

let's **go** exploring!

biafra ahanonu



short stories collection

thanks

Would like to thank my family—Sylvia, Owowonta, Adanta, Monica and Eze—for the support throughout the years.

And to the science fