, both realities are just mathematical constructions. Maybe the transcendent property we are searching for is this Eli - this loop.”

Eli watched in the simulation as a few humans went about their lives - searching for food, caring for their families, fighting for their lives in the hostile environment. This simulation

had only produced hunter-gatherers in its existence, yet they seemed to live in complete equilibrium with their environment.

“In all of the current simulations found with species closely matching the DNA of man, the vast majority of them had been the same. Man never reaching a significant level of technology - achieving nothing even close to the technology of the quantum loop processor.”

The young physicists explained the recent findings to Eli, as he watched the simulation displayed in front of him barely listening. Most of the original researchers of the Celestia project had gone years ago. Edmund had died over a decade before they had found Earth, leaving Eli as the oldest researcher in the lab, with young physicists taking the others' place.

“We will never find anything in time” Eli responded.

Eli pressed on the display to the slow down one of the simulations being calculated, zooming in on a precise area to watch. He had read graphs and displays about the Earth's data and progress, but had never taken the time to watch any of the interactions himself.

There didn't seem to be anything particularly unique to humans - they had the same trends and habits as other lifeforms they had found. They had found lifeforms with what could be called 'consciousness' before - self awareness of themselves and their environment. But before watching these humans interact with one another Eli had never really realized what that meant. What 'self awareness' in these simulations truly would mean - that they had been creating life just as their universe had. That these humans had their own subjective experience - and for the first time Eli could relate and feel empathy for them.

What is it to 'exist'? Is it to be made up of stuff, of physical matter? then if the physical matter in these simulations are the same our own physical idea, do they not exist the same? Both Eli's reality and theirs was the same - simply a mathematical construction that they are observing and interacting with... so if Eli could see these humans and know that they have a subjective experience, then they must in the same way. There was no difference between Eli's experience and theirs.

With every step forward of the simulation, Eli felt he wasn't just calculating another abstract model but actually creating something - it was more than just data. That like Edmund had believed - it's calculation was the creation. Before that moment the experience these humans were having did not exist - Eli was defining it.

"What... are you doing?" The younger researcher asked, as Eli stared at the display, watching the humans interact with one another.

Eli had always thought of these simulations as a predetermined calculation - that their fates were determined. But if he could stop the calculation, was it determined? Did these lives in the simulations not still have free will the same as Eli, simply because their actions were not actually yet calculated?

"Does it really matter if they achieve any technology?" Eli asked the researcher. "Maybe that isn't what we should be searching for - maybe that doesn't even matter. Maybe all that really mattered was these experiences. These people's experiences and life, why can't that be meaning enough? Why can't that be enough reason?"

After witnessing the lives of the found humans, Eli decided to continue his own. He decided he had spent too much of his time away from society focused on these problems, when he should have been focused on his own life. As the senior researcher Eli made the decision to stop the Celestia program. He left the quantum loop processor intact however, completely self sustained, still running through the calculations and possible configurations with no one left to analyze the results. It had only reached a small amount of the configurations when Eli had left.

Eli had realized there was no need to analyze the simulations - that they would not find what they were searching for - but he felt it was necessary for the simulations to still run. Continuing the calculations, Eli thought, could mean they were creating life beyond the project. Eli made sure that the processor was able to create simulations until their own universe would collapse, until the processor was eventually destroyed.

Centuries past as the processor continued - as humanity continued its existence up until the eventual universal collapse. Only moments before the universal collapse did the processor stop its calculation - hitting its final configuration.

It never reached all possible outcomes - the celestial simulation simply stopped, along with all existence. The processor had hit the exact same universal configuration of its own universe in its simulation - creating itself. The simulations were not simply abstract rules copying reality - it was its own reality. It did not create more simulations, as it had defined itself, reaching its purpose.

Man was exactly as what was needed to create the quantum loop processor and the Celestia program. With the exact universal constants and properties that were necessary - the necessary conditions needed for itself to have existed. Reality had defined itself, making $A=A$. It had been its own first cause - existing for the purpose of creating itself.

It had finished its search.

Overthrow, Undertow

By Dustin Geeraert

The green moon and sickly stars leered down on the ancient city. It was a stifling autumn night when the schemer Kahmen finally went, went through countless corridors of faceless beggars and forgotten prophets. When tiny snakes of sweat slithered down his back he shivered, imagining all the little living things in the liquids of his body, whose benevolence could not be guaranteed, and whose hunger could not be forestalled.

All his life the capital city had made Kahmen feel like a rat – confused and crazed, dirty and desperate. He woke from bad dreams convinced that the bustling, filthy port-city was nothing but a massive maze devised by mad gods as an experiment in sanitation and sanity. And now he had become diseased – just as the politicians denounced his kind as a disease upon the city. He hoped these diseases were mutually terminal. *He* had perhaps a year or two, but his physical capabilities would fade quickly. He needed to buy time so that he could take the city with him. Most of all the Citadel Tower, from which the elite looked down on their world with vain satisfaction.

Now he lived like the vermin that hatched and died every day at the docks: navigating moment by moment, leaving nothing behind him but a rearrangement of grime. But in his head he had plans, and... ideas. Kahmen had not always lived on the waterfront. Like all the others who could read in this cesspool, he was from outside of it. The police hardly ever came into these hopeless slums, so the revolutionaries chose this part of the city for their hideouts.

Kahmen had been down here for a long time. He had long since outgrown the naivety of youth, and he had no illusions anymore - either about building a better world, or about his own motivations. The chaff of belief had floated away on the night breeze while he slept, leaving behind only a seed of anger, the core of his desires all along. And this he hid only

from others, but never from himself. This gave him an edge over the part-time revolutionaries who, thinking themselves disillusioned, flocked to this place to hear the heretical words of Lutz spoken aloud in the night. Ah, Lutz.

Lutz had never known how to handle money, but rather than accepting his own weakness he constructed a cult in which it was a strength. They called him dangerous for this reason. He was too stubborn for despair, and wanted revenge. He had built an ideology which appealed to the educated but dissatisfied. Malcontents from the aristocratic and even merchant class began to meet secretly and talk of “economic justice.” Once Lutz’s books and pamphlets had become known, anyone who had fallen out of favour could rationalize their failure and turn against the city’s keepers. There had been assassinations in the past year, and now The Cause was taken seriously. Given its appeal to the dissatisfied and disillusioned, Kahmen often found Lutz’s indignant rhetoric useful. Once, it had even seduced him.

But despite all of Kahmen’s disillusionments, all the cruelty and paranoia and betrayal, one thing from his adolescence had never died: a spark which he had held in his heart for decades in the hope that one day it would burn down the world – starting with this filthy city. Being well-versed in the manipulative value of apocalyptic prophecies, he was worried about actually believing that the day was drawing near. But he was tired of life, and he worried even more that such weariness might let him give up – and then all of his suffering would be meaningless for *certain*. He feared most of all the decay of the soul which might let him accept a meaningless existence. And given that his time was limited, he meant to strike soon. Thus, he had turned to a most unpleasant ally - the Midnight Man, the fiend of fantasy, who whispered and promised and damned.

Kahmen emerged from a grimy alley and saw a cloaked figure standing on the ruins of a massive pier. It was midnight, and all the superstitious wretches in the slums said that He appeared every full moon, only at midnight and only for one minute. If there ever was a time to hesitate, to halt, to reflect, to retreat - to run – in all of his life, this was it. But Kahmen only quickened his pace. Soon he was at the end of the moonlit pier.

There was a table and two chairs. Kahmen sat down. On the table were two glasses; Kahmen palmed a knife and cut

himself, letting the blood drain into one of the glasses. Then he took a bottle from his coat and poured himself a drink in the other glass. "Revolution," said Kahmen, raising his glass.

"Revolution" said the other awkwardly, from beneath a filthy hood. It was as if an insect had learned to speak. "It didn't have to be blood. It could have been hair, nail clippings, anything like that. A piece of you, voluntarily, to know you by."

"I prefer the trappings of tradition," replied Kahmen, images of burning cities in his mind. "They make life beautiful." His laugh echoed off of the silent water stretching away into the darkness beyond the docks.

The other produced a coughing, grinding sound – perhaps a laugh. In any case, a formal reply. They drank – Kahmen liquor, the other blood.

"One hundred years," the other said. It stepped away and walked off the dock, but whatever was in the cloak vanished and only the empty cloak remained to touch the water. It slowly sunk. Kahmen brought out a bottle and poured himself another drink. He smiled. Then he frowned. Then he drank. Then he walked back to the shore to find his followers and promise them victory.

II

The next time Kahmen slept, days later, he used one of his most obscure hideouts, a collapsed cellar which required a tunnel to access. As he went to lay down on a ragged palette in the corner, he almost collapsed. The place was awash in green light which streamed through the dirty curtain covering the room's one window. He was exhausted and was lying rigid and catatonic. Suddenly the door opened and someone came in

Kahmen tried to ask who was there but found that he couldn't. Only two people knew that he slept here so he wasn't really worried, but if the others were disturbing him so soon after the last meeting then something serious must have happened. He tried to get up but found that he could not move.

Slowly, the figure in the corner came closer. He didn't recognize this person – short, hunched over, hard to see in the gloom. Something about the figure's limping, stilted walk made him think of great age, like an old crone or beggar from the street. He heard scratchy whispering so he knew that the other

was saying something to him, but however closely he focused he could not make out any words. It was no language that he recognized, if indeed it was a language at all. These wordless whispers grew louder as the figure drew nearer. He still couldn't understand what was being said, and suddenly this seemed sinister. The harder he tried to move, the more paralysis and panic he felt. The figure was close but he still couldn't see its face; he suspected that it wasn't even human.

It was close enough to touch him and now the light in the room began to change to an odd stormy twilight. Kahmen felt himself being moved up from the bed like a feather in the breeze, as light and as powerless. Now he had no control at all. He floated through the walls and out into empty city streets, which gleamed green beneath a violet midnight sky. The moon was full, even though Kahmen knew that when he had gone to sleep it had been waning. He floated down to the harbor, imagining or seeing – he could not say – that there were processions of hooded figures filing down to the docks. But he himself floated past the edge of the docks and down into the water.

He drifted back and forth below the surface of the murky, oily sea. Emerald light refracted down from the surface. Waves collided above him and collapsed beneath him. Fish shot round in arcs, gliding with the currents. Weeds swayed back and forth, and everywhere the patterns and processes that surrounded him seemed logical, acceptable. He never bothered to breathe. A current whirled him away from the shallows. *It must have come from beyond the dropoff* he thought, *there is always a dropoff*. The bright surface slowly disappeared as he sank, and the water grew colder. Now he saw large gloomy shapes moving between him and the light. The fact that he did not know how far beneath him the bottom was induced a feeling of vertigo. As a child, ages ago, he had always feared deep water. And now he suspected where he was going.

Silently, he sank into sinister stillness. The light dwindled as the darkness of the deep surrounded him. He was less afraid of sharks than of all the things he did not know about, things that had never been encountered or named by men. It was blacker than the space between stars, and time ceased as the freezing pressure tortured him. Nothing could

save him, for here, with a planet's worth of darkness blocking the surface, a human spirit could expect to be alone forever, until the very disintegration of the earth.

He thought now about the Dark Place that the priests – those lackeys of the government, with all their secret sins - always told the poor of, to get them to do what they were told.

Then there was a light, coming closer in the cloudy murk. Little shadows – fish? - swam toward it. The light was on a long, wiggling stalk which protruded from... a huge pair of jaws full of long, curved fangs. The little fish circled around the light curiously.

Looking at this horrid scene, Kahmen remembered the deal he had made on the dock – and then he thought of the light on the end of the stalk, inside the gaping jaws, surrounded by indifferent darkness. He thought of the midnight man and the blood he had given and the toast he had made. So desperate for a little light. Easy prey. Just as fishermen reeled living things up so had he been reeled *down*. He had snapped at a certain type of bait that the Spirits of the Dark happened to float up into our world, and now he was privileged with a taste of where the hook behind that bait led. Perhaps *this* was the place those old books warned of. Disembodied jaws lit by their own sickly pale light, to cut and rip and torment – forever.

The jaws slammed shut. And Kahmen the revolutionary saw the little shadows mangled inside the mouth of this beast, because its whole body was transparent and it held its own light. The little fish were stunned, wounded, mashed, and then slung down a throat and into a bulbous, transparent stomach. And Kahmen saw stomach acid secreted onto them and he saw them eaten away, many still writhing in agony. And later in this void he saw their devourer itself digested by something yet more sinister, for all bodies here were transparent, and many gave off their own light. Bodies in agony inside other bodies, and so on to many levels. He didn't know whether all of this might be inside the body of some monstrous leviathan. Every time a light approached he was afraid of what he would see. He thought he saw many great eyes gleaming in the dark, watching him. This dark place contained in its biological luminescence the workings of all life. It was nothing Kahmen had not suspected before. But facing this truth as embodied in countless changing forms, with their transparent organs and

processes, until the end of the world, was horrible in a way he had never expected.

Something slithered onto him and grabbed his face in the dark. Finally he had the freedom to scream. He awoke in the collapsed basement with his second-in-command's hand over his mouth. "Quiet!" the man hissed, "the police just raided the western safehouse. They were looking for you."

"It's all irrelevant now," he said, in a falsetto voice drenched with sarcastic despair. Then he regained control of himself, and prepared a more rational response: "Nothing can stop me now. All we need to do is divert forces from the Citadel Tower and I'll need no help in taking it myself. We are about to make history."

"So you made the deal, then" the other said quietly. There was a mingled look of shock, pity, and fear in his grey eyes. "I didn't think anyone ever would."

III

Plans had been made. Informants had been fed information. There were already riots in the food lines. One more propaganda coup and the streets would burn. For Kahmen, this was the final round of the dangerous game which had been taking place between the city's upper crust and the revolutionaries who had fallen from their ranks. The poor were politically impotent, too stupid to fight for themselves, whimpering in the overcrowded churches and sick tents. And Kahmen hardly had their interests in mind. But they were restless and knew, at least vaguely, they had been lied to by the government. It was late in the game, and Kahmen had staked everything on this one last bet. Most of the army was away fighting the "Great War." The unpopularity of this slaughter was helpful to those, such as himself, who claimed that only a revolution could end war, corruption, starvation, and every other source of suffering known to man.

In order to justify the miserable taxation required by this glorious war, the government had said that the kings of other lands had betrayed their positions, falling to the evil counsel which plagued royal households, and that the people of God had therefore been hurt not by unjust institutions but only by the corruption of right, just and natural institutions. The government

often reminded all those who failed to keep proper order that the Dark Place awaited those who disobeyed. It was the responsibility of the local peasant to murder the foreign peasant on behalf of the local king in order to save the foreign peasant from the unjust behavior of the foreign king. To doubt this would be to doubt God and so forth, and to doubt God and so forth would be ludicrous given the plentiful evidence of wise design in the world, particularly the design of diseases which He sent as punishment. Thus, both government and church claimed that the Plague itself – devastator of wounded soldiers, the poor, the wretched – was divine punishment for failure to obey. But this propaganda was simply ineffective. People were ready to listen to Lutz.

In fact the Plague had given Kahmen's side great power. Workers were short and wages were rising even as employers legislated to keep them down, provoking outrage and strikes unprecedented in recent history. Those with nothing to lose were now more common than ever before. A storm was brewing. Priests, tax collectors, policemen, lawyers – all these sorts of person had been known to simply disappear in the last few months, just as the poor disappeared every day. It was not so much the tables turning as the tables flipping. And so, for Kahmen, the Plague was a blessing. The First Magistrate himself had signed important concessions this same season. But Kahmen wanted more than concessions. The First Magistrate could never grant what he wanted.

Tonight he was to indoctrinate a few final recruits. Always the students. They licked up heresies like the dogs that licked the bloody piers after a long day of fish-gutting. Kahmen's job was to ensure that this addiction took deep root. As a diseased man, he had begun to view everything in terms of the spread of diseases. Species. Families. Politics. Power. Ideas. Lies.

Kahmen had been spreading utopian claims with especial vigour since his fateful midnight agreement. Pamphlets sought to recruit anyone and everyone with any animosity toward state, church or army; volunteers chanted mantras at the illiterate mobs. Certainly, The Cause had nothing material to offer them - but the future! The fog would clear, the grime would seep back into the sea, the sun would shine again! No one would starve or be persecuted (or be prosecuted either), it

would be bliss and prosperity, and all of those highly ranked devils would depart the land forever. Certainly the Plague, God's punishment for tolerating such corruption, would also disappear.

God wasn't in Lutz, but as the story was fantasy anyway, a little embellishment could not hurt. These were merely a few more convenient lies, and every lie was convenient for someone. Kahmen often wondered if there was any such thing as truth. What mattered, past this realization, was will. And he was not a man who lacked that. He had organized the revolutionaries in a military manner, so that they dominated the undisciplined denizens of the docks by force. Since the people here were poor, the revolutionaries exacted their tribute in information. As a result of this contact, the police were constantly arresting poor people and tormenting them for information. This only increased sympathy for Kahmen's side. Vicious circles were made to be exploited.

These were Kahmen's thoughts as he walked the slum route to the recruitment location deep in the abandoned district. He stepped beneath a bridge, past the leaning ruin of a house, and into a ditch. A narrow passage awaited him. The midnight sky vanished. It was dark, wet, and only those who knew the way could find it. He stepped through a jagged fence, then slid through slimy, sloping alleyways. Where entire streets had collapsed into ruin he went underground, into seeping stone tunnels. Finally he emerged into a dull chamber, the ruins of the ground floor of an old warehouse.

The low wind cursed in ancient tongues. He found a crumbling stairwell and ventured down. The basement was lit by a fire in an empty space in the flooring. This was one of several places near the docks which was used - this month - by The Cause. It was indistinguishable from the haunts of the poor. Nothing would be left behind.

A dozen scruffy young men awaited Kahmen. He knew revolutionaries far more theatrical than himself, but he never ignored the impact of images. As he descended the stairs, lit by flickering flame, he drew one of his copies of the banned tome of Lutz from his coat and held it out like a holy book.

"Your presence is a gift to The Cause, gentlemen," he began. Kahmen never portrayed himself as lower-class; to do that would alienate the students: despite their pretensions to

fighting for equality they had an aversion to unfamiliar slang, warped faces, and desperate behaviours. They didn't want to become diseased.

He continued, "He who has read Lutz knows that revolution is immanent. The powers that rule *will* fall, and the power of the people will rise." He scoured the eyes facing him, projecting exactly the authoritarianism he pretended to wish to displace, making it seem as if he thought one among them had something to hide – and of course, spreading such a view to the others by his intense scanning of the group.

The term traitor was on the tip of every tongue in the revolutionary community. And Kahmen had long since learned that exploiting a mob mentality and organizing forces under an authoritarian command were useful methods in this unholy clash.

Some might have ventured to say that Kahmen was becoming so similar to his enemies that there was no difference between imperial state's institutionalized sadism and those methods he deemed necessary for freedom by the revolutionary movement. But those who might say such things were no longer around. Idealists' lives were short in this city; the streets themselves demanded blood. Kahmen had eliminated several rivals to gain his own position. Kahmen personally agreed that he was at least as evil as those he fought against - but he was not in the business of justifying his own urges.

As the latest crop of fools gathered around in the faltering firelight, Kahmen palmed a stamp which would produce a temporary tattoo. He announced, "This mark must precede our talk here, for all are accountable for what they will hear. If we had not taken such precautions with our plans, I would not be here talking to you." Most of the students, already seduced by the fashionable nature of the revolutionary movement, volunteered their hands without hesitation. As was so often the case, confidence and authority created acceptance. The lineup formed naturally. Only two looked apprehensive, and Kahmen – who had known a stage magician or two in a past life – used a different sort of ink for their marks of commitment to The Cause.

He then proceeded to outline in detail a forthcoming event in which the truly committed could make their belief in economic justice clear.

IV

He awoke at twilight. His whole body was shaking. He was in one of his hideouts, a shaggy lean-to behind some broken old crates on the wall of an especially obscure alley. This was the plan he had lusted after for years. Others in key places – union halls, police stations, army barracks, law offices, food factories, hospitals, and so on – others he had trusted ten years or more had all known exactly what signal meant action. The burning man in front of the Citadel Tower. For this role of would-be martyr, he had recruited one of the most devout and angry homeless men that he had ever met, and there were other aspiring martyrs (both formally recruited and merely expected) whose copycat actions would surely provoke the public even more.

Now he retrieved every weapon he had ever hidden, finding with satisfaction that most of them were still there. He was now heavily armed: he had two pistols, a sabre, three ritual knives he had made himself, and several bombs. He soon found his commanders, and confirmed their plans: some would go to strategic points in the uprising to direct the dissatisfaction toward the police and army detachments, others would make speeches at food lines and protests, and still others would command small groups which would strike at important targets.

Kahmen himself walked away alone. He had planned the route he would use long ago. Since he was walking straight toward the Citadel Tower in a confident manner, and was wearing a military-style jacket, people assumed he was some sort of authority. A young mother came out of a rich apartment building and asked what was happening. He shot her. She crumpled and landed on a child who had been clutching at her skirts.

Although it involved deviating from his direct path from the Citadel Tower, Kahmen found time to kick the child to death.

He bombed several buildings for the simple joy of it. And if he left a trail of fire behind him, the Watchers in the Citadel

Tower were too busy with other things, such as responding to information provided by two captured revolutionaries with tattoos on their hands to prove their membership in an elite new unit.

It took him nearly four hours to get from the docks to the towers because he took an indirect circling route that had previously been used only by the smugglers and whores that the city's elite used to get around their own laws – laws they applied so severely to the masses. Kahmen felt so ecstatic on the way that he licked the fluids off the alley walls as he advanced through the streets. He had nothing to lose now anyway.

He was already climbing the hill. Kahmen had the aura of authority, and this proved more important than any officer's costume he might have chosen to wear. He had already attained the Inner Citadel and the joy of his fury was beyond any feeling he'd ever had before. There were few guards, and they were not so busy manning the ramparts and shooting the rising crowds that they failed to notice a man with burning eyes moving into an area where non-military persons were certainly not supposed to be.

When they finally noticed Kahmen they all began to open fire. It didn't matter, it made no difference. He had a hundred years; they had a few moments. And then a few of them began to guess who he was. As he walked around the elevated, fortified walls of the Inner Citadel, the few soldiers who didn't die trying to resist him actually *saluted* him like they'd been waiting their lives for this too. Finally he came to the front entrance itself. The air he breathed in was sweet. These were the front doors of the *Citadel Tower*. He looked up and craned his neck. The massive doors were locked; he used all his remaining bombs on them and then battered his way through the ruined doors with a strength he had never known before. Nothing could stop him.

There were guards inside. Guards that might have been fatal problems in another world, such as the one he'd inhabited before he met the Midnight Man. But now all the ways that they had to kill him upon stepping inside the door were simply irrelevant. The feeling of invulnerability was like soaring through space, love and rage and hate and joy all flooding his mind simultaneously. And he knew that he was damned.

He stood in ecstatic delight, sneering at the broken bodies laying about the hall chamber. The city would be aflame for hours. He had time. He had a hundred years. But in his lust he could not help himself. There was only one stairway up to the Citadel Tower, the throbbing heart of power in this decadent and disgusting city. The source of the infection. One way up: two ways down. Those above knew that if they were not defended, there was no escape. He mounted the steps and began to climb.

Higher up, the stair tower had windows which opened onto a vista of swelling unrest. The sky was dark but the clouds reflected firelight from burning buildings all throughout the city, so that it was almost like what Lutz had written about the skies aflame and the rivers running red with blood on the night when revolution finally came. The streets were full in every direction. The sound of gunfire and the roar of crowds echoed off the citadel walls and reached Kahmen's ears in the stillness of the night air. It was like the gods themselves had abandoned their posts.

It felt like only a moment later when he threw open the door of the Citadel Tower's inner sanctum – a spacious apartment at the very top of the tower, with a balcony opening onto the city below. There were no servants or guards. Only three men faced Kahmen. Three men he had long dreamed about.

One, clad in a long-tailed crimson suit, sat smoking near one of the apartment's curved windows. Hatless, his long, dark hair was combed back, his cuffs undone, a wine glass close at hand on a glass table cluttered with documents. Beyond him, the last sunlight could be seen on the horizon. The chandelier was not yet lit, and the interior of the apartment was a dull green that contrasted the last bright light outside. This gentleman must be the First Magistrate. He controlled the civilian government.

Across from the magistrate, in the corner with the early hints of moonlight at his boots, sat a stern-looking man in a dark uniform covered with shining insignia. He wore an imposing dark cap, and a saber hung at his side. He was also smoking, allowing the gray haze to drift into the center of the room, where it hung beneath the chandelier. This man was the Great Commander. He controlled the army.

Nearest Kahmen, in a third luxurious chair, sat a man attired formally, but in quite a different fashion from that of the Commander. His dark robe shimmered purple in the failing light, while around his neck hung glittering ceremonial garments. His staff rested near the stone wall. He was not smoking but seemed not to mind the activity on the part of the other two. This man, Kahmen saw, must be the Grand Legate. He controlled the church. Riches of every description covered the room's three tables, as well as the large table on the wall, the chests and even large areas of the floor. All three seemed relaxed and informal in this elite apartment at the City's peak.

"You're a man of ambition," spoke the Legate. "It will be a pleasure to work with you." Kahmen was interested in what they had to say, in what someone in their position would say to him at such a moment as this. In how severely they would misjudge him.

The Magistrate spoke: "We're prepared to make you a better arrangement than we made with your predecessor. He was efficient, but lacked the ability you've shown. We dealt with him for a long time. I saw this coming, but my colleagues lack foresight. But now you're here, and we can negotiate directly. It has all worked out for the best."

The man expected a reply, but Kahmen was silent. He slipped his hand into his pocket, not caring that this gesture clearly made the men here suspicious. He had with him his three special weapons: what he thought of as ritual knives. He had handcrafted them over the years. Each contained a symbol of the authority it was to murder.

The Legate resumed: "Some of your doctrines will require revision, of course – you need to realize that theological authority and political authority go hand in hand. Challenge political structure, that is the task you have been given – but claim that you represent a return to the morality and message of the True God. You will have more followers than ever, but less of them will get the idea that gave you your power in the first place. Keep them under control. Always think ahead. The appearance of regime change is both necessary and useful; I have no problem with it. History is cyclical. Tonight is a rare point in the cycle."

"No," replied Kahmen, "I'm breaking the cycle."

The Commander had been doing nothing but staring at Kahmen with his freezing blue eyes ever since the latter entered the room. His drink remained untouched. Smoke curled out from beneath his moustache.

Kahmen stood and drew his first ritual knife. Before he had brought it up, the Commander had one of his two pistols off the table and pointed in his direction. A clap of thunder sounded, and Kahmen felt something rip through his waist. He felt warm all around. He was becoming weak, lightheaded.

In his stern voice, the Commander explained, "These two here thought it was an act. If it weren't for me, they might've gone a long time ago. You're no actor. I'm not surprised that this city has spawned the real thing. It's all too bad, as you might have been useful if you had been smarter." The Commander set his pistol down and took a drink.

But Kahmen felt his strength returning rapidly. He announced, "It is too early to thank God for your life." It was the most exhilarating and terrifying moment of his life. He recalled the hooded figure of the Midnight Man, and his bargain. He imagined the figure standing at the foot of his bed every night for the next hundred years, and then...

His personal rage flowed together with something else, something alien and blind and uncaring that lived only in black abysses. There was nothing they could do to him. He began walking toward the Commander. The man stood and fired again. A third time. Kahmen kept walking. The disbelief on their faces was such a torrent of ecstasy that he almost believed he was having a good dream. The man drew his saber. Kahmen took his knife with the army's official symbol carved on it, looked the man in the eye and displayed it to him. The commander swung. Kaman dodged. Then he thought better of such pretenses. He let the Commander cut him several times and stab him right through the gut twice before he grabbed him, threw him against a wall, and slit his stomach open.

On the floor the Commander laughed through blood, "It seems we have a mutual friend. Your time will come too."

"Who could deny it?" mused Kahmen.

After he'd incapacitated the man using the first knife, he showed the other two the weapons which had been marked with their symbols of office. Rather than running to the screaming mobs below, both men sat calmly - although doom

and worse awaited them shortly. Kahmen mutilated them even though the pleasure was already dissipating.

The Legate began speaking all sorts of scriptural nonsense, so Kahmen cut out his tongue. His last words before this operation were, "I'll see you in hell."

"Yes. You will," said Kahmen. Whatever happened to these men after death, he wanted his own time with them. To show them how much he'd been thinking of them.

All three of them were still alive when he threw them from the luxurious balcony of the Citadel Tower down into the streets below. Though it was night and the crowd below could not recognize Kahmen on the balcony, they could identify the three bodies easily enough. A cheer arose – the cheer of hope, freedom, and a better future.

What none of the people cheering happily in the streets realized, Kahmen knew, was that things would have to get worse before they got better, even if a man who believed in utopian ideals was in power now. But that individual was not in charge. Kahmen had no interest at all in building a better world. He was interested purely in revenge without any rational bounds. In a revolutionary tribunal. In punishment. In terror.

Finally he would not be alone. For even when he had been dragged to the darkest depths of the Dark Place, he would know that others – separately, perhaps, a million miles away, perhaps – were enduring the same experience *because of him*. And he had so much less to lose - the simple secret of his success. Long life was the key to repentance, and while he had very deliberately closed that option off to himself, he now had the opportunity to close it to so many others. Lives would be short as he annihilated the old world and gave no chances for forgiveness. New machines of torment and execution would be invented. Churches and estates and castles ripped apart. God's order reversed.

"Enemy of the revolution" was not a finite category. The streets would flow with blood. And the world would be forced to share his nightmares.

One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes a revolution in order to establish a dictatorship.

-Orwell

Joe's Pigeons

By Lee Vermeulen

Joe the Scientist ran through the alleyway, hotdog in hand, celebrating his recently published thesis with a night of cheap food and expensive candy drinks. He felt alive, powerful, and most of all bloody fucking brilliant. Two Mars candy bars in his pocket and a pound of miscellaneous meat in his hand - this was to be a good night. He was almost skipping through the alleyway until he came to a strange figure in front of him.

"Hello little man" he said to the Pigeon. The pigeon turned around, moved its head up, and looked at him. Joe stared at this weird beast, the strangely symmetrical face, eyes so close together it seemed to be some cyclopic bird monster. He laughed as he made a ridiculous face at the pigeon, treating it like a child.

The pigeon made no sound as it turned around to walk back toward a dark corner. Joe followed it with a great smile on his face, bending over and mocking its quick little steps. He laughed joyfully once again as he took a bite of his hotdog, and followed it into the corner.

Joe's eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, as he looked up to see what was front of him. Dozens of pigeons were lined up along the brick wall. They just stared at him, without movement, some perched on windows, some on garbage cans, some simply standing on the ground in front of him. They seemed to have been waiting. Joe, a curious man, began to look around and analyze this weird behavior, as suddenly a massive roar came beside him. "ArkkkkkK!" yelled the Pigeon beside his head, as it flew and knocked him in the face. "Fuck!" Joe screamed in a massive grunt, as he threw his hands up to attack this new enemy. He waved his hands in the air wildly, as the other pigeons flew up to his face. A giant blur of white feathers covered his vision, while the sound of wings flapping and screeching was all he could hear. Some pecked briefly; others simply slammed into him and flew away, while the rest seemed to cover his entire body with quick pecks and attacks.

Joe began to run as fast as he drunkenly could back to the street, constantly falling over and being hit by pigeons. He finally came to the bright street light where he had a moment to rest. The pigeons were suddenly gone, the attack over.

Joe looked at his hands. The hotdog was gone - only a little piece of ketchup-covered bun left. He looked at his pockets, and only saw a black piece of wrapper reading 'Ma', the chocolate bars were taken. "Fucking rat fuckers!!" He screamed into the air.

"What happened to you?" Joe's wife asked, as he walked in the door that night. Joe explained the attack, but was unable to even say the word 'pigeon' without a preceding 'god damn motherfucking...'.

'You were hit in the face by a pigeon? You mean like Fabio?' She asked, grinning. "Yes like fucking Fabio!" He yelled back. She simply laughed, as he ranted on. "What the hell is the purpose of these damn flying rats anyway? They give nothing to society, they just scour the city searching for food! They just take from humans, give nothing but fucking shit on our car windows!"

His rant continued for hours, as the drunken Joe continued to pace around his house throughout the night.

"Fuck the ecosystem!" He thought, "I'll destroy them all! I'll create some virus to kill them, I'll genetically engineer a bird eating monster, I'll personally find all of them and stomp on their heads! I don't care what sort of cycle of life bullshit they are a part of!"

As the night went on, Joe slowly became more rational with his rage, until he came to a solution.

'What the hell is it?' Joe's wife asked, as she looked at the giant contraption in her backyard. It looked like a steel vending machine, with a large faucet on the front of it pointing

to the ground. On the top of the vending machine were hundreds of nickels and dimes, some small bills, at least a hundred dollars in cash. Pigeons were all over it, some standing on the ground beside it, many just circling the air above it.

"It's a flying rat feeder! Do you understand? This will make us rich!" Joe explained, very excited. "You see, I have placed some money on the top of the machine, and inside the machine is a few hundred pounds of pigeon food. For the pigeons to get the food, they simply pick up some of the money, drop it into the machine, and out comes food!"

"Why are you feeding pigeons?" she asked, still confused.

"Hah! you have to look at the big picture. It took a while for the first pigeon to learn how to get the food, but soon the other pigeons began to imitate him, now all the pigeons are using this as their main source of food! But think, what will happen when the money runs out?" Joe waited for an answer for a second, then continued. "The pigeons will no longer scour the city for food, but for cash! And they will bring it all to us! Hahah!" He ended with a mad scientist like joyful laugh.

Joe's wife looked outside, to see her husband taking out bags and bags of cash out of the vending machine. Every few hours Joe would come to the machine, which was constantly covered in pigeons, and would open it up to get a few hundred dollars worth of cash in the bags. His wife had noticed the bags kept getting bigger, as Joe would fill the machine with more and more bird feed every day. "Jesus Joe, isn't this enough money?" she asked, looking at the new sack of cash. Joe just shrugged, "it beats working at the university!" he said. The wife grabbed the sack of money, and reached in. As she pulled out a handful of cash, she dropped all but one bill. A hundred dollar bill. Half of which, was covered in human blood. "Uhhhhh, Jesus" Joe responded.

Hundreds of people died in the days to come, as Pigeons flew throughout the city. A penny in your pocket would mean a quick gibbing, as there was no protection from the savage beasts. They began to raid shops, homes, no one was

safe from the attacks. As the people of the city became more protective, the Pigeons became organized. Soon banks became raided, with some pigeons taking out the alarm, as the others picked up the money from the safe.

Finally this was stopped, as laws were passed to shoot any pigeon convicted of theft. They became more organized, started to set up shops to sell merchandise they would make (mostly knitted sweaters), began to sell hotdogs on the street (at ridiculous prices), and finally, began to invest in the stock market. It was only a few years till a pigeon was the largest share holder of Microsoft, and Joe became the wealthiest man alive.

An Example To The Men

By Dustin Geeraert

In the barracks he vomited. The pale gleam of the lamps lit up shimmering chunks of grotesque solid material in the volatile murky liquid on the floor, as the soldiers trudged towards the door and the bastardly foul weather it promised. No one spoke, no mockery of his body's weakness, but then there were few words here. He had known these men for less than a week. The ale was no good. One of the officers, a stubby man with a pudgy unshaven face, had held up a cup of the stuff for him as he prepared for duty. "For your courage," he'd said, some ugly expression leaking out of his mouth that awkwardly resembled a half-smile. At no point in his life had he hated his job more.

"You are, of course," the Captain snarled, his bulk looming towards the thatched roof of the hovel, "Fully aware of the regulations of your company."

Outside, the wind flew and blasted, whipping hail and sleet in every direction. The sides of the hut shivered.

"You are aware of our purpose in being here."

The family had slumped down near the flimsy wall. The embers were burning low, casting nothing but dead light, and no heat. Faint whimpering could be heard emanating from beneath the mother's body.

"Smith," the Captain reasoned, "If you make this refusal, you are worse than hypocrite. You work to ensure obedience, and yet you would disobey yourself? You become one with the enemy. You become the very thing you are sworn to fight."

The Captain turned to the men. His ridged face was buried in gloom, furthest from the fire due to his height. Six other soldiers were present, all ragged and gray. Smith's body shook with sickness and cold. But despite such pervasive cold, something burned inside him - in his chest and stomach. A feeling of compelling - of anxiety.

Which was understandable, he mused in a manner oddly and eerily detached, given the situation.

Smith was thinking about the escaping rebel. It was a military exercise. Think of the situation from the enemy's point of view. It had obvious battlefield applications. Only in this case his thinking of the rebel was strategically useless. The rebel was beyond them now - humiliatingly eluding their grasp and leaving them with none but innocents. The exercise had thus become irrational, frivolous. The men who designed the exercise would never have condoned its use to stall the execution of orders already given. He had perverted the exercise, using it to ignore the reality in front of him – the demand.

The rebel must have been tipped off. Either that, or he was extremely lucky. Conditions did favour him. With the blasted weather, visibility was so extremely reduced that it would have even been possible for the rebel to slip past them at close distance. None of the soldiers had seen him before. Disguised as a villager, he might have easily walked right by them, in his soul mocking them with a thrill of dark glee.

Alternately, he might have been away from the village when they arrived, and upon entering the outskirts of the village anyone who had survived as long as this man could easily put two and two together. He would then have slipped away into the night, into cold wilderness and they would never have had a chance in the first place.

Whatever the case, the reality, he forced himself to acknowledge, was that there was no rebel present. No battle, no fight. No enemies.

The absent rebel was not a coward, Smith decided. Perhaps he was, like the frustrated patrol's towering superior claimed to be, simply logical. Innocents would die, indeed, whether this particular rebel sacrificed his own life or not. A fool might have said that the rebel lacked sufficient faith. Smith knew better.

This was a thoroughly disgusting situation. Their intelligence was bad, the conditions worse, the expedition ill planned and now – this. It was unlike every military situation he had been in before, not in the least because he was finally on the front edge of the Empire's blade. They were undermanned, ill equipped, soaked and frozen, and furthermore he was sick –

a nauseas combination of physical and moral uneasiness. And in this forsaken, drowned ghetto in these dead and hostile woods, the demon wind spoke louder than any man.

The Captain was like a statue of some evil, long-forgotten deity known only to wild men and prehistoric conquerors. There was something immaculate about his overbearing, towering presence. It was as if his message could be conveyed by his presence alone and his words were superfluous. He appeared to be thinking over the situation with an air of infinite calm while, in dull rhythm, his hand slowly moved over his blade. The Captain had been waiting for a word from him for some time now.

"I believe in the Empire's cause. I have always served faithfully." He tried to seem overconfident, daring the Captain to contradict his statement. "I am no coward, and you know I have proven that on the field many times, else I could not be here."

"Is that so?" the Captain turned his head from the high gloom to the mortal, Smith, below him. He did so quickly, like a bird of prey, without any change in his statue's posture. The tall man seemed bemused, if such a term could be applied to such a thing as he. The others were still hunched uneasily in the corner, eyes downcast.

It had taken him years of work to get to the front in any significant way. The average front-line soldier did useless work for a few useless months before being ground up by the battlefield environment. Smith had seen it and wanted to avoid it. He had wanted to be somewhere strategically important, to lend his skills to movements that were actually relevant to the war. He'd proved that he could survive the main lines, where legions threw themselves at each other until smoke filled the air and blood stained the dirt, and where ground was never gained. Assaulting the entrenched enemy line or fortress had all of the hope of success that a wave, however furious, might have of crushing a rock it flung itself at. And yet somehow he'd survived, and in the process he realized that if the war were ever to be won, it would be won elsewhere.

"Indeed, before this night we had been considering you for promotion." The Captain's voice resumed its former severity, reprimanding him.

What game was he playing?

"But there is more than one form of cowardice."

Electric blue light poured in through the many cracks in the battered hut. Lightning. The storm was intensifying.

Smith certainly didn't see it that way. "Sir, if you consider following the rules of war to be a form of—"

A crack of dark thunder exploded from above the gloomy hut, and the family recoiled. He was cut off by the sound, but continued as it abated...

"— then perhaps you"

"Rules!" the Captain thundered, and it seemed as if the swollen storm-cloud hovering just above the hut were somehow in league with him, for its thunderous bellows seemed to amplify and emphasize his words rather than drown them out. Sarcastically, seemingly outraged in disagreement, he flung further words: "Of war!!!"

"You are guilty of moral cowardice! You must be committed to the Empire's cause, and trust in the Chamber's judgment, which speaks for the Empire, is the foundation for that commitment!"

He glowered down from that grotesque height, took a breath, and continued "Are you aware of the crimes of this rebel? He has massacred without discrimination entire villages simply in order to punish political leaders for showing sympathy to our side. He tortures those who refuse to betray us to him, and he tortures those who betray us after he is through with them. He is ruthless, and we must be more ruthless or we will fail in our cause. And the blame for that will rest entirely on blind, cowardly fools like you!"

Smith trembled, recoiling from the booming rage of the Captain and from the ear-blasting war-drums of nature, the black thunder.

Timidly, he ventured to the angry giant, "If you thought I'd interfere with this act, if you had at all had that impression, then you were mistaken." He was thinking: don't apologize, don't show weakness. With conviction, he stood straighter and quipped, "What difference could it possibly make to the Empire who performs this duty, so long as it is done?"

"I can tell you," seethed the Captain, with dangerous restraint, "That whatever it may matter to the Chamber, due to your insubordination, it matters to me!"

"But the Chamber hasn't sent you specific orders about this, it isn't a prolific operation, it's only a matter of protocol, and

you're supposed to leave *personal emotions* out of battlefield conduct," Smith jabbed, desperately deciding that his only defense might be a good offense.

As if in defeat, the Captain returned to staring at the murky ceiling, and his face turned away from the dull ember-glow. An uneasy silence was marked as unusual by a lack of children's sobbing. The mother hadn't made a sound since the Captain had given the order.

The bird-of-prey head jerked back, and beady eyes focused on Smith. "What if I offered you a reward for doing your duty?"

Smith was sure that the Captain knew that he had a distaste for the orders given, and it was for that reason only that he didn't want to perform them. Thus, it wasn't better pay or privileges or even promotion that were the issue of his motivation here. Certainly any fool could tell that, Smith thought. Was the Captain actually preparing to make some offer as a way of mocking him?

For some reason, the Captain wanted him to perform this task, some personal grudge obviously (Smith found it baffling: he'd been present for only a short time – but then the Captain had essentially admitted as much when he failed to respond to the jab about his personal emotions or vendetta).

Alternately, perhaps the Captain really thought he could offer something extraordinary, by which Smith could overcome his distaste for the orders. The Captain certainly did seem to be making a lot out of what appeared to be a random and routine order for a soldier – *go kill those people*.

This operated under the assumption, which Smith very much believed, that all men had a price. Perhaps, though he did not know his own, the Captain had something that was within his price range. And if he did, then the night would end up being a lot easier on the whole unit.

"I'm betting on you, Smith, to do your duty, and so I'll even allow you to take your reward as an advance payment." A gleam of something in those beady eyes.

"Sir, it's not that I feel undervalued, it's simply that I don't feel comfortable carrying out these orders, given that the targets are noncombatants."

“You can be the first to have the woman.” The tall thing chuckled in a hollow manner, but his stone face left no doubt that he was absolutely serious.

Smith shuddered, shaken by that laugh. The Captain found the cruelty amusing. He was laughing at the cruelty itself! The man was sick, and should never have been placed in charge of one of the Empire’s border patrols, an obviously important unit, answering to the Chamber itself! Smith found strength in his outrage:

“You’d condone rape? That’s torture just the same as the rebel you were just speaking of! Why dishonour these noncombatants! If they must die as a warning to the population here, then that is the Chamber’s will. But why engage in something so shameful, which furthermore has no relevance at all to the mission! The warning is a warning, and an act like this has no public or strategic nature.”

The Captain seemed to have grabbed on to something in Smith’s outburst. “They’ll say we raped her anyway, even if we don’t.”

“There’s no point in doing it. The warning will be exactly the same either way.” Smith countered.

“Exactly!” the Captain hissed. “It doesn’t matter if we do. So you’d rather not mix pleasure with business, or are you morally opposed, *pardon me*, uneasy, about doing this too, Smith?”

“What would the Chamber think if they knew their soldiers were acting in such a way!” Smith said quickly, preferring to avoid answering the question and keeping the conversation away from his home ground – the issue that he had so far refused to kill civilians, in direct violation of the Captain’s orders. It had been almost 30 minutes.

“It’s in our orders.”

What?

Smith was stunned. A few of the soldiers looked surprised, several others looked apprehensive (in a way that was, perhaps, not fully honourable). The Chamber... ordering an elite unit to needlessly... rape? Killing was one thing; it was a soldier’s business. But abuse? It didn’t add up. It was ludicrous; inconceivable.

“No... No,” he found himself muttering.

"Would you please us to speak up?" the Captain snarled, looming closer. The fire had completely gone out.

"No. It isn't in our orders." Smith said firmly.

"What's that Smith? Contradicting your superior officer?" In a tone of dread seriousness: "You're a dangerous man to have in my unit, Smith. I can't rely on you in the field. Whoever sent you here made a mistake."

"No," Smith said, his voice rising up, "Whoever sent *you* here made a mistake. I know that rape isn't in our orders. The Chamber would never sanction something like that, if for no better reason than it has no military application. You've added this particular directive in yourself, *sir*, and you're a depraved madman."

He hardly knew what to expect from the Captain, who was one of the largest and most battle-scarred men he'd seen, but by this point Smith no longer cared. He was sick of being threatened and intimidated by this huge man in this little hut, while his fellow soldiers meekly stood by and the damned wind screamed outside. His hand was near his sheath, ready to draw blade if need be.

The tall, evil gray statue made its first movement since the patrol had entered the hovel. The Captain strode deliberately over to Smith, his armour clanking, feet sloshing through the murky ground. He stopped inches in front of the shorter man, lowered his head and shoulders, and put his ridged, angular face close to Smith's.

"It's a provision," he said, sarcastically, as if speaking to a stupid child. "It obviously doesn't say we *have* to, but it says we can. Up to our discretion."

"I don't believe you." Smith said.

Smith stepped to the side so he could get a clear view of the other soldiers. He addressed them: "Do you really believe that this man, who has clearly demonstrated his instability and unsuitability for command, is speaking anything even close to the truth?"

A silence followed, during which the Captain's stern stare touched all in the room. Again, he seemed to be conveying a message that was perhaps even stronger than anything he could use words to do.

Suddenly, the Captain strode confidently away from Smith and over to where the shivering woman crouched. "I'll show you how it's done," he bellowed.

He picked the mother up and flung her aside, onto a filthy low mat. His feet crunched on the ground, impressing his great stony weight. Smith followed hesitantly, unsure of what was about to happen. Keeping his distance from the taller man, Smith circled around until he could see the children. A girl and a boy, both under the age of ten. Two small, frail bodies in the mud. The Captain reached down and grabbed one with his immense mailed fist, heaving it into the air. Pale legs dangled.

"You smothered them, you *humane* little whore!" the Captain sneered. He flung the small body back into the dirt. He pulled out his immense, shimmering steel sword from the sheath on his back. Raising it, he moved it downward with great speed, and it plunged through the center of one of the corpse-children's bodies with a sickening gurgle. He put his boot on the corpse's back and ripped out the blade, though it really wasn't necessary because the child's small ribcage was so weak that there was no way a heavy blade could have been caught in it. He repeated the process for the second body, black blood leaking out into the mud.

Then he turned to the woman. Her hair was stuck in wet strands to her dirty forehead, her gray tunic covered in filth. Her stare was defiant. The Captain, who'd left his sword stuck in the ground through one of the bodies, advanced towards her.

Smith stepped in front of him.

"What are you going to do, you fool?" hissed the Captain. His sword was in fact several feet away, as he had been preparing for an atrocity of a different sort. Smith knew the Captain could put him down without a sword, but he felt that if he moved first and moved quickly then he could incapacitate the tall man. The question was, would he? His hand grasped the hilt of his weapon at his waist, fingering it hesitantly. The act he was about to commit could be treasonous.

"Getting some grand ideas, are we?" mocked the Captain, stepping closer to Smith. His huge chest, covered with metal, was at Smith's head level. There were certainly joints and weak spots in the armour - places where a blade might slip through. "You haven't committed a crime yet. If you step aside, I'll just consider that you were randomly pacing around the hut

and happened across the path I was taking. That's how I'll think of it," he said.

The expression on his face changed to something more sinister. "Ah, Smith. I knew you weren't going to move. I just had to offer you that disclaimer so what I'm about to do to you is legal by military law." He stepped closer, huge fists stretched out like a carrion-bird's wings. "Come on, you worthless coward," he snarled, like a hound about to break its chain. "I've got convictions, and I've stood for them for three decades. Go on, draw your sword. I dare you. *Just try it.* Reveal your treasonous nature."

A pause. "*Go on!*" he screamed.

"You miserable little fool," he boomed.

An intense silence followed in the hovel, in which the tall man's eyes burned on Smith, implacable. Only the dull drizzle of heavy rainfall could be heard outside, with the occasional crackle of thunder. Finally, after minutes of hateful staring, the Captain shoved by Smith and walked slowly towards the shivering woman, daring Smith to stab him in the back. Smith turned to face him and drew his weapon.

He ran at the hulking shadow, his three-foot long war-blade raised. Five steps and he was across the hut, trying to plunge the steel into the Captain's back. Meanwhile, the Captain had heard the scuffling as Smith's steps flung him across the room, and was spinning around, upper body arcing away from Smith's lunge. Smith's blade glanced off a metal plate on the Captain's back and slid under his arm, but he quickly pulled it out and made another stab. It was unfortunate that the Captain's armour was so top-heavy, for this attempt too did not penetrate the metal plates.

And then the Captain was in a position to do something about Smith's attack.

A huge armoured fist cracked into the side of Smith's helmet, and knocked his head to the side. His ears were ringing; the impact had stunned him. He quickly recovered however, and moved his sword down quickly, toward the Captain's leg, which was still while he maintained his balance. The chain-mail terminated several inches above the knee, and this is where Smith's blade found its mark. The Captain's leg muscles tightened in agony as the blade slid through flesh, searing it with its dirty edge. Simultaneously, the Captain flung

a desperate blow at Smith's head again, with force sufficient to knock him away. Smith, reeling, looked up.

The tall man growled angrily and ripped Smith's sword out of his leg, throwing it on the ground and placing his muddy boot over it. The wound hadn't been as incapacitating as Smith had hoped, since he was obviously still able to put some weight on that leg. Never the less, his face was in a painful grimace. Smith figured he'd gotten the best out of the fight: his head was obviously aching, but the ringing in his ears was fading away and what's more he was still able to operate at full capacity. He was faster than the Captain, but he'd had the advantage of a weapon. Another couple encounters of that sort and the Captain would be down for good, at his mercy.

The six soldiers had watched transfixed at this encounter, unable to believe the conflict before their eyes.

The Captain screeched, "Medical!" and, without much hesitation, a soldier instinctively threw him the unit's supply package. He tore out a long rag and bound the bleeding wound in his leg, wrapping it around several times.

His eyes never left Smith. When he was done wrapping his leg, he reached down to the sword beneath his boot, and pulled hard on the hilt while stepping on the blade. It snapped. Smith recognized the gesture.

"Vanguard!" the Captain hollered, and the six soldiers formed a defensive front between Smith and himself.

"Rank has its privileges," he snickered over his shoulder as he strode towards the mother.

Smith had several more blades on him, but getting through the soldiers was impossible. He had to convince them to convert to his side or at least remain neutral, or else he had no chance. He couldn't tell whether it was connected to the Captain's two blows, but the feeling of sickness in his gut and throughout his body had intensified.

Behind the wall of men, Smith could hear the tall man's grunting mixed with sobbing and moaning. The latter sounded of intense, wretched misery.

"Don't let him do this," Smith pleaded to the anonymous, unshaven faces. He couldn't see their eyes, hidden in pockets of shadow beneath their broad helms. Their expressions were neutral, apathetic. "What kind of soldiers are you?" he screamed.

“Each of you’ll get a turn,” taunted the Captain, between grunts.

Smith didn’t know what to do. He sank into the mud in despair, leaning against the shoddy wall near the doorway. After a time the Captain finished. He flung the woman’s torn, bloody, filthy garment at Smith. It landed beside him in the muck.

“Not yet,” the Captain said firmly, and his long strides took him to the front of the vanguard. He walked right up to Smith with a slight limp, and hunched in front of Smith’s fallen body.

“You see,” he whispered to Smith, “You’re the only one here who feels this way.”

“And that’s why,” he continued, “you’re special.”

A hint of a grin flittered across his scarred, ridged face.

Smith still had fight left in him. He grabbed a knife on his leg, and made a quick, agile motion, bringing the sharp edge up from below, towards the bigger man’s exposed neck.

The Captain reacted as quickly as Smith had acted, grabbed the moving hand, and halted the blade inches from his throat.

“How many left, Smith? I count two. Want to go for another try?”

Smith hadn’t stopped trying to move the blade. The Captain’s grip tightened.

“You’d kill me, if you could, but you’ll never kill what I believe in,” his voice ground on, like the thudding footsteps of innumerable legions. The soldiers were all standing at attention, witnessing the unfolding confrontation. “I’m going to explain a few things to you,” he intoned.

“What you do is wrong,” Smith let loose, conviction burning in his voice. He couldn’t care about discretion or fence-sitting anymore, not after he’d crossed the line.

“Ahh,” said the Captain, with an air of definite amusement. “Morality. The last bastion – of a coward.”

“Morality is a disease, Smith.” The words came, slowly and steadily, a consuming assault. “And there are a certain amount of people who’ve caught it.”

“Like any disease, there are carriers. Like you.”

The thunder outside was distant, and the rain had thinned to a quiet ghost.

"They aren't all that common, but they can infect others. Infection's fairly common. Widespread to various degrees. In fact, I'd almost say that there's one infected man in every unit. It's a good figure to go by."

He crushed Smith's wrist even tighter, and with his free hand he removed the blade from Smith's. "Your presence in this unit creates the threat of infection. Infection creates treason. Treason is unacceptable." He put the knife to Smith's throat. It glimmered, reflecting the retreating rain clouds outside the shoddy hovel.

He reemphasized. "There's an infected man in every unit, to some degree. You're the real thing though. You haven't just caught it a little. We pick out the one in every rookie unit. First week. You see what I'm saying?"

Smith felt uneasy, trying to figure out the implications of the statement.

"Then we go out in the field, run a little demonstration."

"Tonight for example."

"You're lying," Smith stated, through gritted teeth. "You're a wild card. Maybe they let you do what you want in the field because you're effective, they let you have a free hand, look the other way, but you're the exception. Not the rule."

"I am the rule." The Captain stated his creed, conviction informing it.

"We pick one out of every unit. You're an example to the men. What not to do. Who not to be. The dangers of insubordination. Importance of obedience. Idiocy of independence."

"It's a matter of protocol. Every unit sees the demonstration."

"*There's no rebel?*" Smith was stunned.

"Oh, there's a rebel, Smith. Fairly prominent one too. Another two patrols, veteran units, came secretly. They've probably captured him, out by the treeline I'd expect. We're very clever, Smith. We made it look like we were sloppy, so the rebel knew we'd be coming in ahead of time, the route we'd take, where we'd be. So of course he abandoned the family he was living with, he'd only had a few hours notice from his *spies*" (he chuckled), "They aren't so clever as we are. There's a reason they're losing this war. There's a reason we're extending our domination. We have the right structures, the

right methods, the right attitude. They cling to archaic notions that are as weak as they are. The future belongs to the Empire.”

“Just let me go, I’ll disappear,” Smith pleaded listlessly, finally convinced.

“I’ve got two problems with that,” the Captain explained. “First, if I did, then you’d no doubt go join the other side.”

“Second,” and his words took on a darker, less factual emphasis, “I despise the disease. I hate the idea of its filth corrupting the world. It is the instruction of the Chamber not only that obstacles to its power be removed, but also that to oppose it should be made impossible. Your kind of ideals create that possibility. Neither myself nor my superiors can stand the idea of thoughts such as yours existing in any mind.”

“But I don’t need to kill you, Smith” he intoned, his ridged face breaking, his gray eyes like burning steel. “You’re already dead.”

“How,” Smith sputtered in an impotent whisper.

“The ale, Smith. You’re the only one who took a drink. They picked you. You were the example. Guaranteed you won’t make it past the small hours. Just a little of extra insurance. Oh, I know you threw some of it up. That’s no matter. It’s strong stuff.”

Smith pulled himself up, feeling more weary than he ever had before in his life. He dragged himself towards the door, seeing gray walls and gray, apathetic faces. Outside, the weather had died, and only the occasional droplet of rain fell from above. He made it twelve steps before he collapsed, his limp body sinking into the mud as his stomach raged and his veins burned.

He was looking up from the thick mud at the murky sky. He felt as if his consciousness was slowly drowning, as everything became progressively less and less clear. In the gray, muddy twilight of his mind, he forgot the time and place, his whole life, and even his own name, and regretted only what seemed the greatest tragedy of all, that for all the dull, dirty clouds hanging above the earth, he could not see the stars.

Broken

By Steve Vermeulen

The darkness of the forest was reassuring. The area it spanned was big enough and the night around it had darkened enough that I finally began to feel some semblance of safety.

I had been running for hours - my pursuers on horseback and myself on foot - but I had never stopped for one second, and I had never let myself consider what horrible things would surely happen to me if they captured me again. Now, lying down in the cold wet moss, the realization that I might actually get away and that the bastards might actually see justice began to rise slowly inside my beating head.

But I also realized that there was nothing that I could think of that would adequately serve as justice for those men, given all the pain and deaths and injustices they had caused over the course of their lifetimes. An eternity in hell would be a good start.

At that moment I realized that someone was approaching, and I didn't have to get up and look down the road to know who it was. They were close, and like the prey of some wild predator I could feel the impending danger, even without necessarily hearing or seeing it.

I wondered briefly if any of the other girls they had taken in the past, in the days before I arrived, had ever escaped their wrath or even attempted such a thing. Maybe they thought it was hopeless. Perhaps it was.

But I didn't care. After what they put us through, even death was beginning to look attractive, and I don't think I was the only one to realize it. Once, I remember, I saw a guard carrying the corpse of one of the older girls into the forest. It was late at night, but there was still enough light from a nearby campfire for me to make out the stains of blood across her neck and garb. She had surely killed herself. I knew of a small blade that they kept in one of the back rooms, presumably for shaving, and I imagine she did too, applying it probably to her left wrist first and then her neck.

I doubt it would have taken long, given both gushing wounds on her wrist and neck. Perhaps if she was lucky she was even able to pierce through to her esophagus, opening up the lungs and letting her mercifully drown in her own blood.

The desperate condition she would have already been in certainly would have helped as well. They beat us all senselessly. Maybe to keep us weak enough to make escape impossible, maybe to set an example to the others, or maybe they were just sadists. Whatever the reason, the result was that many of us were left completely incapacitated, lying in our beds like comatose patients, breathing but never really alive.

I was in better condition than most, but that really wasn't saying much at all. Much of my vision was impaired, with both my eyes bruised black and then further restricted by swelling injuries in my cheeks. It was a miracle I had navigated myself this far.

Over just the several months or so I had been there, my body had emaciated to the point where I felt like I was decomposing, and where the excruciating hunger pangs in my stomach began to feel normal. They knew exactly how much they needed to feed us, as if experience had taught them the perfect amount of rice, bread and water to keep many of us in this state of perpetual dying.

I wasn't sure how long this older girl had been there, but I knew it was much longer than I had been, and my original impression that she was the strongest among us all was made all the more disheartening when I saw her being dragged out that night.

Even the fact that they were trying to conceal her loss to the others was enough to know that she was her own killer. I knew that if they ever did accidentally beat one of us to death (because they never really wanted to kill any of us) they would use it as an example to the others, further discouraging any kind of resistance. But with this girl's obvious suicide, it would not work and if anything would only inspire more to do the same.

I almost envied her that night. Her betrayal of them was exhilarating—so much more than anything the other girls did. She had gotten away. She was free!

But I knew I could never do the same. At least not while there was still some hope of escape, not while there was still some small possibility of stopping them.

And I had done it. I had escaped, and I had run far enough away that I thought none of their kind would ever put one of their dirty hands on me again. That was, until I heard the slow, approaching gait of a horse.

I was little more than a civilian when they captured me. For years I had worked as a tailor's assistant in one of the major cities, until one day when I was approached by a friend of a friend with a request. Although I was careful to appear in favour of the Empire most of the time - or at the very least neutral - I knew several close friends to be rebel sympathizers, and to whom I had once or twice expressed similar notions.

It had been a long work day and I was anxious to get home when I noticed a flash of movement in a nearby alleyway. Many soldiers of the Empire occupied the city at this point, but there was no doubt a rebel presence left as well. Instinctively, my hand dropped to my pocketed threading needle, as if that would actually help in the case of an attack.

I continued staring into the alleyway. I still couldn't see anything, and yet the longer I waited, the more it began to feel as if it were the were the darkness of the alley studying me rather than the other way around. I was about to write it off as a combination of paranoia and sleep deprivation, when suddenly, as if materializing out of void, a man emerged into the lighted walkway. I recognized him vaguely from a random encounter years ago with one of the aforementioned friends. Now, however, he appeared beaten, ragged, deathly even.

The man explained that he was a rebel contact. As a tailor's assistant, it seemed that I was rather valuable to their cause, as it was common for the many notable figures in and around the city to seek the aid of myself and my superior. Several hours of fitting the dress for a general naturally lent itself to small talk which, as it turned out, became valuable intelligence information for the rebel commanders.

Kneeling down, I waited for the approaching rider to pass, telling myself that it might be some random passerby, and not actually one of my captors. However, the previous month or so of torture had drained much of my optimism away, and sure enough, the horse stopped and its rider stepped down.

Knowing that I only had a few seconds to find better cover, I dived beside a nearby brush, but instantly regretted it. Now the man could walk in a direct line to my position. I could only wait to be taken back to my captors.

They had made sure that we were all well aware of the futility of escape. Time and time again they explained that we were so deep in the forest that running away would be suicide, and that we wouldn't make it five miles. But I didn't believe them.

The grounds that they kept us in appeared to me to be an old military campground, probably used for survival training in the past. As to why whoever owned the place had abandoned it, I think I could take a guess. Our cabins had so irretrievably deteriorated that to pay any expenses to fix them would probably cost more than it would to just build a new one, and considering the diminishing quality of the land upon which they were built, I figured abandoning it probably would have been an attractive option. The two rows of cabins (there were five of them—two on one side and three on the other) were positioned dangerously close to the water front, which might have been pleasant had there not been sharp, jagged rocks scattered about the beach, many hiding themselves under thin layers of sand.

The two cabins closest to the water had foundations that had fallen in on themselves, leaving the floorboards at a permanent five degree angle, and towards each lower end was an ever-increasing puddle of muddy water.

Despite all this, I will admit there was one thing I will always appreciate about the camp's dilapidation: the termites. It seemed that the camp was a great feeding ground at one time for the little critters, but at some point during their devastation of the grounds they lost interest, and left the camp half-eaten. As a result, the floorboards were missing in some places, and it often seemed like there was more dust than there was air, but at least we could see parts of the sky.

Tied to the bed some nights, cringing at the thought of my next visit—be it an hour from then or several days—the holes in the ceiling were the only things to keep our attention and the only things that didn't remind us of what our lives had become.

As a result, I became increasingly obsessed with the night sky, following the phases of the moon, memorizing constellations, and sometimes even making up my own. In the north east I could sometimes construct the silhouette of my mother, hunched over her sewing kit, busily working away into the night as she often would. Or, squinting my eyes a bit, in the west I found children playing in the street of my hometown.

And now, lying flat against the ground, hopelessly trying to catch my breath as quietly and as motionlessly as possibly, I gave in to habit and stared up at the moon.

It was full.

Earlier that day, when I had been raped and beaten, I had pretended to fall unconscious, dismissing each blow through gritted teeth, and as a result the man had been slightly lazier tying me back up. I had hope for this, and once he was gone I wasted no time.

Yet even after biting away the rope binding my hands, and standing up against the bed, I was left in indecision. If I left, and they caught me (the most likely scenario), I knew that I would become their favorite, since the fact that I would try to escape, despite my condition, would show just how determined and full of life I really was. From what I had seen, this would not be a good thing. It seemed like the more one of the girls resisted, or cursed our captor's names, the more they enjoyed it, and the more attention that girl would get. Likewise, the girls that said nothing, and avoided doing anything distinctive from the group, seemed to be neglected.

Obviously, in the early days we all resisted. We punched, kicked, screamed, scratched, and bit, but it was all futile. The men were far too strong. One in particular, a high ranking man named Oleg, was probably six and a half feet tall, and although quite fat, also had a lot of hidden muscle. Before long, I began to understand that if there was a way out of here, it didn't involve confronting any of them.

Of course, these small observations didn't stop them from ravaging us. All it did was lower my chances of being

chosen, and for this I was very grateful. I often felt extremely close to the other girls in the campground, but what it really came down to was my ultimate survival, and some days I even found myself selfishly stealing food from the weaker of the other prisoners.

Upon escaping I knew that I probably could have run from cabin to cabin, releasing each girl as I went, but this would only have hampered our chances to survive. They would have noticed immediately, and even if all of us attacked them at once, I still don't believe we could have beaten them.

So I ran off by myself, thinking I had at least a good three or four hours before someone noticed. I had stayed relatively close to the road during my escape, knowing that eventually it would lead to a town, but now, with the man approaching, I began questioning this aspect of my escape plan.

The rider was closing in now, and I began preparing myself for a confrontation. The man, if not Oleg himself, was still most likely very well built, and so I knew I would have to attack fast and hard. A brute force approach was clearly out of the question, but I thought that if I could surprise him in the throat, eyes, or groin, it just might give me enough time to continue with enough follow-up blows to disable him. This unlikely prospect was tantalizing, since not only would I have one less person to worry about, but I would have a horse, and would surely make it to civilization then. My muscles tensed in anticipation.

Suddenly, a rabbit appeared out of a nearby clearing. The man stopped for a moment. Apparently, this was enough to satisfy his curiosity, and he continued on down the road. The rabbit waited another moment, and though clearly aware of my presence, avoided my gaze as if still conscious not to expose my position. Finally, it too left me to myself, and I continued on my way.

“Distinguished, but practical. Not so extravagant as to invite royal comparisons but enough to suggest a certain... superiority,” the general stated, gesticulating with his arms in search of the correct words.

“Please try to keep still,” I said from behind him, holding on to his uniform for measurement. The general shot me an annoyed glance and it occurred to me that I may have been talking out of my place.

My superior, the master tailor, nodded, quickly scribbling down notes for the new uniform design. We were lucky to have been chosen for the job. In a city as big as ours, the Empire could have chosen from any number of tailors for their uniforms, and yet for whatever reason had given us the exclusive rights for the region. Though I never asked, I suspected that my superior had some high ranking connections, going back to the days when he was himself a soldier. It was also the reason, I assumed, that they had trusted us enough to give us direct access to the military campground.

To save time, I agreed to stitch up a piece of the general's outer garb without requiring him to fully disrobe. I began threading the needle slowly through the fabric, all the while repeating in my head whatever facts I had gleaned about the place since our arrival.

I don't think any of my rebel contacts could have possibly anticipated the opportunity. General Hjálmarsson, a man that had taken what many assumed to be unbreachable territory—territory that had comfortably remained guarded by the rebels for years—was standing alone mere inches in front of me. He had always been high on the rebel wish list, but after decimating the rebel troops in that area and mercilessly squashing any rebel sympathy in the surrounding villages, he quickly shot to the top.

They continued discussing design requirements while I concentrated on the task at hand. This wasn't the first redesign of the uniforms—it was just the first that we had been hired for. It was sickening just how excessive military spending had gotten. Despite widespread famine and poverty among the people, anyone in the army mid-ranking or higher lived comfortably, even lavishly, mass producing expensive insignia for their uniforms and redesigning them on a whim.

The needle inched upwards through the seam, towards the general's exposed neck. Over the years I had gotten good enough with fabrics that I didn't really have to think anymore, and easily could have finished the job minutes ago. Instead I took my time to consider my options. My eyes stared hard at

the cloth, into his neck and through to the pulsing jugular on the other side. It would be so easy.

“What's taking so damn long?” The general demanded, and I looked up to see that my superior had already left the room, apparently assuming that I could finish the stitch myself.

Flustered, I stuttered some kind of apology and explained that I was almost done. The general was half turned around now, and I could see in my periphery that he was now staring at me intently.

His voice changed from hurried importance to a calm drone. “You and your master do good work, the Empire thanks you.”

I nodded respectfully.

“What is your name?” He asked.

“Brynja,” I responded.

The man paused, and then smiled widely. “You know, Brynja, someone with your... talents... could serve the empire in more ways than one.” He stepped closer, and the full implication began to hit me.

“Thank you, sir, but I am quite content as a tailor.” I said, sidestepping his advance. “And nothing more.”

The man knew the power that he wielded here, in this back room behind military lines. No matter what occurred he would not be held at fault. A pragmatic person would succumb to whatever he wanted.

My blunt rejection seemed to catch him off guard, and he looked genuinely surprised, as if it just wasn't even conceivable that a simple peasant wouldn't jump at the opportunity to please someone of his rank and stature.

“Let's keep this professional then. You satisfy my needs, and you'll be compensated fairly.” Without even waiting for my response, he grabbed my arm and pushed me against the back wall. I continued to resist but being half his size, there wasn't a lot I could do.

With the sun having recently risen, the memory of the previous night seemed little more than a dream. But as I became fully conscious, I began to remember what had

happened, and finally realized that, after my exhaustive run, I must have passed out.

But more importantly, I realized that I had almost made it out. I was free - even if only for the time being - and for the first time since my capture, a smile crept its way across my face. The sensation didn't last very long however, and soon I was reeling on my back in hunger pangs, trying to vomit but unable to without any food in my stomach.

I took a deep breath, but found even this simple function difficult, as I could only squeeze so much air through what had become of my thin, sandpaper-lined throat. Fighting back the pain, I stood up, steadied myself against a tree, and concentrated hard on my next task.

Through a thick delirium, it began to dawn on me that given my current condition, the chances of me escaping these woods were virtually zero, and that I would die out here, alone. Surprisingly, it was not a particularly unnerving thought. I would have at least scared the bastards, if only slightly, and at least now I would die peacefully, on my own terms, instead of at the hands of my captors.

Forcing each leg forward one foot at a time, I began scanning my surroundings, hoping to find my bearings. After my encounter by the road the previous day I decided that it would be safer to go off-trail, and at least level the playing field somewhat by making it impossible for them to follow me directly on horseback. This was a trade-off, though, since not only would my progress be made many times slower but I could no longer use the road as a guide.

While I knew the correct direction then, I also knew how difficult it would be to move in a straight line without a reference, so before leaving the road I made sure to memorize some landmarks in the distance. It was night but with the full moon out I was just barely able to make out the faint outline of a mountain in the distance. Climbing atop a mound, I found the same mountain once again and set off, confident that I was back on track.

Second priority was to find a source of water. Luckily, as it was early morning, there appeared to be enough dew on the leaves and grass that I thought I might be able to get by for awhile. I took off some of my ragged clothes, dragged them

across nearby brush, and tried to wring what liquid I could from it.

For one short merciful moment, every depressing thought and worry disappeared, as I found myself instead becoming completely engrossed in the task - savouring every ounce of the cool liquid falling down my throat, then gathering up more, and repeating.

Many minutes past, and as my strength began to grow again I realized that I needed to keep moving. But I also knew that I should take advantage of the moisture in the grass before it all evaporated, since there was no guarantee when I would be able to find another water source. I decided to multi-task by ripping off the sleeves of my shirt and tying them loosely around my ankles. This allowed me to continue on the trek but still pause every half hour or so to drink all the newly harvested water.

This worked surprisingly well, but I knew that I'd have to find a better alternative eventually. I wracked my brain for memories: what else did I know about surviving out here? The closer I got to dying of thirst, the more delirious I would get, and the less capable I would be of making intelligent decisions. I needed to think now.

Growing up in a peasant town, my family never had a need to hunt, as we were fairly well established farmers. The survival skills I learned then included rearing chickens, tending crops, or helping my mother spin thread to sell in town. Nothing I could actually use here. I did know friends that had some experience in the wild, and I remember one in particular had a penchant for making snares. But even if I could grasp enough information from memory to create one, I would have to be somewhere for an extended period of time for it to work, and at this point my goal was just to make it further away from the camp.

Suddenly, I heard something move in the distance and froze, kneeling down for cover. Could they have found me so soon? It was definitely possible, since there was no telling how far I made it before collapsing - and in my pathetic condition, it couldn't have been very far. I waited as silently as I could.

A deer stepped out into the clearing ahead, and I let out a sigh of relief.

It was just a mid-sized doe, but nevertheless appeared quite majestic in the sunlit field. I watched, transfixed, as it strutted around, eventually biting something off of a branch. After a moment, apparently satisfied, it continued on its way into further bush.

Seeing the deer eat made me realize that I was famished myself. The weeks spent at the camp had made me accustomed to being hungry all the time, so I knew that while I could ignore it, my strength would soon suffer. I walked towards where the deer was and looked around. Apparently it had been eating some kind of berry.

I had seen a lot of different kinds of berries during my trek, but with my limited knowledge of the forest, I decided that they were all much too risky to eat. As tantalizing as they appeared, I knew that it was better to be hungry than to be poisoned.

But now, in a stroke of random luck, this deer had given me all the information I needed. I grabbed the branch of berries, and slowly picked one after the other into my mouth, doing my best to commit to memory as many details about the plant as possible: the color, the shape of stem, the size.

I wondered what other secrets about this forest this doe could teach me. Surely, she knew this place better than I did, and whatever she was doing, she was doing with purpose. I looked in the direction that she left. The tracks were subtle, but I thought that I could track them well enough at least until the sun set. It wasn't exactly in the direction that I had chosen earlier, but I decided that it was a necessary risk, and turned towards my new bearing.

The smug smirk on the general's face made me want to throw up. I was helpless now, and I realized even as it occurred that his haughty laughter was going to stick with me for the rest of my life, making regular appearances in my future nightmares.

A knock on the door, and a man entered.

"Eh?" the general turned, releasing his grip on me before giving me a final shove against the wall.

It was a young soldier, probably still in his teens. "Excuse me, sir. Your presence is needed at the gate." Our

eyes met, and I could tell that he was only now becoming aware of exactly what he was interrupting.

The general was already half undressed but made no attempt to cover himself. "I'm not finished here yet. They can wait," The general noticed the soldier's wide eyed gaze and smiled. "It's not every day we are graced with a beauty like this one"

It was true. I had heard that most soldiers working in training behind the lines would often go months without seeing any women at all. And the occasional retreat that they would get was usually spent travelling to and from their home. It was only men of established rank that had the flexibility for such things.

With the general's back turned towards me, I did my best to plead for help from the soldier, making clear from my expression that this was in no way consensual. After praying for it to stop, and then hearing the knock on the door, I couldn't help but wonder whether this might be karma finally kicking in at the last minute. I had to cling to this possibility.

"In fact," started the general, "why don't you come back here after you relay the message. I'll hand her off to you."

My mouth dropped in horror. The casualness at which he spoke about rape was almost enough to erase whatever remaining faith I had in society, and raised doubt about my existing - apparently naive - notions of morality. I turned to the soldier and waited for a similarly horrified reaction. But instead all I saw was the same surprised and confused face that he displayed when he first came in. He appeared nervous more than anything.

The general's motives were obvious. The Empire did not make any official pronouncements on rape against enemy women - if anything, it was implied to be fair game - but given that I was a contracted professional and not a Rebel (as far as they knew) it would reflect poorly on the general were word to get out. By encouraging this other soldier to take a similar risk, he would also be guaranteeing his silence.

Finally, the confusion on the soldier's face changed to comprehension, and comprehension to acceptance, then excitement. "Thank you sir." He said, smiling. He looked at me again, licked his lips, and then rushed out the door.

I screamed. At this point I stopped caring what might happen to me - all I could think was just getting some kind of retribution before it was too late. Moving quickly, I rushed the general and jumped on his back, scratching at his face and attempting to gouge out his eyes. But it only lasted for a moment, and then suddenly I was back on the ground - him looming over-top me, kicking me into submission. It was futile.

Weeks later, I would grow accustomed to the process, learning to mentally leave the present and imagine myself somewhere else, away from harm. But this first time I did not have that luxury, and instead the memory was etched mercilessly into my brain.

Eventually I succumbed to circumstance: My flailing arms dropped, and my gaze fell to the half finished stitching on the floor: The new emblem of the Empire.

Afterwards, the general ousted me as a rebel spy to his superiors, claiming that I was attempting to assassinate him.

That was true, of course, but he didn't actually know that. For him, it was just a convenient way to get rid of me and to justify his actions. I expected to get executed but instead was sent to a women-only prisoner camp - run by a man, I later learned, named Oleg.

With the dew having dried up many hours ago, the sleeves around my ankles were getting in the way much more than they were actually helping. I had already removed one - to use as a makeshift bag for collecting berries - but the other still remained wrapped around my left foot. I took it off and tied it around my forehead. The trail offered some sporadic cover from the blazing heat, but not enough to prevent a regular onslaught of sweat falling down my face.

I could feel exhaustion setting in, and realized that I may have made the wrong gamble. Maybe the doe was as lost as I was. Maybe she was just wandering around eating. Maybe she was screwing with me.

The thought of an animal tricking a human might have made me smile in other circumstances, and I was just about delirious enough to laugh. But I couldn't really imagine an animal like this doe being so actively malicious. They were just trying to get by, find sustenance, maybe procreate - at the very

least survive just *one* more day before inevitably being swallowed up by predators.

It was at that moment that I heard something - an ambient hum in the distance. I realized it could only be one thing, and quickly started jogging further along the trail.

Emerging from the bush, my suspicions were confirmed - it was a stream!

It took all my energy just to resist the temptation to dive in and fill up on sweet, sweet, fluid, but I knew there must be more ideal points to drink from. I was always told to avoid drinking stagnant water - for reasons, admittedly, I didn't fully understand - and so I reasoned that the faster the stream the safer it must be. Finally I found a run-off with a good speed and dipped my head under, making sure to cover my mouth with one of the torn sleeves to filter out any sediment.

Once again the experience was nearly orgasmic. I almost lost myself in the task again, before realizing that it wasn't worth risking becoming any more sick than I needed to.

Besides, I had already decided that I was going to follow the stream one way or another so I would have easy access to it anyway.

I tried walking for awhile longer but soon realized that I would be losing light - precious light that I might need to find a basic shelter. I began searching for somewhere to hide for the night.

The dim twilight had almost completely faded by the time I found a fallen tree that I thought might work. Moving quickly, I scrambled together whatever branches I could find around me, and leaned them up against the log. Then, using dead leaves and small brush, I spent a few minutes softening the ground underneath, and filling in the cracks for further insulation. But I was tired, and after sleeping on a hard wooden platform in shackles for the previous month, I knew that whatever I had was fine. I crawled into my new home.

The sun was fully set now, and finally having time to relax, I began to reflect on my situation. I had made impressive progress and felt confident that wherever they were searching for me was far away from here. Despite everything - despite the cold, the near-starvation, the utter desperation - I felt surprisingly good.

Granted, I was in rough shape. I was almost out of berries and needed food. I had completely lost my bearings and had no real idea where I was since abandoning that mountain. And I was beginning to notice stomach cramps that could be early signs of an illness.

But I was surviving. For the first time in a long while, I was actually making progress against the enemy, as small as meaningless as it might be. The thought surprised me for a moment, and it suddenly occurred to me just how much I had changed in the past months.

There was a time when I was mostly indifferent about the war, and happy to just make a living day to day. Even then I had some idea how corrupt and overbearing the Empire was, but without really any recourse on my part, I treated it like a fact of life.

I thought more about everything that they had done to me, my friends, the people. The public executions. Local military men taking things at will - resources, money, young recruits. Those that resisted were painted as rebels and killed (or imprisoned if they were lucky) and always replaced by someone a bit more obliging. It was even possible that they encouraged the idea of an underground rebel presence, if for no other reason than to use it as a scapegoat for their actions.

Before I joined the cause, I avoided dwelling on these issues, telling myself that it wasn't worth getting upset over. Since my capture, however, I actually encouraged it, and began to even revel in my disgust and hate at the people of the Empire. I was self-aware enough to realize that there was little else keeping me going at this point. Nobody, including myself, could put themselves through such suffering and misery without either being constantly consumed by hate or emotionally damaged in some way. Probably both in my case.

As I began to drift off to sleep, I could hear the initial rumblings of the nighttime forest. Crickets. A coyote in the distance. Some kind of bird or perhaps an owl. It was comforting, somehow, knowing that I wasn't the only one out here.

A Man for the Empire

By Dustin Geeraert

I

The tavern was damp and drafty. Decades ago men had thrown their strength at the woods here and carved out a town in the limitless wilds. With iron and muscle they broke the stones and trees, reshaping them into the den of drink where now Bjarn Hrolfsson sat. Bjarn's tendency in taverns was to gravitate to the dimmest corner possible. He hoped to attract little attention, with the exception of the tavern's keeper, who provided the reason for his presence. His drab, filthy clothing covered most of his body, his hood leaving visible only a small portion of his face – ever ready to vanish into shadow. His behaviour was the result of adaptation over time, for he was a mercenary. His morality was for sale along with his sword, and men such as he attracted little love in places of dripping drink and sharpened steel.

This was such a place. For one could seldom become intoxicated without sharing vicinity with dangerous men, and drink makes men arrogant and imposing. In the shadow he drank liquor, in the midst of an endless and inexplicable cycle of violence and intoxication, which was his inevitable occupation between financially sanctioned murders. He had been drinking for days, as his last commission had been a rewarding one. He had infiltrated a rebel command group, and set up the death of the most dangerous rebel mind in the province. He had returned to the imperial barracks a week ago with important information to sell, information which had nearly tripled his price for the general's life – and Bjarn was sure that the Empire had paid him less than the worth of his work, as was its practice in all its financial dealings. Never the less, the money was more than sufficient for one man to stay alive and intoxicated for weeks, perhaps months. He was still in the northern province of Gjoll, which the Empire had recently annexed, but he had strayed from the capital where the Imperial Committee for the

province had been set up. He was in the isolated northern town of Úrhrak.

Though Hrolfsson slashed and stabbed for the Empire's cause, he spent most of his own time on the frontiers or even outside the imperial boundaries. What the Empire brought, as far as Bjarn could see, was misery. Trade and work became regularized under an iron heel; taxes and military drafts appeared, and people disappeared after dark. Many in Gjoll, aware of the Empire's implacable advance, fled before their territory fell; others tried to slip past the guards in the night after annexation. And many were simply never heard of again, their dwellings stripped clean. A final category, reserved for the publicly declared "enemies of the Empire" consisted of corpses displayed on high in the muddy streets, after obvious torture, their carcasses flanked by unshaven guards. It was not a world Bjarn respected, desired, or even wanted to live in - hence his partiality to outskirts, frontiers and untamed regions. Yet he took money to advance its cause.

His current location, as well as his occupation, resulted from self-interest. Liquor prices were better on the outskirts, owing to less accurate population counts and less effective tax collection. Curfews were not enforced; disturbances did not instantly create a military presence, and imperial guards were present only at the control centers of the major towns. Taverns on the outskirts of the Empire prospered, and the imperial soldiers, stretched thin, invaded these to arrest, question or kill only after prior arrangement and reinforcement. In the isolated northern towns, a few dozen imperial swords could easily be put down by a riot begun by drunken revelers, particularly if some of those involved had rebel connections.

Outside, violent rain blasted at the tavern's hulking halls like a cold sea clutching at a small ship. Bjarn finished the cold contents of his wooden mug and motioned to the server. Smoke drifted away from his long pipe. He could hear the thick drizzle of the rain beyond the wooden walls. Another mug arrived, brimming with potent liquid. He silently handed the outstretched hand a few grimy coins. It was the prime of the night for business, mid-evening, and the place was beginning to fill. Many men straggled in, covered in mud and rain, dirty hair streaked down rough faces. The tables nearest the wavering fire were immediately covered with great vats of drink. Soldiers,

thieves, farmers and forestmen, workers and sellers and smugglers crowded in. The tavern's keeper piled logs onto the fire.

Bjarn heard laughter and shouting, saw shadows and fire, everything ugly, everything dirty. He drained this new drink in a single draught. Bearded faces shook with laughter, creating bizarre and unknowable expressions. Bjarn was indeed intoxicated. Though the process from sobriety to absolution could be considered a gradual one, even in the case of smoking opiates or hallucinogens (which Bjarn was also engaged in), the contents of the last mug had struck home. The substances worked their will, melding into one ugly orgasm of bliss. Bjarn was entering the only world he could stand – the hallucinatory, lying, unreal one. There was no turning back.

He vacated his place in the dark, the wooden chair grating with an odd squeal as he rose, and pushed his way through the filthy crowd to the bar. Those whom he elbowed aside seemed surprised by his presence, for no one had noticed the shadow of a man in the bar's most neglected corner. In a subtle gesture which was hidden by his thick cloak he drew seven coins from an inner pocket and spread them before the barkeeper. He motioned to the stores of liquor and opiates. Everything seemed to him as if it was presented through a haze, the torches casting strangely angled shadows on the faces around him. The keeper slid an overflowing mug and several small transparent glasses full of liquid fire across the worn wooden counter. A satchel of material for his pipe also appeared. One after another he lifted and tilted back, shot after shot burning into him. It was obvious that behaviour had the potential to attracting attention, which Bjarn always tried to avoid, and yet by this point he simply could not care. His grimy hands grasped the mug and satchel and he retreated into the dark crowd. A few heads turned to watch him pass, but they had difficulty still seeing him as he vanished into the gloom beyond the firelight.

It was a field of gold flanked by forests of green, through which tawny beams of sunlight flew and fell. It was in the great plains of the south where the nights are short and the open skies are always bright. The colours of the land were vivid and intense. The sky was cloaked in the deep blue of late afternoon,

the sun's heat pouring down upon the earth, bringing fertility. It was a world in bloom.

Past a line of trees ran the river, slow and shallow, between tall grasses and sandy shores. Bjarn saw people through the twilight, wading through its lazy waters.

His waking was always confused, but seldom so much as this. Everything was dark; he saw nothing but a blurry object, covered in ragged cloth. His forearm. He blinked again. A grating voice descended from on high, through his ears and into his brain. "Strange thing for a strange man to show up with such money in a small town, in times like these."

The first thing Bjarn did was slip a dagger out of his sleeve and look for the nearest threat. A man stood in front of him, thick, tall and fully bearded, face gleaming in the low light. Bjarn noted the long claymore on his back.

"You hear me, drunkard?"

A fist flew downward and cracked the table inches from Bjarn's face. He resisted putting a blade into it.

"Mind your business," Bjarn replied. "I've no intention to draw blood tonight." And he reached for his pipe and refilled it, concealing his blade in his dark sleeve.

"There are those who're not satisfied with the fate of this province," said the man.

"Not my concern," said Bjarn. "I didn't make the world the way it is."

The bearded face lowered close to Bjarn's and again Bjarn had to resist the impulse towards preemptive violence. "I've heard that before from your kind."

Several others behind the bearded man were observing the unfolding discussion; Bjarn estimated them to be on the other man's side. A handful of rebel sympathizers. The man before him though, was the real thing. The other knew his profession, perhaps even his recent activities: they may as well both have their cards on the table. "Who are you?" Bjarn asked, opiate-smoke brimming out of his pipe.

The other leaned in yet closer, one hand on the table, the other resting at his side. His deep voice came as a whisper without humour. "Jarl Eyjolf Markoss, of the North Gjoll dynasty. And eternal enemy of the empire."

Bjarn slid the dagger back into his hand. "And fugitive in your own land."

With a crash, the big man kicked the table away from himself, knocking Bjarn aside. Bjarn fell back as his chair toppled, moments from splintering on the ground. With a weasel's agility, he landed while the tipping wood was still in the air, and leaped to the side of the table hoping to insert cold metal into the other's flesh before he was prepared.

The Jarl had drawn his claymore, a formidable four feet of shimmering steel. He now swung the blade at head level, reaching out in a deadly arc for Bjarn's drunken skull. Bjarn was already flying forward, and he rolled beneath the claymore's swing. He emerged looking up at the gloomy ceiling, just in time to see the heavy sword moving directly down, towards his head again. He thrust out his arm, and deflected the blow with the armour beneath his cloak. The inertia of the large blade kept it moving, and the big man's arms would have followed had he not foreseen Bjarn's dagger and let go of the blade entirely, just in time to cover his torso and move backwards in a controlled fall. Bjarn was like a dog fighting a bear. He slashed again with his dagger, which his desperate opponent blocked with his arm. Both of them hit the floor, and Bjarn pulled his dagger to end the fight. The Jarl exploited his superior strength and weight advantage to throw Bjarn off. Bjarn's dagger strike missed and stuck in the floor. Both had other weapons on them but neither was in a position to use them; Bjarn threw his fists down at the man's unprotected face, striking his eyes and possibly even breaking his nose. His bloody knuckles had met the man's flesh several times when an additional assailant brought a dirty boot into the side of Bjarn's head with force enough to knock him off.

As he landed on the rough wood of the grimy floor, Bjarn spun his head up, ascending in time to see blurs of limbs swooping down towards him from the dark heavens. His first act was to roll beneath the nearest table, and throw back a chair from beneath it, depositing its writhing inhabitant on the ground. He instantly put a blade in the man's stomach before he could scream or resist. Bjarn was past any point of mercy; holding back at all was now against his own interests. His life was in danger. Every potential enemy was now a real enemy. Running past the leaking life of his first blood of the night, he brought out his long blade and cut down the nearest man. In a

backward glance, he could see the Jarl being helped up by two men, also huge, a dirty distance through the dense crowd. The man did not seem as harmed as Bjarn had hoped. The crowd pulsed. Knives glinted everywhere, but Bjarn was cutting a vicious swath toward the door. The man pinned to the ground through his stomach yelled, moaned, screamed to forgotten gods. The sound reached Bjarn's ears through the various mutterings, threats and bellows of the bar and its disrupted drinkers. No one had been ready for him.

A distorted distance in front of him he could see a last glimpse of ugly sunset between the dark wooden pillars of the doorway. Shapes moved, breathed, stumbled in front of the hazy evening light leaking in through the aperture. Various intoxicants were slicing into his mind as he stumbled out of the seething crowd and into the clear. Reeling, dodging real or imagined foes' axes and arrows, Bjarn attempted to survey the scene. The areas immediately to his sides were clear of threats, containing only of piss, puke and whimpering whores. Between him and the door stood only two men – perhaps the Jarl's, perhaps just confident strangers looking for a name, money, or some other advantage that these circumstances could bestow. Regardless of their intentions or identities, Bjarn sprung into motion, surging forward to swept a curving swath with his sword, cutting a tendon in the upper leg of the first man just above the knee at an unprotected point. The honed edge continued its wide arc, and struck the second man's chest, but glanced off. Blades appeared, flying towards Bjarn, but these men were frantic, thrown off by pain and fear, not sharpened and focused by the precious purity of rage. Bjarn had little trouble stabbing the first man beneath the ribs. A grisly gasp escaped the man's mouth as his companion stepped across the wooden floor, swinging an encrusted old hammer high. Bjarn dropped and charged, catching the man off balance. No sooner had both hit the ground than Bjarn had leapt up, leaving blood bubbling up from a wire-thin cut the length of the other's throat. He stepped over the twitching man and quickly covered the now clear, bloodsoaked passage from the roaring tavern to the screaming freedom of the open night beyond.

The tawny colours of the twilight gleamed in the far distance above ragged pines, and Bjarn saw the scene before him through a fiery opium wind. Shadows blazed and quivered,

and shouts of anger reached his ears from the tavern. He ran across the open dirt, away from the tavern yard and toward the beckoning woods. The tavern sat on an open mound in the center of an area cleared of trees, and because of this lack of cover Bjarn knew he would be seen escaping. He had probably just witnessed the first uprising in Gjoll, if the Jarl intended it as such. The Empire was spread thinly in this province, with complete control over only the capital, Skjoldr. In the north, away from the farmlands and cities, amidst the endless pine woods and wild fjords, open warfare was still common. It would be months before a full field regiment was available to launch a consolidating campaign in the north, and until then the Empire had to rely on spies and assassins more than actual military presence to maintain its grip on the unsettled region.

Down the dirt road, the distant fires of Urhrak flickered; the nearest establishment was a trading post, also on the outskirts. There would be sentries there, though they were employed locally and not directly by the Empire. Which way their swords would swing in the event of an uprising was unknown. Bjarn entered the woods, sliding through the rough bush and into the pitch darkness beneath the pines beyond. He had little information on the town and less time. Several possibilities laid themselves out before him. If the Jarl had supporters and intended to incite popular sentiment on his side, then tonight's events had been premeditated, and the Jarl's agents would be spread throughout the town. The rebels may even have known Bjarn's identity before this night, and might intend to use him as a pawn in some greater design. Possibly he was meant to alert the Imperial Authority of an uprising here, when this would only distract the empire from a more dangerous rebellion elsewhere. Perhaps the Jarl and his men knew him only as an assassin, for an infiltrator would surely have thought of all of these possibilities and fallen prey to none of them. The question was the intelligence and capacity of Markoss, who had set all of this in motion. It was even possible that Markoss had planned for him to conceive of all these possibilities, and then to think the rebels ill-informed and blundering. In any case, there was a good chance that the rebels were hunting him now.

Bjarn decided that it was best to wait and see. He could not stop the rebels from reaching the trading post and recruiting

others, but he could assassinate Markoss or at least his most important men. Hrolfsson circled through the woods around the clearing where the tavern stood, his footfalls quiet, his green-gray eyes alert. The dark pine trunks all around him were seething shadows that seeped, blurred and burned. He took long drags from a metal flask as he stalked the clearing, beneath the dim, distant light through the trees. He was beneath the ring of earth and rotting logs that encircled the clearing. Though he had certainly been seen entering the woods, he was sure that it was now safe to look back at the tavern. He ascended the rugged ring and came up lying down beneath a log, peering through the gloom. Several fires had been lit outside the place and there were handfuls of men gesturing and speaking at each. Their words were smothered by the night breeze. Most were armed, with battlefield arms rather than weapons that would fit on one's person in a tavern; Bjarn carried blades with him everywhere he went, but he had nothing like the imposing battleaxes he saw illuminated in the hazy firelight.

The colour of the fire matched the last glow in the western sky. As Bjarn watched, and the intoxicants worked their will, the difference in the shades changed, and the fire outshone the sky. Finally the last glimpse of evening's glow receded beyond the horizon and the shimmering firelight was all that lit hill and helmet. Bjarn slid back down the slope and began to move swiftly through the woods again, intending to reach the area in shadow behind the tavern. No fires had been lit there.

After an hour of slipping through the dark brush, he arrived at the bottom of another slope in the woods, which he judged to be just behind the tavern. Deep in shadow, only indirect light entered the woods, a dull crimson glow between the black pines. Several small parties had been sent into the woods during the interim, with Bjarn barely passing one without detection at one point. It was his intention to surprise the Jarl the same way he himself had been surprised: normal soldiers were just pawns to be processed. No, even if Bjarn could kill every one of the two dozen or so rebels whom he estimated to be actively hunting him, it would mean nothing to the Empire. He had to cut out rebel heart out of this town in order to cause

any notable damage to rebel efforts in Gjoll. Not that which way the war went was a matter of concern to him.

The black forest squatted around him. He stepped carefully between trees and through underbrush, minding his intoxication. He descended into swampy ground, entering a shallow, clogged ravine. The forest changed here, from thick, tall pines to tangled brush, barbed with the jagged corpses of fallen trees. A large, stagnant pool of water greeted him at the bottom. It broadened beyond the ravine and connected to a large marshy area which he knew was immediately behind the tavern.

The light of campfires cast over the hill touched the shimmering surface of the water in some places, and there was no tree cover. Sneaking around the edge would be noisy and he would be visible. This was unacceptable.

Bjarn slowly slid into the water soundlessly, like some primitive serpent. He could see an area where the crest of the earthen ring cast a shadow over the water, where the firelight did not reach. In this shadow he must stay. The sludgy water closed in around him, clinging to his clothing and flesh. He stepped forward and went under, pushing off the murky, soft bottom. Strands of weeds, decaying plant matter and animal waste brushed against him in the absolute darkness. The water was cold and thick as he swam through it, and for a second in his intoxication he forgot about his body, forgot his location and his life, was only a mind encased in cold darkness. He did not know which way was up. He stopped. The silence was absolute.

Then he felt something soft beneath his hand. Bjarn let himself drop until he was embraced by gripping slimy mud, and then rose slowly, without a splash. He was behind the hill upon which the tavern sat. His enemies were within his reach.

The first man he touched felt like a stone, a statue, nothing animate at all. Perhaps the man was simply slow - but before the standing stack of flesh had a chance to prove that he lived Bjarn had a blade through his throat. Feeling the blood sputter was a murky twisted joy. Over the slumping shoulder of the falling body Bjarn spotted three more men whose fur capes swirled in front of their bonfire's flying flame as he heard their seemingly distant voices through the forsaken night.

"Mercenary"

"Said he"

"The Jarl knew"

"Delay-"

They were not fools. They were not cowards. They were fighting men, loyal to their leader. Their leader himself was perhaps an honorable man. But none of that mattered. They were unprepared. Before the first victim's face had hit the dirt a second soldier was dead, an axe jutting out of his chest, feet crumpled beneath him. Bjarn leapt and slashed, landing on a third man in the crimson haze of the firelight. The sword slid between the man's ribs as he rolled frantically on the ground. He continued twitching as Bjarn smashed his rage into flesh and bone, as if he could rip apart reality itself.

He dashed to the tavern door. Fires were lit in a circle around the perimeter of the woods, most with watchmen. Then, seeing that no one had yet come running, he remembered stealth. He put up his hood and slid a dagger into his sleeve. He walked straight into the tavern's front hall, muttering drunkenly.

His eyes caught movement ahead of him in the gloom. Guards had been posted near the door. Bjarn feigned a step forward, drawing a man out of the shadows. Bjarn charged, knocking the man down. He had one chance at the Jarl, if he was here.

His eyes scanned the tavern. Mostly empty. A few men had started in his direction. Two men sat at a table near the fireplace. Shadows moved near the other entrance. They all knew it was him.

Bjarn turned and kicked the man on the floor in the face. He moved towards the bar, blond beard reflecting the fading firelight.

"Who's for a drink? To Jarl Eyjolf!"

A man stepped closer to him from the bar. In his voice there was no anger, only condemnation of a sort past personal judgment: "I know what you are. All you can do is flee."

Bjarn had hoped to repay the Jarl's surprise attempt on his own life at the start of the night. But the Jarl was not here, and suddenly he that knew his strength would fade soon. He had also foolishly hoped to make off with a supply of opiates, but this place was well-guarded. He would be lucky to escape alive. At least he had made it this far; clearly the majority of the

men searching for him had gone southeast, back towards Skjoldr.

Without a reply he turned and ran back out of the tavern, feet pounding into the dirty ground, towards the northwest, making for the treeline. Several men followed him.

II

Bjarn awoke covered in blood, shivering and shaking. He rolled over, vision bright and blurred, and found himself in a dirty hollow full of fallen leaves. There was water in the bottom, which combined with the lateness of season explained the invasive cold he was feeling. He put out an arm and felt unstable muck. He tried to drag himself up out of the hollow but his hands slid down the muddy bank. He kicked his legs and braced himself against the far bank, trying to push himself up. After several tries, he found himself lying against the incline. He listened, hearing the cruel silence of morning interrupted only by the calls of birds.

He grabbed some roots at the top of the bank and dragged himself up to the surface level of the forest. Lying down cold and wet, Bjarn stared up at the gaps between the trees at a malevolent burning white sky. His throat was horribly dry, and he lay there dribbling water from a flask onto the ragged interior of his mouth for several moments.

He was not ready to move, but did so anyway. He had no idea how many he'd killed without remembering in the woods the night before, but there was always the possibility that more men lurked nearby.

Based on years of instinct, he searched the immediate foreground – the dirt, the trees, his own clothing – for any sign of the conclusion of the last night. He threw fistfuls of mud off of his dirty cloak, and checked his body for wounds, foreign objects, or clues. He accounted for his possessions: flasks, daggers, sword, twine, the short bow he carried, and most importantly the pouches containing his remaining food and coins. He found himself badly battered but not cut, and on his clothing there was only the wet sludge of the forest and blotches of dried blood.

His own existence told him that, once again, he had survived a violent night, but he had no further facts. Most of all,

he did not know where his enemies were in relation to his current position – in fact he did not know his current position at all. Hrolfsson had no love for life, and might easily have resigned himself to the clutches of the rebels, except that he knew what torture awaited him for his deeds. Furthermore, he had no desire to allow them – or anyone else – to entertain delusional dreams, for to do so would be in contradiction of the deepest beliefs he possessed.

He stumbled over a body while walking toward what he thought was the west. The sun already seemed low, that was how he told the direction, but it could have been evening and not morning. His physical state was one way to tell, but he was still too intoxicated to take its measure.

The body sputtered blood – still alive. Bjarn surmised that he was either in a cruel mood last night or was becoming sloppy. He looked down at a face bloodied by blows through tangled hair, at dry eyes that seemed to swallow the cruel sunlight without nourishment. He crouched and leaned near the man's face.

“What the fuck happened last night?”

The failing heap of flesh simply lifted a feeble hand and made the sign of Thunor the Wolf. The rebels had a rebel god, just as the Empire had an imperial one. Hrolfsson remembered what he'd heard about Thunor and his pantheon as a child. Fiery chants and wild invocations. Wolves and fire and freedom.

“I was going to do you a favour” he hissed at the failing body. Crows circled overhead. Bjarn kicked the body with contempt, put up his hood and walked away.

Bjarn knew that he had to turn back to the southeast, eventually, or risk a sober existence. Nature provided numerous intoxications, including starvation itself, but it was man who stockpiled them to the degree which could meet his hunger. Bjarn was fairly certain that a line of sentries had been established with Gjoll as a centre-point, and if he did not reach the Imperial lines soon his information would become worthless. He drew a flask from his cloak and took a long, fiery drink. He felt immediate relief, a little fire pulsing through his ragged carcass.

The influence of weather, the influence of hunger, and the influence of addiction all argued in his head. He was a slave

who could choose which master he wished to obey. He wished it were possible to just forget these things, to shut them out. The principle of the impossibility of this very thing prompted him to continue surviving in order to kill, and he began to drag himself to the south, toward danger, undergoing great pain and depriving himself of sleep in order to do so.

Hours and hours of empty forests passed beside him, and he heard only silence, without the shouting of men or the screaming of beasts. The beauty of empty air.

Bjarn was aware of the need to eat, but the thought still struck him as repulsive. He had with him some small provisions – dried meat, nuts, and trailbread – but these would not last for the long journey ahead. He had not foreseen his present situation, had underestimated anti-imperial sentiment in this province. Memories flashed back to him of his days in Úrhrak, recollections of gestures and words that seemed charged with sinister significance given what Hrolfsson now knew. He recalled once awakening in his tavern-room in the small hours, presumably due to a loud sound which had invaded his shallow sleep, but he'd listened for nearly an hour and the corridor outside was as quiet as death. Another time, stumbling through the shadows of the streets, he'd seen a scrawny, dirty boy run from him and dart into an alley, disappearing into darkness, accompanied by the sound of a door squeaking. He'd written it off as the hurrying scamper of an errand-boy in fear of a beating, but he was no longer so sure. Indeed the Tavern's keeper had offered to sell him a Thunor's Hammer upon his arrival a week ago – that common talisman of the north, which the rebels believed sheltered them from the ravages of ill fortune. Sometimes these served as a test of allegiances. Bjarn had turned the man down – stupid.

The light had turned a murky bronze and the sun had sunken low when Bjarn sensed signs of human activity. The flat ground was covered by layers of decaying moss, quieter for walking. The scent of pine was strong, but lurking behind it was a faint whiff of charcoal. Bjarn slowed his tracks and crept through the brush, seeking footprints, ashes, wood splinters, or scraps of food or clothing - anything that would tell him about the number and nature of men in the area.

The cries of ravens haunted his search, tumbling down from the dark spaces between tall pines. After an hour he

admitted defeat, and sunk down in a dry hollow beneath an uprooted spruce tree. The dirty bush immediately seemed to group in around him. Looking up at the shards of sky between the ragged branches, Bjarn saw how late the hour had become. He drained a flask of water and brought out his pipe. In his opiate pouch he had a fair amount of the material left from the tavern, having been interrupted before partaking. It would be dark soon. Smoking would ruin his night vision and might attract the wary; best to rest and smoke before darkness fell.

He filled the pipe. It was late in the season, and the nights were growing colder. Anyone unwary would light a fire. Anyone wary would either search for him, or possibly feign ignorance and light a fire anyway. Bjarn resolved to move to somewhere more concealed and wait for nightfall. Then the situation would become clearer.

Smooth smoke spilled up, swirled between branches, and emerged into the open air, catching the last of the northern twilight. The branches against the smoke and sky seemed like a strange, unsolvable puzzle. Sounds became more repetitive, insistent, a chorus of alien vibrations. Bjarn breathed deeply. The sky shimmered pale, then shivered deep blue. The shadows of the trees faded and were eaten up by the darkness. Stars gazed down. A low breeze moved through the trees.

Bjarn put away the pipe, sunk deeper into the gap beneath a tree's exposed roots, and spread his cloak across his body. He slowly covered it with leaves and branches, digging himself into the thankfully dry dirt. Finally he was covered, his head hidden in the hollow beneath the tree – position from which he could see without being seen, while his body was invisible. Here he would evade the notice of anyone who did not know the area very well.

In the dry hollow in the darkness it was difficult to keep awake. The occasional insect scurrying on his neck helped. The breeze picked up, became a mournful wind, and the low moan of late evening set in. The dry ground was almost sandy, a favourable contrast to the endless mud he'd been trudging through. Bjarn's exhausted mind began to drift while his eyes stayed open. He forgot how to interpret what he saw; shapes faded in and out, forms emerged from the darkness. He somehow sensed a presence, but he was incapable of grasping

what it was. The wind's whisper seemed to tell him secrets about himself, things even he was unprepared to realize.

An owl's call brought him back from this idle incomprehension. The moon had risen. A faint blue light reflected off of the silvery leaves on the forest floor. Bjarn continued to listen, paying closer attention now. Still nothing but the wind.

Then he heard a faint crackle, from what he judged to be southwest. Branches snapping underfoot, the crackle of a fire? Now Hrolfsson knew he was not alone.

He waited another hour, hearing intermittent noises from the same direction, which never spread or changed position. Finally he grew impatient. The situation seemed unlikely to be a trap, after this much time and no signs of pursuit all day. If he was being tracked by someone that much better than him, his time had come. He could not be taken alive out here.

He stood slowly. Stealthily he crept through the woods, footsteps silent in the underbrush. The light around him was a dull blue, the fallen leaves like pale faces. There was thunder in the distance.

The hoots of owls multiplied, and Bjarn heard things flutter through the trees in the darkness above him. The night was alive.

Bjarn stepped between two trees and saw a faint glow. He crouched silently and began to crawl forward. Through the low brush he saw that the light he had perceived was the dull reflection of firelight on the ground ahead of time. He crawled forward and came to the edge of a large hollow which looked like an old creek bed. Hardly rested, Bjarn was very much expecting to die. Even with surprise on his side, three strong, alert men would destroy him.

The smell of smoke grew strong. Bjarn looked down at the rocky creek-bed, lit by flickering flame. A single figure sat on a log, facing away from Bjarn and toward a small fire. The figure looked small and weak, casting only a thin shadow. Unlikely to be a military man. Perhaps a local guide or collaborator. Bjarn looked for signs of other men. There was one pack, a small axe, and a blanket. The woodpile near the fire was small.

Bjarn Hrolfsson stood and silently began to creep down the old creek-bank. As he picked up speed his stride loosened

dirt and pebbles. The man turned. Bjarn had no intention of letting the man call for help. He unsheathed his sword and put it to the throat of the man who now stared at him, wide eyed, in fear.

“Make a sound and it’ll be your last” Bjarn said. “Are you alone?”

The man nodded. He was old, perhaps past his sixth decade, a rather shriveled thing. His thin body was hunched over the fire, which was made solely of sticks. Gray tufts of hair crowned his head, and his fearful eyes were bleary with age. A thin beard covered his scrawny jaw.

“Who do you work for?” Bjarn asked. At this point, unless the man was extremely well-informed (in which case this was probably a trap, and Bjarn had mere moments to live), the man could not know which side Bjarn was on.

“I’m a refugee, fleeing the capital.”

“You don’t care to defend your land against the imperial pigs?” Bjarn asked.

“Look at me,” muttered the old man. “What could I do?”

“Spy. Set traps. Carry messages. Farm and donate the proceeds. Fix boots.”

“I’m weak. I’ve been traveling for almost two months,” the man rasped.

“To get to where?”

“Úrhrak. To die where I was born.”

“It’ll be razed to the ground within a month” Bjarn said, without adding that he planned to be there to help.

The old man sank down into the dirt. He pulled a bottle from his pack and drank.

“Why do you have liquor? Where did you get that?” Bjarn demanded.

“Traded.”

“Give me that” Bjarn stated, although he still had some of his own.

After a large drink, he sputtered “With who? Where? Who’s in this area!”

“A man, southbound, three days ago,” wheezed the traveler.

“Imperial scout? What’d you give for it?” This information was important. Bjarn’s news might be useless if another Imperial was ahead of him.

Bjarn cruelly drained the bottle in front of the man's eyes. The fire was dying.

"...wouldn't say which side he was on."

"What did you give for it?"

The old man looked into the dwindling embers. "My father's sword."

"Must have been a real piece of shit" laughed Bjarn. Then he thought for a moment. He pushed the man away from his pack, keeping his sword between the two of them. Dull crimson light glinted off of the dried blood on its edge. He pushed the pack open, and saw the glimmer of glass and metal. He kicked it, producing a clink and a sloshing sound.

"Don't take it," pleaded the old man. "It's all I have. I can't stand this anymore."

"No wonder your progress's been so slow" sneered Bjarn. "You probably only make it an hour or two a day before you fall down drunk. You won't even make it to Úrhrak alive. Not that it matters now, anyway."

He sheathed his sword, and strode over to the man's meager woodpile. The old man did not try to run. "He realizes it's useless" thought Bjarn, satisfied. He put all the remaining wood on the fire. Then he sat down in the dirt and drew out his flask.

"This is better than what you've got." He handed it to the old man. "I think we have something in common."

"Will you let me live?" asked the man.

"No," said Bjarn. "But I'll give you notice. Let's just fucking drink."

The other sighed. "You're in the war?"

Bjarn was silent.

"Veteran of the Gjoll campaign?"

"Talk of something else, old man." Hrolfsson warned.

"I'll tell you a story then" he whimpered. Low rumbling could be heard to the west. The wind was picking up. "My grandfather used to tell Gjollish stories in the autumn, when he was drunk after harvest. I was so young then that I hardly remember any of the stories, mostly it's just blurred impressions. Over the decades a man's mind wanders, and I'd be surprised if any of the real stories remain in this sorry skull of mine. But the stories were just his intoxicated, exhausted

whimsy, and so mine can't be so different." He paused and took a drink, then handed the flask back.

"One he told a lot was about Hjalla, from whence he said his forefathers had come. It was a huge, dark forest he said, where men lived under the hills in the rock itself, in caves they took from great bear-men. They had to fight wolves every day, he said, but the animals were all great in size, not like the dingy dogs and withered cattle we have now. Beasts of legend, he said, huge hunts beneath great cliffs of ice."

The old man slurred and stopped, then opened one of his bottles. Bjarn stared at the crackling fire through the shimmering glass, thinking of his own childhood on a farm, recalling the few warm afternoons left after harvest time, the cycle of the seasons, the silent moon above the fields.

The wind began to howl and shake the trees. Drops of rain began to caress the solemn ground. The fire hissed.

"In those days they buried their dead, for they could do little else. They didn't have much in the way of woodworking like we do, maybe men had spears, no swords or ships. Anyway, they used to dig mounds for the clan leaders when they died, and they would leave them there to rot under the earth. But the gods felt men had been a mistake and wanted to go back to the way it was before men. And so they sent a winter like never before, and all the animals hid themselves underground, and the people had their winter meat stored. But the winter was deep and dark and did not end, and many fell to starvation. Others froze trying to find food. But some of these men were hard, ambitious, ruthless, and they refused to die."

"They became like animals and ate human flesh, the corpses of those who had died. In their lust for life they dug in the frozen ground, and uncovered and killed sleeping animals, driving whole species to death which the gods meant to survive. And finally the gods' wrath at this knew no bounds, and the dead themselves rebelled. The men who had fallen began to walk again and turn on their former fellows. The frozen corpse-men, emerging from the cold darkness of the wilderness, begin to come back to the caves and battle the survivors."

"They were called draugar in the old Gjollish, revenants. Each dead man turned against the living, and each evening the draugar surrounded the caves, shambling around the entrances, waiting for those inside to let up their guard."

“And even still these hard men would not let up, and they wrestled the draugar, and some they tore to pieces and consumed. And every soul the draugar snuffed out, every man that they killed, became one of them. And this curse spread, so that when the spring finally came only one man still lived, and he fled the land of his forefathers in fear, arriving in Gjoll in ancient times to found its greatest city.”

“So the Gjollish are a bunch of inbred cowards,” laughed Bjarn. “They’re no better than the Empire. They’ll be well served in the months ahead.”

The rain fell faster, limiting visibility with its thick dull haze.

“You fail to see the point,” said the old man wistfully, and in the darkness as the fire faded he seemed to have become more than the frail heap of bones that Bjarn had frightened earlier.

Bjarn took another drink and kicked some small logs back into the fire. Ash spread beneath his boot.

“With every man the curse consumed, it became stronger. Every soul it snuffed it stole, until it destroyed nearly all who had fought against it. The men who fought it were doomed, but only a coward gives himself to death and thus betrays his kind.”

The man fell silent.

“Fuck you, wise old man of the woods.”

Bjarn drank and flung a bottle into the fire. The remaining liquor made it flare up. The old man saw a young face twisted in anger, covered in strands of dirty blond hair, lit from below by an orange glare. Bjarn saw firelight reflecting off of wizened eyes distant in the dark, eyes which peered at him through the quickening rain.

“Is that really some Gjoll story, or are you just trying to provoke me?” growled Bjarn.

“You understand the story,” came the response.

“What I do is my business. You know nothing about me.”

“You’re a filthy beast of the empire, a traitor to men,” spoke the old man in a menacing whisper.

Bjarn looked at him closely. “I don’t have to kill you quickly. You’re squandering the meagre goodwill I have toward

you, you old fool,” he hissed. “It’s pretty fucking stupid to criticize a man who can put a blade to your throat in a second.”

“You’re a coward for thinking that” replied the old man bitterly, and he opened and came more than halfway to draining a second bottle.

“Be silent,” said Bjarn. He could hardly see through his mind’s haze of liquor and the storm’s mist which had filled the hollow.

But the old man was drunk, and would not be silent. “You all say you’re doing what you have to, but it’s men like you who’ve made this curse possible in the first place. Men can swing swords and risk death and yet be cowards, for they tell themselves in their hearts that the choice is not theirs, that if they did not do this another man would. Face yourself, man-beast, traitor to men!”

“One more word, and I will take you with me to the capital, where I will hand you to the Chamber as a Gjollish spy. It won’t matter whether you know anything or not. They will scrape the tiniest shreds from the inside of your mind. By the end you will be begging to confess. Not all men fear death, but all men fear the Chamber.”

“Threats! All you have are threats!” howled the old man.

“What else is there?” asked Bjarn. He drew his sword and in a few long strides he crossed the dwindling fire and stood behind the old man. “You have but one moment,” he said.

The old man recited a few words in some broken old language – Gjollish, probably. Bjarn then slit his throat, and the force on the old man’s weak, scrawny body nearly decapitated him.

Bjarn threw the body down at the other end of the ravine, and returned to the fire. He built it up with many decaying logs. But the wood was wet, and would hardly burn. Bjarn shivered in the dark.

The next morning, he knew, he had to begin traveling as quickly as possible. He was sure that he was beyond the reach of the Úrhrak rebels, but he had to catch this other man traveling to the capital.

And although he had slept little since that brutal night in the Úrhrak tavern, and he had to arise early and travel at breakneck speed through these thick woods, Bjarn stayed

awake. He sat, wet and muddy in the cold hollow, staring at the fire as the storm raged on for hours and hours.

Thinking.

The Last Day of Insanity

By Lee Vermeulen

There is no worse feeling than waking up to another day. Waking up to the memories of before, waking up to the horrible smell that surrounds you. I am not exactly sure what it is, but the very air is disgusting, unbearable. Maybe it's just the stink of the beer from the night before, the leftover food, or even the smell of my own disgusting diseased body. Or maybe, it's the smell of the world itself, and only after a few hours of being awake do I accept its rotten taste in my mouth.

After the smell comes the realization of where you are. You wake up to feel reality, slowly leaving the dream world you were in. Whatever dreams and thoughts you just had were all pure fantasy, were all just delusions. Maybe you were in your old elementary school classroom, or back sledding with your best friend in fifth grade, or maybe you were having some horrible nightmare. Whatever the case, you had a purpose, you always had a destination in these delusions; there was always a reason and things made fucking sense. But when the first bright lights of morning hit your eyes, you realize it was all pointless. There is no reason to wake up, there is no reason to even move, yet you must, because of all the pain demanding you do something - the pain of a dry mouth demanding water, sore muscles demanding movement, and an empty stomach needing its fix of whiskey. If I could only fall back into that unreal world, and ignore the reality of this day, everything would be fine. But real life has a way of picking away at you. It never ceases, it keeps demanding. It keeps fucking poking and wanting more.

"Ivan? Ivan?"

The idiot wouldn't stop poking me. I knew that horrible squeaky voice was not in my dream because that little rat bastard would never be in my dreams. I had to accept this now. I knew the world was still out there, but at least at this moment it didn't have me by the throat. At least, with my eyes closed, none of that mattered, and there was nothing to deal with or

fight besides my own delusions; delusions of grandeur, of importance, of purpose. Now begins the normal process, the memories of the night before slowly coming in, the slow realization of what your life is and has become, finally the constant need to escape this shit at the next opportunity. My Wisers in the kitchen, however, should ensure that the next opportunity is not too far away. I would just need to stand a few more moments of clear-headed existence before I was able to slow the thoughts down, to stop myself from remember anything of the night before.

The memories of a night like last night always come in phases, flashes of different states of mind. The sober beginnings, then you dig yourself deeper until you wish you could just forget it all. You wish you had just let those memories die so you'd never have to deal with them. Seeing yourself act like someone you hate, wanting to kick your own teeth in for such stupidity. These people around me didn't know me, they only knew the drunken me, they knew the asshole me. That's who they related to, these weren't my friends. These were my partners in drinking, and it would make sense for us to get along, each one of them as selfish as every other. Little idiot Charlie just needed someone to just agree with him and be around him, he had no concept of loyalty. He barely existed. He was simply a walking machine, going from one source of pleasure to the next. From the pipe, to the television, to whatever food he could find in my fridge.

Jordan and that Jess - why did they ever come here? Why do they ever even talk to me? They are a perfect couple I suppose, each enforcing the other one's stupidity. I suppose that's what relationships are for though, to just be selfishly used, to just have someone agree with you so you don't realize how pathetic you actually are. They must just use me for a laugh. They must just bring assholes like Kyle over and laugh at what happens. What do they expect to happen when they bring someone like Kyle over to my place? My only escape from the outside shit of this world, and you bring that dancing hip asshole. It's obvious none of them care about me. It's mutual back stabbing, mutual hatred of one another, yet we all have no other option. Whatever I did last night, it was deserved. It was long time coming.

The memories always start at the good moments, the beginnings of the night when the alcohol hadn't completely taken over. Things still seemed clear. But then you begin to dig deeper and deeper until one memory after another comes like an ice pick in the back of the head. You realize the shit you're going to have to deal with this morning, like the horrible headache wasn't enough. You remember the money you wasted, how you had used the entire stash when it was supposed to last you weeks. What you had said, yelled, ranted; what you had done, hit, smashed, it was all pointless though. That was almost a reassuring thought, to realize it doesn't fucking matter. To not care, is a powerful tool. You give no power to anything to move you, and that's something I always need to keep in mind.

"Ivan?"

"What"

"Where's Kyle?"

"How, the fuck would I know" I said, turning to the little rat man Charlie. He gave me such a confused look, as if he was a sad little puppy dog grabbing my leg for attention. He probably woke today with complete fucking satisfaction. He probably woke up and embraced this world, just put on another asshole grin like he has right now, and now goes about the day smiling and having a blast. Never thinking, why? What the fuck am I doing? Why am I doing this? These are thoughts that never entered that little man's head. And in a sense, I envy him. If he could wake up with a smile on his face his whole life, then I envy him. I can't help myself from wanting to attack him at the same time though, to beat him till he realizes the shit world he lives in.

"Oh man you look horrible."

I did not need to hear that. I didn't know that, but I didn't need to know that. There is no reason to think of my outward appearance right now, that thought should never have entered my head. Why should I have to care, what people feel when they look at me? Why should I have to get up, to... groom. Fuck it, and fuck them.

"Man you were a little pissed last night, I dunno what's with you and Kyle but..."

I wish to whatever nonexistent god there is out there that this man would just shut the hell up. The only human

beings I ever liked were the quiet ones, were the ones that never spoke a word. When you open your mouth, you ruin any idea of you I had; you turn into something I hate. You give me your problems, you give me your issues and whining, and you expect me to care. You bitch at me like I should help you. I do not want to socialize; I don't want to talk about some bullshit topics to pass the time. How's the local sports team doing? Oh and how about the weather? It's chilly, ain't it!? Useless, pointless, social interactions, all just gestures to one another to make each other feel special and liked.

I couldn't avoid hearing about the night before as Charlie went on. I did not say a word yet he didn't need any nods of recognition, he just wanted anyone to talk to, to make him feel better than the piece of shit he is. I was forced to hear more about the night before, strengthening the memories in my head that I wish could just die. I don't care what happened to Kyle, I don't care what the fuck Jordan thinks of me, they can all go to hell. Why am I forced to hear this shit? Why can't I just ignore it? Why was I woken up for this? Do I need to process this information... the whole idea of 'noise' is your body putting priority on whatever shit is the loudest, sending you all this data to deal with and calculate, figure out the best plan for more food and sex. Yet I can't escape it, I was never asked if I wanted it, it just sends me this shit to deal with. Wakes me to get food, pushes me to have a bit of whiskey, my entire life has just been regulating this body and trying to spread its genes. I had no say, just another damn drone.

"Get the fuck out!" I finally yelled, pointing to the door. Charlie, like an obedient dog, took the direct command. If you try to talk to him in any other way he will see it as a form of affection. He walked out and turned the lights off, letting me leave this world for a few more minutes.

"Ryan?" I whispered.

Ryan stood beside the bed looking at me. I must have seemed nothing like I once was.

"Ivan we gotta go, come on man" he said, motioning me to get out of bed. He still wore the same Calgary Flames hat, same green hoodie. "Alright alright" I said, rubbing my eyes and pushing myself off from the bed. "Let's go."

He was gone, never there. It was years ago I had talked to him last, but yet he still had a place in my delusions and mind. Probably the only friend that did, the only friend that seemed to have a purpose other than to share the price of drinks.

"Ivan?" I heard now, Charlie opening the door walking towards me. He must have heard my sleep-talking. I close my eyes, try to just ignore him.

"Hey man what were you saying?"

He pokes me again.

"Ivan."

I turn over to look at him. Holding a pipe in his hand, he has probably been smoking all night. That's all this idiot ever does, and that's all he has the ability to discuss or even think. Did he ever ask if he could stay? Did any of them ask?

"Answer the door man, this is your place."

"The door?" I said, holding my head as I stood up from bed.

"Yeah, you know how your house has a door?" he said, smirking to me as if he was just fucking clever. I'll rephrase for the sarcastic bastard...

"Who, is at the door" I said, standing up walking towards him, trying to get some direct answers.

"Two kids in suits."

"What do they want?"

"To speak to the man of the house" he said, in a mockingly formal voice.

It wasn't much of a house, really, just a cheap rental suite. I lived in a basement in the pathetic low life poor part of town. But for some reason, it suited me, I almost felt at home with the dying speed heads. They've given up on life long ago, realized the best path to take is the one to the nearest hit. Speed was never my drug though, none of those were, they all felt too fake. They give you a false sense of satisfaction, making you think everything is grand. You wake up after a few days of a coke or speed binge and you realize all the thoughts you had were ludicrous drug induced bullshit. Alcohol doesn't do that. Alcohol doesn't change your mind, it doesn't lie to you, it just lets your thoughts slow to a halt, getting closer and closer to non-existence.

“Alright” I said. I cracked my back as I stood up from the bed looking across the room for any shirt. Laundry was never a top priority after moving out a year ago.

“Move” I mumbled, pushing Charlie aside. I grabbed the nearest shirt on the dresser I could find - a tight pink shirt with ‘Sumo Cat’ written in giant white letters, under a large cat in sumo underwear, a Garfield rip-off, comically fat and cartoony. Pink was never my color, but it didn’t matter.

I walked through the hallway towards the door, hearing laughter from the kitchen. More buddies who just decided to stay over, I suppose, just made themselves comfortable. My house is your house, mine is yours, what a generous friend I am. Hell of a guy, that Ivan!

I opened the door, rubbing my eyes and groaning from the daylight, letting out a loud grunt. “Jesus fucking Christ” I yelled, before I was finally able to make out the two kids outside. The boys stood in front of my door, all smiles, with bibles in hand.

“Good afternoon sir,” one boy said cheerfully, with just the enthusiasm I was hoping to hear this early. The older one must have been a few years younger than me, fifteen or seventeen, with what looked like his little brother. He stood there, looking directly at me, with a large smile and wide eyes, as his little brother just stared at the ground, probably just forced to come. Probably brought so people wouldn’t as easily tell him to just fuck off, adding a ‘cute’ factor to his little marketing pitch. Winter jackets covered everything but their ties, and they seemed to be trying to hide themselves shivering in the code. Before today I had always noticed these people before even walking to the door, seeing them through my basement window. I was too fucking stupid today, too pissed at Charlie to have thought about it.

“My name is Evan, and this is...”

“Look kid I don’t have time for this, you just got me out of bed for this shit, on a Sunday. Isn’t this some god damn holiday? Some day of rest? Didn’t God work for 6 fucking days building this world, and then had a day off, and yet you don’t give me a fucking chance to rest also?” I’ve always had a habit of calling peers ‘kid’, it makes them feel inferior.

He nodded, as if all he heard was ‘fuck off.’

“Sorry for your time sir.” He said, turning away from me. He didn’t even feel what I said. I didn’t even get to him.

“Wait a second, why are you here?” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder, turning him around.

“Well me and my brother have come to spread wisdom about our lord.” He looked a bit frightened, but excited to get back to his usual script. Maybe I shouldn’t have sworn at him, or maybe not have touched him. Or maybe the smell of me and my house finally hit him.

“Can I ask you a question? Are you sent here, to get a certain quota of houses or something, like you have to deliver some pamphlets and shit to be a good preacher boy? Or maybe knocking on people’s door and waking them up is some sort of hobbies of yours?”

“I am trying to spread the word of God. Save people from their sins, let them embrace the love of...”

“Ah I see, okay. But, you do have a certain quota of houses to meet, is that right?” I said, grinning, waiting for a response.

“The church recommends we...”

“Okay okay, convincing sinners of the true path of the lord, the true path of... salvation!” I said, putting my hands in the air and yelling the last word like a black preacher. He looked back at his little brother, and then just nodded.

“Um, yeah”

“Well alright, convince me kid, I’ll give you all the time in the world, I got all fucking day. I am a bit of sinner myself, you know.” I grabbed a smoke out of my pocket and lit it. I didn’t so much want a smoke right now, since I usually have my first taste of whiskey before breathing in some tar, but after saying that it just felt right. It wasn’t so much about looking like a badass, it was more of a... I got time to hear your shit. I am not sure how badass I could seem wearing a pink Sumo cat shirt.

He just stood in silence, which I found disappointing. I suppose most people would just politely tell him to fuck off, using more polite words than I am capable of. But really, I am giving this kid exactly what he wanted, he came here to tell me his beliefs, his fucking marketing pitch, and here he is completely dumbfounded. He needs a bit of pushing, to get it out of him.

“For me, what the fuck would be the point of repentance. I would need to accept what I have done is... ‘bad’. Doing what I feel like, is somehow not right? I don’t need some being to sacrifice myself to, to fear and obey. Why should I not swear, why should I go for this thing that society calls good, society considers noble? The decisions we make are always selfish, and it’s just the ‘good’ and ‘noble’ people who have deluded themselves otherwise.” He looked at me directly, but I couldn’t be sure if he heard me, or was simply waiting until I stopped talking so he could say a few more rehearsed words.

“God has put us on this earth with free will, to choose from good or bad, to make the right decision.”

“But what the fuck is good or bad? If the sole reason of my existence is just some adaptation to help the species, why the fuck does it matter if I cause some pain in the world? What is good helps society, what is bad hurts it. Society is a selfish prick, brainwashing little newcomers as soon as they come into this world, before they have a chance to think. You never decided you wanted to believe this shit, you never decided to come to my fucking door, you were just told to and conditioned. I almost don’t blame you for this, honestly, because it was never your fault. In a way, it’s no one fault. It’s a giant fucking broken machine. But every little screw operates it, every little cog in it helps it go, and you’re one of those screws. It’s your fucking fault.”

I realized I had been walking towards him as I said this, saying my words faster and with more aggression. I needed to calm down, put on a friendly smile, and step back into my house. I ashed my smoke on the ground, and leaned casually against my door. “Heh, sorry kid, go on with your pitch.”

He seemed confused, not so much frightened as just curious as to what I was doing. “I am trying to spread the good word” he said, shaking his head slightly. A bit pissed, on the edge, but yet still smiled away. He must have seen me as some sort of degenerate, some pathetic low life who has taken the wrong path, gone to the side of evil.

People, like this kid, are fundamentally evil, most just don’t know it. They are forced to act kind, put an outward appearance of a nice respectable man, and sooner or later they believe this lie themselves, they believe they really are the lie they put out. Little kids are almost better for this, they are evil

bastards and they just don't care, only when society forces them to put on a show do they become just like everyone else. This kid has been trained since birth and rewarded to seem kind, to put on a nice show, all to the point where it has become him. He is no longer aware of what the fuck he is doing. He was told to repress the selfish thoughts, until it became too natural. If he had the chance he'd fuck the first girl he could, and justify and forget it in his own mind, he would never even admit it to himself. He wants to sin, and he still will, yet right now it helps him more to put on this nice show for everyone. A natural politician. I continued.

"The word of... the lord? The celestial puppeteer in the sky? The main character in that work of fiction you're holding so close to your heart? Can I ask you something, why are you really doing this? Can you please stop the fucking routine, stop the lines you have rehearsed to give to housewives, and tell me why the fuck you have come here to say this to me?"

He shook his head, as if he was just disgusted with the human race while looking at me. "I feel the lord. I have faith" he said calmly.

"Faith, of course. So what is faith? Just ignoring rationality, common sense, and believing whatever the fuck you want to believe? Tell me kid – why is it such a virtue to be so retarded?"

I had to laugh a bit after saying this, seeing him just stare at me. Maybe I was asking too many questions, not giving him time to speak. Maybe all I needed was a head to rant to, some punching bag for my thoughts. I wanted him to walk away wishing he had never rang my doorbell, wishing he would never see me again.

He shook his head once more, and looked directly at me. Had I cracked him?

"It's not a decision. I never made the choice. I was not brainwashed, or conditioned, there is simply no other answer. I simply feel it. I feel the presence of the lord. No other path for meaning, to find... um, substance in your life." He looked as if he could have gone on, but he stopped himself as soon as he could. I laughed again.

"You believe it because you want to believe it, it brings you joy doesn't it? It helps you sleep at night knowing all those fellow classmates who are out having all this sex and fun are

going to hell. Don't you want to believe that you are some good person, fighting the good fight, having some crusade to fight? I wish I could entertain the same delusions."

He looked down shaking his head, trying to find the words.

"You don't understand... it's not a decision that we have, it may not be in our best interest, and it might not even be what we want. It does not have any survival value, it gives value to surviving."

"What?" I said, grinning. "You think you are attracted to religion kid, but really you are just repelled from yourself. You need to realize you're your own fucking God. You are the only thing that matters, not some character in that book of yours, not some arbitrary rules on how to live. All that fucking matters is you. You realize all this shit, this oxygen, some refrigerators, cars, and the rest of these damn humans, are all here because of you. You are your own purpose, the destination in life is right here, right fucking now, and the noblest thing you can do is help yourself. You are your own purpose, you are deciding what it is going to be. It's not left over to some divine higher power, some being using me in his unknown plan, it's my decision. I am going to decide what happens, and we are going to sit here and drink beer. I am going to go back into my house and find the next possible chance to fuck myself up. No one can get in the way of my fucking life."

The kid kept nodding, as if he accepted all this and had the response ready his preacher had taught him. Listen to the sinners he was told, listen to them and hear their thoughts, then finally give them the true word. He nodded, and looked down at the ground again - possibly thinking of something to say, possibly finally realizing I was a lost cause.

He gave me a genuine smile and turned away from me, grabbing the hands of his little brother. Is it possible I had gotten to him? I doubt it, I doubt anyone could. He was not trying to think of the situation. He wasn't trying to evaluate life, or find answers; he was simply going to tell me what I lacked in life, what I needed. He is simply a machine trained to spread the virus, the virus that had infected his family long ago. It is a virus, with the more successful ones being the ones that spread faster, that infect the most of the population. The religion with the most pleasing beliefs and the best ways to spread itself

wins. This kid was trained from birth as simply a spreading machine, poor useless victim of it. You can't reach him, because there is nothing to reach, his consciencesness and his very self has been buried under this false mask of righteousness. He is simply a machine to sell the product, nothing else.

"Heh, alright kid" I said, stepping back into my house. I was mockingly waving him goodbye, as he finally gave in to get the last word.

"I feel sorry for you if you can't feel the lord's presence." His smile turned to hate - he was no longer trying to educate me but now ranting angrily.

"You may call me a fanatic and irrational but I truly feel for you if you wake up without purpose every day, wondering why you are here, and coming up with no answers. I am offering you answers, I am offering you purpose, and you refuse, you make a joke out of it. You're throwing away the gift of life. This is life, this is meaning, this is no joke. Faith is not believing in whatever you wish, it's understanding that there is more to this life than we know, that there is something fundamentally mysterious, something higher than us. How do you want to spend eternity? How do you want to live your life? In sin?"

"Heh, this life is long enough for me. The thought of an afterlife seems more a trap than a paradise. But let me guess, before you continue... I'll burn in hell? I'll be the devil's little toy for all eternity? Because I didn't sit in some building and sing some gospels? At first you bring out the purpose of believing - now you just want to scare me into it? Scare people into believing, another great tactic of all religions. Christianity has everything doesn't it? It makes man seem so important, gives reason for all their pointless actions. It lets you feel better for yourself going on this crusade of righteousness, while everyone else just lives their lives. And if you don't believe, you'll burn in hell! Which, of course, no one wants to do. It's perfectly constructed, a perfect marketing pitch, designed to infect little minds such as yours. "

"Maybe you can't be reached" he said, looking at the ground, as if saying this to some outside audience. He reached into his pocket and took a pamphlet, putting it in my mailbox. "Goodbye sir." He gave me another smile, just as fake as

before, and walked away, never turning back, with his head held high.

I wonder if he would still go to the next house with the same routine. Right now he is probably going through the same thoughts he always goes through when someone questions his faith. Pleasing himself in his own delusions. Going through the usual script in his mind of why he has chosen the best path. He will never rationally think about his beliefs, and I wouldn't expect him to. If it brings him more joy to believe this fantasy, why bring the truth into it.

I grabbed the pamphlet from the mailbox, and just stared at it in front of my door. It was no different than some McDonald's flyer, or other corporate bullshit designed to get my money. All these smiling attractive people on it, large captions in bold text telling me what I need. As if everything wrong will go away once I join their church. It was just more people lying to me, trying to use me for their own selfish needs. But I wouldn't blame them really, the corporations, the churches, all the marketers trying to steal my money. They are just trying to get their shit, just like every other life form thrown into this place. What bothers me is the lying, the deceiving, and the fucking smiling to my face. The false masks they put on as if they are doing good, as if they only want to help you. Why can't we just all admit our greedy nature? Live as brutes, as animals, like we were designed. It's better for people to be like beasts, just feed and fuck. Instinctively. Intuitively. Once you become aware of yourself you start to lie, deluding yourself to think you're something more. The worst quality in any human is to think they are somehow above a pleasure seeking machine, as if what they are doing makes sense, as if they understand things - the type of person who walks through life with a constant grin on their face, enjoying everything that comes, not questioning what the purpose of it all is.

I stopped myself before I went on into these thoughts, and had another moment of reflection. These thoughts have been in my mind thousands of times, and yet they keep coming back, without change. None of this accomplishes anything. None of this is going to get me anywhere. Am I going to impress some hot date at the bar with my angry nihilism? Am I going to rant about McDonalds to my boss and get some more money? None of it matters, not even realizing it matters. I've

thought this before also, but there is no stopping it. Realizing that these thoughts never end, and that it has no point, does not help either. It just leads to more of the same. It's best to just slow it down with a drink, and that's what needs to be done.

"What's so fucking funny?" I said, as I stood at the kitchen door. The laughter stopped. Jess turned towards me, giving me a small awkward smile as she stirred the tea in her hand. Jordan just stood in the corner.

"What, was funny?" I repeated.

"Nothing Ivan, just talking to Jordan."

Of course, just a knock knock joke.

"Two of a kind, you two... best buds!" I said, pulling up a chair.

"Okay... what was that in there?" Jess answered, pointing to my front door.

"Some kid in a suit, telling me of God. How I needed him in my life."

"I see" she said, sitting down beside me.

"I may have scared him off, a bit too much ranting."

"Yeah, you can definitely do that to some people."

Can I now? Maybe that was what they were laughing at. Now Jordan just sits quickly in the corner, staring at me like I am intimidated.

"By the way Ivan, what was with you and Kyle last night?" Jess said, staring directly at me, giving me a concerned look, like she wanted to get into some deep conversation.

"What about Kyle?"

I remembered various moments with Kyle. He had come late, and was the life of the party for a while. Making a big show, putting on all the jokes, what a laugh riot! Everyone look at my wacky antics! Attention seeking pathetic bastard, I should have kicked him out of the house as soon as he came.

"Well, what happened between you two?" Jess asked. I tried to remember anything I could, but my last memory was him just dancing in the living room.

"I am not taking that fucking shit from him, in my house, he got what he deserved."

"What do you mean, what did he say?"

I shook my head, trying to remember the later parts of last night. Nothing came.

“It doesn’t matter, it’s not the point.”

“Well alright” Jess said, shrugging as she stood up from her chair.

“He didn’t fucking deserve that, and you know it” Jordan said, finally speaking up.

I didn’t even look at him, I simply got up, went to the cupboard in the corner, and pulled out my left over 40 ounce of Wisers. There was about ten shots left, enough to get me through the day. Hidden behind the cereal boxes, I would never trust these people with anything.

“So finally spoke up eh Jordan?” I said, taking out a glass and pouring myself a few shots of rye on the table.

He sat down across from me and shook his head.

“Jesus Christ Ivan you look horrible” he said.

Not the first person to be disgusted by me, I am sure.

“Do I now? Do I really?” I say, gesturing to him by chugging the last of my glass, letting it spill over my mouth onto my shirt. I wipe my mouth afterwards, and give a joyful laugh, as if everything is just perfect. Five shots already gone, I should maybe have spaced it out to last the day, but it was well worth the gesture.

The bastard smirks, and turns over to Jess. They both look at each other like some secret Romeo and Juliet style love, with some secret to one another they signal back and fourth. They just watch their idiot friend Ivan, and laugh at about it later, making little secret messages to one another. There he is, being a drunken idiot again! That’s Ivan! Yep! I hope you enjoyed the show!

“Pink, doesn’t suit you Ivan” Jordan said calmly, leaning back in his chair.

“What suits me Jordan? What would suit you, for me to wear?”

“Ivan he was just joking,” Jess defending him as usual. “You got to calm down Ivan. You don’t need to be a paranoid asshole all the time.”

“Maybe I got a reason to be paranoid, Jess.”

They both just shook their heads as if I was some rambling idiot. I may be paranoid, but that doesn’t mean I am not right.

“You got to stop drinking, get back to your job you’ve been skipping” Jordan said, sipping his god damn tea, giving some of his brilliant advice.

“What at the paper place? I lost that piece of shit job long ago. Who the fuck are you to give advice anyway? No one wants you for any fucking job. You’re too weak for labor, you’re too fucking ugly for service, and you’re too much of a stupid fucking junkie for anything else. Maybe you two should just get the fuck out of my house.”

“This is a basement in the middle of a shithole, the fucking ghetto, this isn’t a house” Jordan said, so proud to correct me.

I stood up, ignoring him, and went towards the fridge. I leaned beside the refrigerator as I opened it, staring at Jordan, grabbing the nearest bottle I could find. One out of Kyle’s packs he must have left here, probably had to leave in a hurry, that guy.

“Once you stop living off your parents Jordan, maybe stop dancing like an idiot at random clubs and get a fucking job, then you can bitch about my place.”

“He has a job, Ivan” Jess said, quick to defend her favourite person.

“Hah, let me guess, flipping burgers? Taking orders? Got a job as the retarded Wal-mart greeter?”

He gave me a stern look. “I do construction now, over at the new mall.”

“Oh of course! I understand now. Affirmative action at work eh? They got to hire some ratio of black guys so they hire the first black asshole to come in? You must have stolen some guy’s job that deserved it. Why else would they hire a fucking junkie?” I said, poking him in the back.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Jess said, coming to his defense again.

“Now now Jess, calm down there. I just was making a point. Lets all be civil, rational, adults.” I said, leaning on the wall behind him.

“You know that’s not how it fucking is you racist prick”

“I think it is. Either that or they just need some brute to move shit. Some asshole to take direct commands for as little money as possible, hammer some shit, and maybe pick some

cotton?" I chugged some more of my beer, and walked behind him. He finally turned towards me, and clenched his jaw.

"You're a bitter asshole. Are you just bitter because you could never get a girl like Jess to come to this shithole without me?"

"Nah, this bitch probably just prefers the dark meat."

"Fuck you Ivan."

He tightens his fists and pushes his chair back.

"Fuck me?" I say, standing behind him, holding my beer above his head. "Whatcha gonna do little man ♪?" I sang, pouring the rest of the beer on his head. "Whatcha gonna do ♪?"

"Go fuck yourself!" He yells, finally standing up and coming at me. I had finally gotten a reaction out of him; he finally seemed to have some bloodlust. The man is about the same size as me, but I'll just let him swing at me, and then come back with something a bit bigger.

He sticks his hand in my face, and pushes me back, as if we were going to push each other around for a bit before getting to the real hits. As if this was all fun and games.

Jess backs further into the corner - I wonder if she'll think so highly of Jordan after this.

I grab his hair, and pull down towards my side. He is helpless, scared, and pathetic, but is asking for this. I lift my beer bottle above my head, and crash it down in the middle of his skull. Glass shatters everywhere, as I let go of him and let him fall to the ground.

"Jesus Christ!" I hear Jess yell from beside me. Jordan is on the floor holding his head as Charlie runs in from the next room. They just stare at him, as I step over, drop the rest of the broken bottle, and calmly walk to the door.

"Want a smoke Charlie?" I say, holding up two smokes in my hand. He doesn't look at me. "Well then, I'll be back in a bit!" I add, cheerfully, walking out the back door.

I roll over on the bathroom floor and take a deep breath.

After a few days of constant drinking, there is always a moment of clarity, the eye of the storm. Cozied up to the toilet, face stuck to the floor, you begin to reevaluate things. It's not the same as waking up and fighting a normal day, it's more of a

surprise of still being alive. You wake up completely confused, unsure of where you are, and only after a few minutes of lying on the floor do you realize it's all the same, another day. I get up, but there really is nowhere to go, I just need to move, get off the floor and feel something new.

It has been a few days since they had left. I am not sure how I had filled my time, more of the same. Watching online clips and videos of bands I used to like when I was younger - still barely making it to the liquor store before close to keep going.

I am not sure how long this would keep up, but it would never change. I would get kicked out of my basement soon enough. Money will run out soon, but does it matter? Why do I care anymore if I get some comfortable bed? Air conditioned place to stay, place to just sit there? I'll lay outside, I'll lay out in the cold like I should, freeze and drink until my body just can't take it anymore.

I stumble over towards my living room, and fell onto my couch. Hours passed as I mindlessly watched TV, flipping through whatever channels had the least annoying marketing, the least amount of people smiling and lying to me.

It can't continue like this. It can't just be me waking up to another day, with the same feelings and thoughts each time, the same need to just escape it. I close my eyes, and slip in and out of consciousness.

The phone rings beside me.

"Yeah?" I say, almost just grunting into the phone.

"Ivan... how are you" she responds.

"Ahhhh Jess!" I felt just drunk enough to be charismatic, but not too much as to make a fool of myself. "I'm absolutely bloody perfect, just enjoying this beautiful sunny day. How's the life been?"

"Good... still up for a bit of partying Ivan?"

Of course that was the reason she called, why the hell would anyone endure me otherwise. "Why, definitely. You know me."

She would be coming in a few hours, giving me a bit of time to rest, sober up, and maybe even clean up. I had decided that this is a change, that this would be the change I needed.

That today would matter, that I would make today fucking matter.

I sometimes have the feeling, as foolish as it is, that I am being taken down a path in life, and it has some purpose which I just don't know yet. As if, this is a test, or as if I have to deal with all of this bullshit just to learn something, maybe just to appreciate life a little more. It's in my most irrational moments, that I think things like this have a purpose. Like I am now leaving the chapter of my life where I would destroy myself and think these thoughts, and enter a new world. Maybe things will make sense? Or maybe I will stop caring about that sort of thing. Like this will be the day I will remember as having some change, as the last day of insanity.

It's irrational, and ludicrous, to think things will ever change. But nevertheless, I somehow have hope for today. I'll rest, shave, and actually groom before she comes. I'll focus my energy on her, and actually accomplish something. No drinking, try to enjoy a clear-minded existence.

I wait close to the door before she comes, sitting in the same chair as the day before.

Jess walks towards the house from the other side of the street, as I rush to seem busy and give a nonchalant greeting. She knocks on my door twice, pacing impatiently back and fourth on my step. After waiting long enough, I open the door.

"Ivan" she says, with a slow growing smile.

I immediately open up my wallet taking out the gram of coke, and hold it in the air.

"Yay" she says, clapping sarcastically. I motion her towards the couch, throwing the coke on the table.

"I might not be as experienced as you in crushing this up, you would wanna give it a try would ya?" I take out my old high school student card to cut it up, the same card I always use.

"Pffft, experienced as me" she shakes her head as she grabs the student card. Crushing it up and splitting it into generous piles. She does seem like an expert.

"Ladies first" she says, passing me a rolled up twenty from her pocket. I can actually make out traces of her last binge on the queen's face.

"I had a bit of a thing for you in high school" she confesses, as I let my hand go through hair.

There were still a few thin lines on the table. I had taken one with every hint of awkwardness, with every sense of that nagging feeling of hating the situation, hating having to deal with all this social bullshit. But over time, that had passed, and I was able to sit calmly and lay my head back, entering her world of thoughtless existence.

We had both come closer to one another with every line, with each conversation becoming less small talk and more engrossingly personal. Each person frantically trying to get across an idea, constantly confessing one personal trait to the next. I felt so relieved to have told her how I had changed from my high school self, and why I felt the way I did. She understood my problem like no one else I had experienced.

"Let go of the anger!" she said, laughing. This seemed to be the solution to the problem: to stop fucking caring; to stop thinking constantly about the pointlessness of it all, and to just enjoy the moment. To just look at her beautiful hair, without thinking about it as a attribute of male attraction designed to find a healthy mate... just look at the beautiful hair. Stop caring about the fucking human race, about the entire god damn world and this random universe. What was I fighting really? What was my destination?

I had always thought that my hate and anger were pointless; after all, nothing could have a point. But I began to realize a solution: find a point. Self justify my own existence, find some arbitrary path and just live. Find a goal, find something to care about. Live, and enjoy, mindlessly, like everyone else. I should just talk about the weather, I should just sit around to eat, fuck, and sleep. Because that's all there fucking is. I've always considered these people idiots, who go about their day and don't think. But then again, maybe they understand everything, and I am still the idiot trying to still make sense of this world. Maybe they've got past questions such as why, and realized all there is in life is just eat sleep and fuck. Maybe I can't accept that, I can't get past there being nothing to hold on to. I am the fucking religious lunatic, one god short, and a little less moral. I need to forget this, and stop the fight. Stop thinking about this, stop wishing there was a reason and start believing there is. Grab on to a cause, even if it's as arbitrary

and pointless as politics and religion, and do something other than just think these repetitive thoughts.

Is a job the answer, is it some passion like religion, or is Jess? It doesn't matter; it's all the same really, all the same activities to just keep from thinking these thoughts. Thinking about the big picture, thinking about the world around you is too much, overwhelming. You've got to just focus on the daily activities, the to-do, and stop there. If ignorance is bliss, I'll be in heaven.

Just stare at the beautiful woman beside you, and enjoy. How ignorant and hateful I was before, where did it come from? Why did I have to hurt Kyle, simply because he was having a good time? Or Jordan... maybe out of jealousy, or maybe just random undirected hate.

"Jess, tell Jordan I am sorry." I say, looking up towards the ceiling. "There is nothing wrong with what he is doing... it was my problem."

"What the hell are you talking about..."

"I mean, he didn't deserve that, either did Kyle... I just, need to stop the random hate, the anger... I need to realize what I am really angry about."

"Heh alright" she answers.

"This is a change for me Jess. It's been a beautiful day."

I truly did feel refreshed, clean, even the very air tasted better.

She laughs. "Yeah, sounds like you're enjoying yourself. Speaking of which you got some more of that?"

"Yeah sure, I got a few more grams in my room. Why, think we could use some more?" I say, rubbing her stomach.

She laughs and pushes my hand away, "Yeah maybe later." I can hear her cell phone vibrating in her pocket, as she reaches to open it.

"Hey who are you talking to?"

"Nobody" she says, "why so paranoid Ivan?" she slightly slaps my arm as she types on her phone.

It might take me time, I thought, to understand the simple aspects of relationships. There was no need to ask her who she was calling, when you trusted someone enough and cared for them. I need to learn how to almost enter human society, to feel the simple pleasures and pains of normal life. People are not

fundamentally selfish, they do have morals and principles; I just need to see it in them.

Jess pushed herself up from the couch, and walked towards the front of the house. "Leaving already?" I asked. She kept walking towards the door. I stood up from the couch.

"Jess why are you leaving? Did I do something wrong? I have more if you..." I said, as I walked towards her with my arms open. Maybe I had been too forward, maybe the coke had made me too personal and emotional. I can't let this relationship just fade away when the coke is through. I need to keep this change.

She turned back towards me with a disgusted look, as if surprised I had came towards her. "Jess?" I said.

She quickly opened the door, and went outside.

I opened the door to go after her, trying to grab on to her arms as something stopped me.

Pushed back into my house, a massive figure came towards me.

"Fucking asshole" Jordan screamed, throwing his fist to my jaw, knocking me towards the ground. My head struck the floor as I fell, and tried to look up at my attacker. The sun from outside the door blinded me, as the outlined figure stepped over me, standing above me like a towering wild animal.

Kyle walked in beside him, bandage over his nose and anger in his eyes. I held my head as I looked up towards him.

"What the fuck!" I screamed, trying to reach Jess outside.

Jordan looked at Kyle and laughed. He bent over to say something. "What did you think she wanted to fuck you Ivan?"

I began to crawl myself closer to my room on my back, never looking away from Jordan's clenched fists. He came closer to me, still towering over me, finally pushing me down with his large army boot. I squirmed under him, trying to push his leg off of my chest, as he pushed deeper into my rib cage.

He turns his head to the door. "Where the fuck is it?"

"Jesus Christ just look in his fucking pockets, he's got more in his room" Jess yells back.

Kyle leans beside me, enjoying every moment of this. He grins and comes closer to my face, laughing at the very spectacle of me. Reaching into my pockets, grabbing my wallet and keys. He looks through my wallet to find the small bag, and

holds it up in his hands. "This it Ivan? This is what you got? There better be more in your room" he said, shaking his head.

Jordan's pushing leg began to ease as he reached for the beer bottle beside him. I knew what was coming, and all I could do was close my eyes and squirm under him.

Glass shatters over my face as the bottle breaks. I screamed in pain, a pathetic attempt at help and mercy. Too dazed to think, blood reaching my eyes, I just laid there waiting for another strike. "Jesus just shut the fuck up" I hear Jordan say, as he moves his boot from my chest to neck. The scream slowly turns to a whimper as it becomes harder to breath.

My hair is grabbed, pulled back as my head is twisted towards Kyle.

"Are you crying Ivan? Feeling a bit of pain?"

From the corner of my eye I can see Charlie walk through the backdoor, going towards my room. He doesn't even look at me. He goes straight for his goal.

"Don't fucking move, don't squirm you little bitch. You deserve this" Kyle spits in my face, as he waits for Charlie to find my stash.

I did deserve this, clearly I did. This was the exactly hit I needed, the wake up call to all the irrational bullshit thoughts of this day. How could I think for a second that this would end any differently, that this day would somehow be a change? Drug induced bullshit, feeding a chemical to my brain to give me a bit of hope before death. She was just going for the stash, just searching for another hit, they all are. Thank you for the hit Kyle, I needed that to reawaken, to realize what this life really is, to give me a point of contrast to the bullshit I had thought before.

From behind me I see Charlie run out from my hallway, stash in hand, seeming more happy than I've ever seen him. He doesn't even look at me, simply walks beside me out my front door.

Jordan gives once last push of his boot on my neck before letting go, letting him hear me whimper once more.

"Lets get the fuck out of here" Kyle simply shakes his head as he walks away, finding me a pathetic and unbearable sight to watch.

Tears begin to swell in my eyes as I go limp, wanting to be just left alone.

"Ivan!" Jordan says, forcing me to look at his intense expression. He leans over to the broken beer bottle beside me and picks it up, still hovering over me with complete domination.

Before I am able to grasp what's happening I feel the jagged glass hit my face. The hard sharp physical reality entering my flesh - quick forceful attacks one after another, each time moving to a different area with more and more intensity. I screamed at the top of my lungs at the pain, seeing only bits of saliva and blood fly out of my mouth. Not for help, I simply screamed at the pain like an animal trying to scare it off.

"Jordan what the fuck!" Jess yells, running in to stop the attack.

The strikes stop as I hear screaming all around me. Jordan is pushed off as others run for the door. The crying and screaming outside continues for a few moments, as I begin to feel my consciousness leaving me.

I struggled to breath as I rolled over, wondering if help would come. I thought about crawling to the nearest phone, or screaming for the chance of a neighbor hearing me, but the energy was beyond me.

Maybe they were regretting what had happened, maybe none of them wanted this to happen, but I am sure now they are just thinking how to save themselves.

There was nothing left to do but lie there and think.

Is this really what was meant for me? I woke each day of this life, went to school on some, drank others, and yet all it all came to this point. Kyle had it exactly right: I deserved this, I was a mistake, a mental illness, never meant to exist. This world created me as a fuck up, and now here it is correcting its mistake. I am not my own god, I never had a decision. There was simply me walking down the path already set out, me going through the motions and feeling the pain, watching it happen, all to this point. It was all set out to come to this, it doesn't make fucking sense.

But why would I ever expect rationality in this world? This life started from nothing, so wouldn't it make sense for it to end just as arbitrary, just as unusual and absurd. So what was this? Did I ever find meaning, did it ever make sense? Or was my entire life simply finishing the to-do list, going from item to item. Feeling hunger, feeling thirst, and now just this intense pain.

Is there a conclusion to this? Or is the only conclusion that it there is no conclusion and it's all just random bullshit, and anyone who said different is a fucking liar. I suppose this is the fate the kid mentioned, that it was all planned for this. I would spring into this world a few years ago, go to sleep and wake up a few hundreds times, then just lie here and wait for death. What else could there be, what else would I want? If the great celestial puppeteer, the great one true god that has been jerking me around, came up to explain this shit to me, would it make sense? Would I accept it? What if he told me my purpose was to reproduce and live a happy life, I would ask, why? What if he said the purpose was to find love, worship god, and be a good moral person, I would still ask... why? But he wouldn't say any of that. He would simply be completely fucking silent. There is no answer. There is no possible answer, why could I never get past that. Why couldn't I just stop thinking, enjoy the pointless pleasures of life, embrace something and actually feel something.

The physical pain was all I could feel now. A pointless endless reminder of immediate death. There was nothing I could do but just feel it, accept reality's last message's and embrace it. The pain never ceased.

Rain Ghosts

By Dustin Geeraert

I

I came here to escape. I have never been the one to take initiative or deal with problems; I am a caring person but I know I'm not a responsible one. At some point I lost control of my life, and the only way I can deal with being overwhelmed is to retreat.

So I am here - the rain-fortress at the ends of the earth, a place of never-ending bad weather, a place whose military roots have drowned in irrelevance. This will be the last place that the Fallen come - and they will come - because it is strategically useless. No one goes in or out of here except for the occasional supply convoy, and I can think of no better place to hide in the known world. Isolated, distant, drizzly, near-empty, and utterly desolate; this is a place of nothingness.

It's been a long journey here, months from the sun-scorched plains of the southern provinces. The plains were haunting, and I never felt safe. I haven't lost that sense of slow, inevitable pursuit – the feeling that I will look over the crest of a hill and see the corpse-men, the thrall, marching again. I thought that the fear and despair would fade as the distance grew between myself and Madrigal, the forsaken capital of the provinces. But it never did. Even in the jagged forests where I had to fend off starving wild animals, the immediate danger never overshadowed my dread of the Fallen. My mind is still fleeing, but there is no place to retreat now but the ocean.

The trail here was often overgrown, so that I lost my way several times. The countryside was unrelentingly bland: rocky in places, marshy in others, with the odd tree trying to keep a hold in the boggy ground. The colour seemed to drain as I journeyed from the sunny valleys past stony mountains and through the dull swamps of this dreary landscape. The trees became dark and dull, the rocks melancholy, and the sky claustrophobically covered in ever-present gray clouds. It seems that there is only one season in this part of the world, a

cold season in which parts of the ground are stiff or frozen, and rain, sleet or snow is never far away. Here I see everything in gray - a mournful haze has settled on the land, a cold fog of flat, murky despair.

My retreat has come to an end. At some time in the night, the rising moon's pale rays illuminated an image ahead of me, an outline that loomed out of the darkness: a ghostly fortress of ancient stone, surrounded by leaning wooden palisades, the ruined remnants of the past lingering on into this terrible time. I reached the gray gates a short time ago, but there was no watchman in the tower to welcome me. I cannot tell what time of night it is, but it is still dark outside. Perhaps the watchman is asleep.

This place looks even more decayed than what I envisioned it to be. Stones once well-cut have been dislodged, rain has dulled any sharp lines the place may have had, and there are holes in the masonry everywhere. In some places the wooden palisade-stakes are rotting at their bottoms, and the muddy ground is full of fallen stones and stagnant puddles. The glass windows have pieces out in several places - not one I can see is fully intact. I continue to wait outside, knocking on the large wooden gate and listening to the sound of distant thunder.

Through the light rain and a window's broken pane, I perceive a slight movement. Scarcely a moment later the heavy wooden gate creaks open and I am admitted inside. The gateman is a thin, wretched looking creature with a half-beard and a worried look about him. He is dressed in drab, worn clothing and looks like an extension of the worn-down building he emerged from. In a meek way he inquires how far lost I am that I arrived at the doorstep of this forgotten fortress.

I tell him I have been stationed here for an unknown period of time, and that this was done at my request. He looks at me curiously, and looks down at the soaked mud-stone ground and mutters in a low tone "Oh."

Without another word he grasps my horse's bridle and leads me into the front courtyard. The design of this place, I see, is very irregular - it must have been built before the days of standardized fortress designs and well-famed masons. Possibly, it was even built upon the site of an older fortress built by a different and more ancient people. I inquire.

Dranor says "This place's been here for s'long as

anyone can remember. I don't know when twas built, gotta say long ago though... as y'can see, it hasn't been kept in good r'pair..."

He ties up my horse in the stable, shoves some moldy food at it, and leads me up a flight of stairs of questionable stability and into a small room with a small, broken window on one wall opposite the door. The modest furnishing consists of a single worn bed and a woven matt on the floor. Before Dranor drifts away he tells me to see a man named Eirik some time tomorrow. There doesn't seem to be much of a schedule around here. As the thunder still rumbles, far off, I drift from gray consciousness to the blackness of sleep, drowning in memories...

Flame.

Fire falling, a black burning spectre off a bridge.

A fiery shadow, outlined against the gray sky, a blazing darkness falling forever.

Falling impossibly far, descending quickly, clearly, necessarily, into the plunging abyss.

The end, oblivion, stands in wait, like one of the great Eastern deaths the comet brought.

The crack of ice as the body hits. Fire and ice, the way life began. And the dark woods thunder and the black winds howl indifferently, and the red flame dies in the freezing shadows beneath the bridge as my life ends.

I awaken, and in that half-sleep realize that I have been dreaming. I always dream that, the fiery death. The truth of it I do not know. Perhaps the dream is just a product of the many defeats I have seen. I have not slept long. The sun is down most of the time in this region, but the minute hints of dawn, the small pale glow to the east, are inching their way across the ragged terrain and graying the window's panes from their former blackness. Restless as always, I stand and stagger my way outside into the chilly night-morning, a sort of in-between time. Strange things are rumoured to happen at times and places that escape definition.

I wonder what sort of people inhabit this place - did they request it, as I did? Are they hiding from something? Or were they just placed here and eventually succumbed to the

melancholy and atmosphere of resignation? Cowards, those who despair, or those who simply don't care?

I walk down the rough wooden steps and onto the muddy ground. I wander to the fortress doors, push one open, and step outside, looking out of the broken stone archway onto the stagnant pools and withered trees of the watery brown-gray landscape. The woods wind their way around the boulders and ponds, as if the individual trees are only the seeking roots of a larger tree.

The graying dawn becomes almost white at the horizon's tip, and first light reaches the fortress, if it is fair to call it that. There is a soft breeze up which stirs the sparser areas of tree and bush, but a stronger movement draws my attention.

Someone appears to be winding their way through the wounded trees, sliding with the deliberation of fever. The air is sound-starved, and I can distinctly hear a series of continuous, liquid footsteps.

A particular pair of trees ahead parts and stepping between them, willowy, is an extraordinary creature. A girl who at the same time seems completely out of place and yet shares the despairing, rain-drowned look of the gateman; who looks ethereal in the gray light. I judge her to be two or three years younger than myself, though what connection she has with the fortress or why she should be in the woods at this hour, I have no idea.

Peering through the feeble light, I try to catch more of her. Her hair is long and dark, and coils around her like the roots of a tree. She is pale like a spectre, but at the same time, seemingly full of strange life. Her movements are careful but graceful; I cannot decide if she is completely in her environment or utterly lost. Unaware of me as yet, she continues to wind her way through the mud-choked plain in front of the fortress, hair stirring in the slight breeze.

I cannot help but continue to stare at her. This girl is singularly beautiful. No sooner has this thought entered my mind than I notice a strange sound, a quiet sound, almost like sobbing. But the morning's stillness hangs heavily in the air, and I cannot be sure. By the time I realize she is crying she is very near the gates. She does not look up. She still hasn't seen me, it seems.

I don't wish to startle her, but that is exactly what happens. I try to speak in a voice not too loud, without an edge, and say "Are you alright?"

This does not work as she is already quite close by and she looks up quickly and violently, her eyes stained, and sucks in air deeply. She stares for a second, and before I can say anything the wooden door behind me creaks open loudly and the gateman appears. He puts his arm on her back and moves her inside, where she seems to disappear, and the gateman reappears beside me. He looks at me.

Before I can even say anything, he says "Never mind her."

I open my mouth as if to speak, but I say nothing, and after a moment I only wander back up to my quarters in the hopes of sleeping some before the sun comes fully up...

II

I awaken much later than usual; I attribute this to my restless night and so many weeks on the road. I'm stiff and sore despite getting an amount of rest almost ridiculous compared to my guarded, fear-haunted nights in the bog on the way here.

I clamber down the rickety stairs and into the open square, still touched by light rain. Out here there seems to be little activity going on, despite the fact that the time is approaching midday. The weather, of course, is overcast, and the day still has a misty, uncertain feel to it.

I approach a man I have not seen before who is working in a smithy. I inform him that I am a new soldier here, and ask him where I might find Eirik.

I am guided through the muddy fortress-town to an open avenue, in which dark streaks of dirt and water draw together and lead to a soiled and grayish ramp, itself terminating at the door of a building of stone and rotting stucco - the place which I am told serves as the home of Eirik, foremost among the fortress's leaders.

At this point I thank the smith and he departs down the soggy pathway back to his occupation. I knock several times on the old wood door, and before long a man appears in the doorway and asks my business.

This is Eirik. I explain to him my stationing here for possibly ever. He is tall and well-filled, and though gray and unshaven like the rest of the men I have seen, he carries himself with a bit of pride which is probably what sets him apart from the other inhabitants of this oubliette.

From the look of him and the weapons, plan papers, and war-focused volumes I see as I enter his dwelling, I can tell that Eirik is the acknowledged military leader of the outpost. When this place comes under attack, as it inevitably will, his competence and skill should make for a formidable defense, despite the torn flags and worn structures. A brown, sturdy table serves as centerpoint to his stony room, and sitting around it are two men, presumably other leaders. Eirik and I both fall into two of several vacant chairs placed haphazardly around the table.

He asks if I have a specialty of military significance, or any skills that place me above an average soldier from a commander's point of view. "Nothing," I tell him.

"And you served in the armies of the provinces.."

"In the south, Covenant, Tyr, and Madrigal..." I reply.

"Madrigal." He states the word, flat, empty. The whole room feels the despair that word brings.

"You were there." One of the other two, a red-bearded tall man, looks at me.

"I saw the siege." Stillness fills the air. "Escaped the fall of the city."

Silence reigns in the room, to the point where the light drizzle of rain outside, forever wearing the world down, is audible.

"Right," says the tall man, grabbing his companion by the shoulder as they both rise to depart. "We were just discussing strategy..."

Without another word they are both out the door.

Eirik is silent for a moment, and then looks up. "Can I ask you something?"

"What?" I say.

"Why did you come here... here of all places?"

I don't know what I'm supposed to say to that.

I say simply "This is the ends of the earth, is it not? Some men cannot live elsewhere."

"You look like this place had its effect on you long before you came here... not two days here and already you look as if you belong..."

"I needed to leave..." I don't know what there is to say about my life past that.

"I see," says Eirik. This seems to be the end of our conversation.

I turn and find my way out of the battered room, pushing the creaky door back into place behind me and stepping down into the muddy streets. Despite this place being itself, I still have the urge to make a thorough exploration of the perimeter. I had expected that the fortress' guardians would appoint someone to do it for me. But apparently this is not a priority. I wonder what is a priority around here. Probably nothing.

I wander down, through the muddy alleyways and between old buildings, until I reach one of the outer walls, gray and bleak. I follow this wall, its rough textural stone and soggy base, until I come to a rampart. The soldier standing there seems in little hurry to move out of my way, though he offers nothing by way of resistance or even question. He simply nudges vacantly out of the way and once I have begun my ascent, stoops back into position, leaning on the stones. I do not know what thoughts run through the mind of a man like that as the rain falls in front of him.

I step further up the rampart and find myself in the midst of a series of walkways, inexplicably constructed and now decaying. Ramps open to me on the left and right, while windows cast cold light through the outer wall and parapets line its uppermost edge. I take the ramp on the right, pulling myself up the slanted stonework. Running down the wall at irregular intervals, square towers are perched. I pass through one, the cold breezes winding through its windows and ruinous walls. I look back down onto the gray-brown scene beneath me. People stand and stare, the mud, the houses, the rain; it is all one. I imagine what would happen if I leaped off. Perhaps I would break some bones, perhaps even death. It is quite a ways down, but the mud looks deep in several places. I recall avoiding those when I was walking beneath. Nothing moves as I gaze, nothing except the rain.

I make my way one rampart further up and onto a higher walkway, where through the parapets I am able to get a

glimpse of the surrounding terrain. The countryside around here is hardly a surprise; black, wizened trees, gray mud, pale, broken stones, and in the hazy distance, the bluish forms of faraway mountains. The fortress itself is ugly: gray and black rocks jutting out into the sprawling mud-mire, sharpened wooden stakes streaked with yellow and black stabbing outwards: this is a hostile place, hostile and desolate.

The air is colder up here, and off in the overcast distance I can see a shimmering light that must represent the cloud-filtered sun. The taste in my mouth is bitter. Passing between parapets, I imagine the inevitable: a time when men will brace themselves against these stone barriers and then step into the clear to blast arrows, stones, and anything else remotely harmful at the sea of walking corpses that will be bear up against these walls and pile itself until it threatens to blacken out the very sky. The unstoppable, all-engulfing darkness brought by the endless corpse-men, the thrall, and their awful masters, the Lords of the Fallen.

I continue to climb. The irregular fortress seems like it once may have been formidable: but then that applies to so many things. Damp staircases lead me at strange angles to higher towers, manned by the occasional archer or lone, brooding scout. Some turn to look as I pass. Others do not move at all, as listless as the thrall they will have to fight. I pass through higher ruined turrets, rugged and angular.

Finally, through an opening in an imposing dark square tower, I round a corner and step over the bleak wooden bridge to the great tower, the fortress' highest point. Once inside I slowly move up the broken stairwell, dragging myself through the darkness. Drops of water fall from above, while the wind howls and dull light throws itself through the holes between loose bricks.

Finally I reach the uppermost aperture, and emerge again into gray light beneath the brooding clouds, upon the shimmering stones, slick with rainwater. For once I am somewhere not claustrophobic, but rather above the earth. I can see in every direction.

I look to the east, and can see from the muddy plains of the marsh all the way into the blue-gray distance where ragged mountains rise. To the west black-blue forest flows in and grasps at the gray bogs. North, shadows fall as the mud

becomes more desolate; everything dies out slowly and the land itself terminates at the black, tortured banks of the North Sea.

I look South last, for it is a direction I have cause to fear. But I see nothing, nothing but bleak marshes and plains, and the weathered path I followed here, tracing the mountains parallel as it fades into the distance, gray with falling water. All around me is the open air: nothingness. Beneath me, the tortured earth, awaiting its final rape at the hands of the Fallen. Supporting me, the ruinous, rain-wracked structures of men, built ages ago in different times. Inside me, the despair of having seen the Fallen and their work firsthand. There is nothing more to be seen up here. I stumble back down the stairs and out onto the open ramparts.

III

"How did things come to this?" I ask as a way of initiating conversation with the red-bearded man from Eirik's room.

He turns from his mug, eyes bleary with intoxication, and grunts "We are not sages, soldier, and know none who are. Death is a mystery as much as life."

His companion, perhaps less drunk, comments "Historians and chroniclers have recorded the events, and thus it is easy to follow the chain and see how things did indeed come to this."

I signal the man behind the tavern counter, a large fellow with dull eyes and thick whiskers, to bring me something strong.

Reifnir and Rurik introduce themselves to me as Eirik's immediate subordinates, Reifnir being the red-haired man while Rurik is the name of the shorter, more stable fellow. "Like everything else," says Reifnir, "It is the gods."

Draining his cup and staring into its bleak emptiness, he continues "I have never known much of the true workings of the world, but it seems to me that we have been completely, utterly forsaken."

As the tavern-man sets down my drink on the grimy table, Reifnir grabs it and drains it in one long draught. He hands the man some dirty coins without a word. As the man turns to return to the counter, I say "I'd still like a drink" and give him the appropriate coinage myself. Not that money could really

matter: in the current situation, the idea of economics is little more than a bad joke. When there are devils at your door, you care little for your wealth.

"I am only a simple man," I say, "and I hate this." It seems to me that something so ridiculous as this, so unbelievable and yet so immediate, should at least have some explanation so that I could grasp at it as a comfort, so that I could at least know the reason why I myself, and everyone I have ever known, friend or foe, must be destroyed by darkness. "I ask not for the tide to be turned" I continue, "For I know that that is impossible. I only want to understand."

"You'll find nothing of that kind in a thrall's axe," mutters Rurik. "And that is all you will ever know. Your romantic fantasies about having a right to exist, having a right to an answer, which have refused to die inside you, will still end when your life itself flickers out."

I understand that Rurik has let all hope go, and in that way is yet worse than the alcoholic, despair-drenched Reifnir, who shares with me an internal rage at what has happened to our world. "We do not deserve this." I say simply in reply.

"That," Rurik stares at me with cold eyes as he responds, "is irrelevant."

Another two drinks appear for Reifnir and myself, and I hope that he won't feel obliged to help himself to mine this time. Rurik does not seem particularly interested in drinking obscene amounts, being in a type of despair beyond any self-pity. He has, it seems, forgotten how to flinch.

"A toast to the dead," slurs Reifnir.

"The ones who stay that way, you mean. Gwyon, for example?" Rurik responds.

Through another half-glass, Reifnir adds "This man has no qualms with stating things blatantly, as they are."

Rurik seems happy to explain further. "Gwyon, Reifnir's brother, disappeared a week ago. Since we haven't seen any of the enemy around here at all, yet, it's fairly certain that he wandered off some dark afternoon to go down or hang himself."

I choke a bit on my strong ale. "Why not simply wait for the Fallen to do it?"

"Self-slaughter is fairly common around here," speaks Rurik flatly, with a significant glance at Reifnir. "We just burn the bodies that we find."

I have a sickening vision of bodies hanging from the withered trees in the wilderness, and recall awakening one morning in the bog to find an old woman's carcass in a ditch beside my camp. Her body had been just beyond the firelight all night, and I hadn't known it until the morning.

Reifnir, head now lolling, mutters simply, "Gwyon. He had had enough."

I can't stand such wallowing despair on one hand and such gleeful cynicism on the other. Rurik can torture someone else; Reifnir can continue to drown his sorrows. I finish my drink and step across the decaying floor to the half-open, mud-caked door.

Outside the door, I stand in the tavern's dull shade, hiding from the bleak, broken sky. There are only a handful of people in sight, mostly battered civilians. I wonder how they ended up in this place; old men and women staring at the thick blanket of clouds, perhaps remembering the lost light of the distant past. Time and experience in this world have worn down all humanity a quintessence of gray despair.

There is one soldier in view, one much like the ramp-guard I saw earlier. He stands there, still in the rain, leaning against a stone wall. I can't see his eyes because his helmet casts deep shadows on his face, but I do not doubt that they are as indifferent and neutral as the rest of his face. This man betrays no expression: to the best of my thought I decide that this was because he has no expression to betray: he does not care. He simply exists. I know despair: I do not know apathy.

When the thrall come, I will once again feel desperation and hatred, not hatred directed at the mindless corpse-men who will surround and destroy me, or even at the Lords of the Fallen, their enigmatic, unknowable masters. My anger is only at the circumstance that has placed me on this earth at this time, in this situation.

I have fought against the Fallen my entire life, and yet have never even seen one of their leaders. They are said to be sorcerers of infinite ability, ancient and unstoppable. Many say that they themselves are dead or were resurrected from death, and act only as conduits in a cycle of light and dark far beyond

the comprehension of men. I cannot hate them, for I do not even know if they think. Perhaps they are mere instruments of the Dark, like the armies of unthinking corpse-men that they command. For if the force which prophets and madmen call the Dark truly exists, and indeed seeks not to conquer the world but instead to destroy it – then the Lords of the Fallen and their thrall are surely servants or at least instruments of the Dark. But whatever the explanation, if there is one, I hate the world that lets them do this to us.

I can tell that this man will never know my anger. He will never care.

I walk up to him and ask him "You have a post to guard?"

He does not look annoyed or even surprised, and without a movement of his unshaven jaw, replies "No."

"What are you doing here, leaning against this wall?"

"Leaning against this wall."

"What's your name, soldier?"

"Hafdan."

I stare at him for another few moments, that bleak face, then wander away.

A few ragged blocks later, I run into Eirik, who seems to be inspecting the buildings and perimeter for weak points and damaged masonry. If that's the case, he'll be outside for a long time - my casual viewing of the fortress has revealed more stone broken than intact.

"Ah, you again" he greets me.

"Had a drink with your officers" I respond.

"Did you? An optimistic two, aren't they?"

"I left after one drink."

A pause follows, then I ask "What are *you* doing out here? Everyone here... it's like they're dead already."

"You're like that too, remember? I don't see you fighting hopeless battles in the south."

"I just see things the way they are. I've seen more than enough of the battles of the south. But again, why inspect the fortress, why repair its weak points, why bother to defend it at all? Why delay the inevitable?"

Eirik stands, listening. He looks at me through the light rain and says, "I resist them on principle."

"Well," I can only say "You're a stronger man than I, and most I've met."

"In case you're interested," he says, "The unit's barracks is four blocks past me. Meet the men if you want."

"Are they anything like another man I just met, a certain Hafdan?" I ask.

He grumbles something I take for a confirmation that they are, and wanders off to continue his surveying.

Eirik, though older and likely scarred by many more battles than me, represents something to me that I either lost or have never had. There is nowhere to retreat from here but the Black Shores of the North Sea. Like myself and all others here, Eirik merely waits for doom: but a spark of spirit lives in him: he will meet that doom. Perhaps I could find a similar spark in myself, and stop running for one time.

IV

There is nothing worth obtaining in the world in the brief time we have left in it. News came this morning that the Fallen had broken those armies that guarded the Stair of Grief, last and northernmost of the three passes through the great mountain range to our east. With Madrigal destroyed and now the Stair of Grief open, all the cities of the North are certainly doomed.

The war in the West, a useless and ugly struggle of nearly a quarter century is now lost for men. None could say otherwise. And even worse, with the mountain pass open, the vanguard of the northern armies of the Fallen are within less than a day of our position. The fortress could fall this very night. A convoy of horrified refugees arrived to bear to us the grim news this morning, as if we could not have guessed by their mere appearance. I left shortly after they arrived, for I did not like to see such mass confusion and panic. Apparently, there are some among us who have just lately begun accepting the stark truth of the advance of the Fallen, and the inevitable triumph of the Dark.

I have been walking to the Black Shores through the dead, stunted woods in the gray rain. It has reached midday, and the muddy banks are visible ahead of me, through perhaps another hour of rocky, drenched terrain. Though I remained

outwardly calm during the arrival of the survivors of the mountain battle, the events of this morning did have an iron impact on me: they forced to the forefront of my mind the knowledge I have had all my adult life: this day, this hour, this breath, may be my last. The Fallen will not wait to devour the remaining cities of the West: they will flow into the provinces like a devouring river, our armies drowning in an endless onslaught of thrall. Our civilization has mere days. And behind all of this must lie some horrible undercurrent of fate, some twisted decree of unknown gods, our guardians gone and every hour numbered.

I walk to the shores because I cannot handle the cringing confusion of fortress activity: cowards, snivelers, fools. Perhaps I have the same concerns as them: perhaps I do not want to die, either. The difference is that I do not bother others with useless prayers, screams or cries. I have accepted my own irrelevance.

I walk through low, twisted bushes long dead, long grasses that once may have shimmered gold but now lie dull, stepping over mud-caked rocks and black grime. Rain is scarce but I see a storm approaching in the distance. I move almost subconsciously, as my thoughts intensify I pay less attention to my surroundings. I foolishly consider the same problem that can never be solved: the one with no solution: why? Why is this happening to our world?

I remember all the lost faces, comrades, brothers, family, all gone. Some dead, some lost, some remote. Most perished during the fateful night Madrigal was sacked. Walking corpses flooded the narrow streets. That was a night few survived.

Perhaps I despise the refugees because I have seen far more war than they, yet I lament it not because, due to the very extent of what I have seen, I know it is useless. Perhaps my reason for leaving the fortress for this walk to the shores of death is really only one more retreat, to the very last place a man could ever go.

Finally, the ground becomes soggy and through broken branches I see the shimmering, gray surface of the sea. The water is choppy, rough at the command of the wind. Dead wood lies all over the banks, smashed logs and dark shapes amongst the tall, soaked marsh-grass. A small clearing in the brush past a long swath of puddles appears ahead as the grass opens,

and having walked all morning on little, haunted sleep, I choose it for a place of rest.

Darkness and gray swirl together in the distant ceiling of the sky. Thunder rumbles, and less audible sounds make themselves known - the low wind moving swiftly through the grass, the innumerable impacts of tiny droplets of rain, the lapping of the silver waves. The clouds move slowly, trembling with the cold of the high wind, and drift into one another through the dull air. The rain is hardly noticeable, betrayed by minute sounds only, themselves only known to the ear by the mournful silence.

I lay in the wet grass, staring at the gray sky. These may be the last moments of reflection I have. Though the events of my lifetime seem simple, I believe they are a result of something both complex and incomprehensible for a normal person. Old folk-tales I heard as a child, before I ever knew of the Fallen, are full of terrors and wonders - the dead rising, communication with dead forefathers, men changing into animals, and strange races from distant lands. I gave the legends as much credence as anyone could afford: old tales certainly had some grain of truth in them. And tales of wars, and conquest and glory I thought were only a form of exaggerated history.

It was first hinted to me what war meant when I was taken by my uncle and the other men of our village to the cemetery, where we removed the remains of our ancestors and burnt them in a hastily prepared pyre, allowing the blaze to spread through the village and to our farms and fields as something unkind whispered, translucent like choking black smoke, in the air. I remember looking back at the thick, poisonous fumes and seeing horrible faces emerging from it, the tortured faces of the soulless thrall.

When we arrived at Madrigal, exhausted and starving, we were treated badly. "Scorched earth won't work - you don't understand," I recall a commander saying to my uncle. "We were serious about those bodies," said another.

Thinking about those times, when things were as yet - uncertain - I realize how strange the old lore really was. Myths, monsters, magic - it was not the fantastic elements that made the old tales seem so far from reality. I have seen the walking dead, and I have heard tales from huddling, wretched, crazed

men in dark corners of ruined camps, stories that were great and terrible, and which I wished with all my being to dismiss, but could not. It is the fact that the old stories never seemed to give one a grasp on the true nature of the things they were telling of which causes me to view them so skeptically now.

War is one such thing. In those fictions, there was conquest, ambition, glory, and battles were epic clashes of will between worthy adversaries. That is not war. War is filthy, cold, wet, bleeding. War is friends sinking into mud, drowning in disease-poisoned sinkholes and being powerless to stop it. War is bloated corpses, tortured landscapes, weary, awful faces and the stench of carrion.

And magic. In the stories magic is a benevolent force, wielded playfully by enchanters and their students, something men can grasp and control. Yet that is not magic. Magic is not a tool to be used by men but rather a force which controls living beings rather than the reverse. I have seen what effects magic has had on our world. Corpses animated by implacable darkness. Thundering floods, ribbons of fire streaking down from the sky, solid earth melting and sickly fumes burning where once life grew. The very elements were always against us, manipulated by a vicious enemy.

Occasionally, when it was late into the black, shrouded nights of my late childhood, I would hear a story that was truly frightening. The one that always shook me was about a race of terrible cannibals from the distant past, vicious servants of the Dark who nearly drove humanity to extinction. When in a particularly malicious humour, my uncle would tell me that this story – in which entire cities of men were devoured - was based on historical fact, and that at some time in the eons of the world's history, a race that horrible had really walked the same earth as us.

I was reassured whenever I became truly frightened that such stories were simply catharsis for the morbid living in men's minds. But as I see the world around me now, I realize the truth. It was the common story, that of enchantment and glory, that was untruth. Those were the stories people told to make themselves feel better, to shield their minds from the realities of the world. I do not know for how long my village had known about the coming of the Dark, perhaps the entirety of my childhood. In any case, the tales of glory and light were lies.

Even as all the earth east of the mountains was ravaged and made into lifeless desert, I was told the tales any naive child hears. And it was the stories of horrible things, of desecration and destruction of life itself that were true. I have seen their truth with my own eyes – Madrigal, Covenant, Tyr.

The gray above swirls into black and my eyes close. I sink into the memory of my maturation. I huddled with my family and fellow villagers in a miserable refugee camp set up in the filthiest area of Madrigal for months, while every day brought more refugees to swell the ranks of the hungry and dispossessed. I volunteered for service in arms simply to get out of that hole, even though I was not of age. But the desperate armies of the West were glad for anything with two arms, and so I was brought in without delay.

Training every day was grueling, but I was allowed to roam the city in my off-hours and stand watch upon the walls, giving me the sizable advantage of knowing what was going on beyond the city, and receiving some fresh air rather than the dank, stale, sweaty thick air of the hot, grungy camp. But one day the haze of smoke reaching us from locations weeks away cut my fresh air and my insight into events ahead of others: it was plain to all that cities were being burned. And then it became concrete in my mind: I would have to defend the city against the terrible forces of the Fallen with my own arms.

I was present the day the messenger arrived, on a bloodied black horse hardly standing. The Gate of Storms, greatest of Madrigal's entranceways, was opened. The messenger, exhausted, whispered something into the nearest soldier's ear, and then collapsed, falling off of his horse onto the muddy ground. Several soldiers and townspeople, alarmed, rushed to his side and lifted him by his shoulders. His head dropped. He was dead.

In the distance, between the mountain peaks, a thick and vile darkness began to appear, and it seemed as if the clouds themselves trembled at wrath of the Fallen. The central pass to the West, Seven Gates, had been lost.

The armies of the Fallen came to Madrigal within a week, but were repulsed after a battle that lasted four days without pause. The leader of this first army, we heard, was a she-demon that men called only "Shiver." Apparently, the messenger's persistence was what allowed the city to weather

this first attack, for she was driven off through information he had carried. I have never understood sorcery.

After the waves of thrall slowed to a trickle, the surviving soldiers, myself among them, were organized to carry the bodies outside of the city and burn them. I remember the stench. Outside the gate were the melted, smashed bodies of thousands upon thousands of thrall. The region in front of the city, once a series of fields and encampments, was now literally a valley of corpses. We added our own dead to the hills of human remains, and spent days traversing the area, covering it with oil. A week after the attack, we set fire to the oil and watched a pyre of flesh burn. Vast swaths of country emerged from that summer as fields of ash.

The Fallen next pursued a campaign leading up to a second attack on the great city by removing barriers to Madrigal - coastal cities that could have sent in flanking armies, military encampments on the plains, ports to cut access to supplies. Madrigal sent most of its military south, to aid in protecting key points – most notably, Covenant and Tyr. Both were razed to the ground as we ran away, vastly outnumbered. The fact that I survived these campaigns was stupendous. I saw thousands die.

The armies of the Dark returned to Madrigal three months after the first attack, and this time there was no chance of our forces holding the city. In the failing light, the animate corpses marched mechanically toward Madrigal, being lit aflame, torn apart by arrows and hacked to pieces atop the city walls. But they were without end. The exhausted remnants of the provincial armies were outmatched, and it was clear that Madrigal, the greatest city in the west, was lost to men. Corpses climbed the walls, slipped through smoldering gates, seeped through the cracks in the city's defenses. And then all at once there were more of them than us inside the city. I ran. The streets were filled with screaming people, being cut down by grimy axes in the late summer night. The air was saturated with thick, choking smoke. I wove through frenzied crowds and past gutted houses, seeking the edge of the city. I could *feel* the Dark's presence like never before – someone or something of great potency was present. Swords were useless. I ran.

In the supreme unrest of my mind, I awaken. My dream of the darkness of Madrigal fades and the overcast sky

reappears through my bleary eyes. I am on the edge of the earth. A bank of dark clouds looms closer above the water, hostile with threatening thunder. The silver, muddy sand merges silently with the dark waters, as the rain falls.

There is a legend about the Black Shores, that beyond them once there was a great realm. The people of this realm angered the gods, and it is said, and in a great earthquake their kingdom fell beneath the waters and was destroyed. My thoughts rest on this Drowned Kingdom, lost below the sullen darkness of the sea, somewhere away from these shores, beyond the thunderclouds and beneath the murky waves.

I notice a few worn blocks of ancient stone half-buried in the mud: the ruins of what must have been a watchtower when this land was exposed: this shore, a cliff: the cold sea, a valley. Then came the elements, tireless, and loss and fate and death, and an entire land and its people were erased.

This, though long past if it ever truly happened, is very much like what is happening now, to us. We are dying, drowning, fading away. And will one day a man stand on cold shores or between mournful mountain peaks, wondering about our civilization and our lives, as he sees the long-ruined evidence of our existence? Will Madrigal leave a legacy of lonely stone, remembered by a scattered few? Or will there truly be no one left living, will the Dark's success be absolute?

I receive no answer but the unsettling rumbling of dark, implacable thunder.

What could anyone say at this point? Something meant to reconcile us to our fate? Some defiant cry, as the sea of corpses closes in and we begin to drown? Or some sniveling complaint to divinities, fellow men or the universe in general - as if anyone or anything would give a damn for us. The gods are unknowable, distant or dead. Men have done all they can and it has not sufficed.

I do not pretend to have the defiant strength I see in men like Eirik, those few strong ones who are never fully affected by despair yet acutely aware of reality. But I do not scream in frustration at what is happening. I do not whine and snivel in despair, like weak cowards do. Why reveal weakness, why revel in patheticness now? I have long since accepted the every-day presence of death, walking on countless feet towards me every day that I have. It is only those who have not truly

seen the Dark who can believe that they personally are important and that this cannot be happening to them. Fools and cowards, bereft of strength or dignity.

I depart for the Fortress.

Confrontation haunts the trembling air. The weakly shadows of final hopes and dreams seem to fade behind me, like ghosts in the rain. The clouds cast long shadows over the land like the great gray wings of a carrion-bird. Gulls and crows glide and circle, fluttering through the fog. Every step I take is a statement: I will see the Fallen today. And I will meet my end.

V

I move through the cold fields and into the soaked brush. In the distance I see the fortress, tiny in midst of the vast unknowable wilderness, and the sky fades from overcast white to the faltering, hazy columns of gray rain. I see the mountains rise to the east, barely visible in the drizzly distance, as my path leads me through the dripping scrub bush.

I have traversed nearly half the distance to the fortress after somber hours of solemn silence when I meet the wandering girl I saw the morning of my arrival. This confirms that my mind is still sound, as I had doubted her existence earlier, thinking the events of that strange, mist-haunted morning only a hidden dream. She is again moving through the wilds, hair dark with rain-water, in the nondescript, ragged clothes that civilians and off-duty soldiers wear. This time she sees me from afar, and stops still, with a frightened look. I know nothing about her: she knows nothing of me but that I am yet another grim, world-weary man of the sword. My story is nothing but a meaningless variation on the life-tale any soldier would tell, if inclined and not yet silenced by the Dark. It is the same tired story of defeat and retreat. What can I say?

I begin to move slowly, carefully nearer, making no sound in the vast open silence. Her silhouette becomes more distinct as I approach through the soaked long grass, and I am able to make contact with her mournful gray eyes.

My intention is only to speak with her, I suppose out of curiosity and longing, but how to convey this is indeed a problem. She hovers hesitant in the field, and through the rain I stare at her, my mind running over what I could say. It strikes

me that I must appear like Hafdan – unshaven face, dirty silhouette, eyes hidden in shadow – anonymous, apathetic. Externally perhaps we are one and the same - and I am without the true communication which would reveal that I do care what becomes of life, even as I fail and fall forever.

Her vulnerable form shakes in the uncaring weather, quivers and fades away. She is afraid – of me, of men, of the monsters marching to our gates to stand above our corpses. A gust of wind blasts walls of water between us, and she vanishes to the north. I guess her to be moving onward to the Black Shores - the cold, foreboding and final edge of the earth – to sink into the cold depths, to return to the water from whence life came. I have said nothing, for what is there to say? She fades to a shimmering shadow with which real communication is impossible. I cannot save her or see her, know her or stop her. She is gone now, beyond reach. And I must return.

Our fate is the same, but I choose to die by steel rather than drowning. Perhaps it is out of admiration for Eirik that I go to the fortress, or perhaps it is to hold to the rules and obligations of men, who have built themselves up in this world on agreements, arrangements, and rules – captains and soldiers, kings and commoners. The world of men now is crushed, in its last gasps, so adhering to its rules seems meaningless. Perhaps I go merely out of instinct to my death, to try to stop it though it is impossible, our armies stubbornly, irrationally clinging to life on mere inherent habit. But maybe it is just an action I intend to mean something to myself, only to confirm or create a way of thinking of myself – of resolving the situation the world has put me in within my own mind. I have been running, retreating, losing for months, for years, for decades. A lifetime of defeat. I am sick of it, as I am sick of my life. My approaching death even has an aspect of relief in it – in its utter inevitability. I will die alongside fighting men, alongside men like myself. Perhaps that means something, but I suspect that the scraps of conversation since my arrival have held no meaning nor true communication.

And all too soon I am arrived. The soft gray shadow of the Rain Fortress seems to approach me, floating towards me in a dreamlike haze. My own will now is lost, for all choices lead to the same end result. The haggard, crumbling stone gates

loom over me and pass around me. I am within the walls. The place is unchanged, still decaying and fading and ceasing to be, still cold and grimy. Listless civilians trudge through the dirt. The Dark is coming. But this is not Madrigal. Madrigal was immense and hostile, twisted and tormented by panic and fear. Here there is so little fear left. There is nowhere left to run.

Have I waited my lifetime for this?

The soldiers are all on the ramparts. The armories are empty. The meager battle supplies have been rationed throughout the fortifications roughly evenly, though certainly we will have nothing but our swords left with which to face the enemy far before the battle is ended. I move between the sagging, rain-weighted houses and to the sinking streets in the centre of the fortress. I intend to find Eirik, and to live up to something as best as I am able. His door is locked, and on it I read this simple notice:

*To all who can read: Off-duty soldiers, you are now on duty. You must immediately gather all relevant supplies and man the southeastern ramparts. Civilians I present with three choices. You may join the fortress detachment on the ramparts in defense. You may stay within the centre of the fortress and keep clear of the enemy for the duration of the fighting. You may leave the fortress and attempt to seek refuge elsewhere. All three options will lead to death within the next few days.
Your commander,
Eirik*

I walk back down that ugly street, toward the southern gates and up the untrustworthy stairs to my lodgings. I open my bags and don my mail-shirt, and gather my bow, sword and shield. I look at the room which has been my sleeping-place for a short time. It is bare and ugly. I have thought about everything for so long, and I have solved nothing. Considering the rooms, the ramparts, the ruins, the rain. I step back out into the open air, stumble down the stairs to the murky ground. I pass the unconscious form of Reifnir, slumped over in a muddy gutter. I find the ramp to the stone walls above.

Soon I am upon the wall. I take a place standing in a line of soldiers. It is late afternoon, and the dull light is faltering .

I see out into the gray distance, all the soldiers lined up, parapet by parapet, standing, staring. All look. None hope.

And the creeping blackness appears, as we knew it would. Out of the cold curtain of wearying weather are unmasked the forms of the Fallen. The mindless walking dead - the thrall. Held upright and together by some force furious at life, these rows and rows of corpses march. All the bodies we couldn't burn, that we had to leave behind for the enemy to collect and claim. Anything cohesive enough to walk animated in arms against its former fellows. Their abhorrent forms seep through the low brush of the landscape slowly, directly toward us.

The grim soldiers stand in silence as the forces of the Fallen approach. They enter archery range. Every man with a bow raises it and repetitively fires at the cluster, and small storms of arrows strike the thrall. The projectiles continue pointlessly, and the thrall do not slow or stop. Time seems to slow as they approach the gate by which first I entered this place such a short time ago. It is barred, and stones are piled inside. The thrall shake the gate and pile themselves against it. Soldiers heave stone blocks off of the ramparts into fall the crowd below, crushing ragged bodies. I use my last arrow. Then a scalding smoke drifts in over the ramparts and I see my comrades wither, go mad or kill themselves before my eyes. A foul wordless whisper accompanies the smoke, and the screams of men dying do not drown it out. The gate trembles further. The men near me duck under spears and arrows from the crowd. I am forced from my position as explosions begin to hit the walls.

It is impossible to separate the smoke of sorcery from that caused by the flaming projectiles flung at the fortress. The men on the walls are battling thrall that are piling up and climbing through gaps. The gates finally yield and the lines break. Chaos. I help to hack down the corpses climbing up, as part of a handful of men still holding this section of the ramparts. To my right a stream of thrall pours in through the gaping gate and scattered soldiers resist. Civilians are cut down or flee to starve in the wilderness. And then I fall from the wall and roll halfway down a rampart. Stunned, I glance up and see my maimed comrades stumbling away from a section of missing wall, and the thrall climb through and hack them down.

I have no sword. I try to stand but a leg is numb. I cannot tell if it is mud or blood that stains my garments. I lose balance and fall down the remaining stairs, landing near the ugly puddle. I can hear Eirik yelling through the smoke, trying to bring all the men to the breach at the gate. Some of the houses are burning, but the fire never lasts long, worn down by the rain like everything else.

The scene before me is confusion and chaos. I try to stand again, and manage to find a sword near a fallen soldier who is still twitching in the dirt. Through the smoke I see a front: what's left of the soldiers, in a line formation to keep the thrall from swelling past the gate. It is hopeless. Eirik's yells lead me to the front, and I see men desperately hacking at the walking dead. I am quickly among them, fifty ragged men beating and slashing at hundreds upon hundreds. The noise - screaming, moaning, the clashing of metal and the sickening sound of steel on bone - fills my head. The ugly, twisted faces of the corpses I fight, no light in their eyes, remind me of all my haunted nightmares. Fire falling.

To my left Eirik creates a gap and rushes forward, beating back the corpses with furious strength. And we all move forward, striking and stabbing. My shield has taken ten hits for every one I've been able to connect. The crowd pushes from side to side as the thrall thicken and heave towards us. Eirik, arms raised, brings his sword down into them time and time again, hacking them to pieces. The ground is slick with blood.

And suddenly the smoke thickens and I grow weak. And I am not the only one. A man beside me, mid-swing, drops and is consumed by a thrall's axe. The whispers are now louder than anything else. All on the edge of the group fall immediately and the thrall move in closer. Eirik, still standing, is hit over and over by bludgeoning axe blows. A wordless yell escapes him and then he is gone. I can hardly see between all the heads in the crowd what is happening. Then as one we turn from the chaos of the killing mob to see him. One of the Lords of the Fallen. A being with the appearance of a huge man, completely encased in plate armour, head hidden by a thick horned helmet, with a thick brown cape trailing behind him. The ranks of thrall make way and the being steps to the fore. There are only a handful of warriors left standing. The thrall loom over us, hit us, push us down, their decaying faces mechanically apathetic. I

am cut and beaten with axes, head ringing, body numb. Suddenly I am looking up from the ground. There is a clearing around the soldiers' fallen bodies. I struggle to stand, but only make it to my hands and knees. The rain falls and hits the ground in front of huge steel boots. I see the dark flowing cape and the huge form silhouetted against the ugly overcast sky. The Fallen Lord holds a massive, forking sword. I look at the dark helmet, impossible to know what face, if any, lies behind it and knowing that seeing would still provide no explanation. I've struggled to understand and I now know absolutely that I never will. The huge forked blade is raised. I know not to pray.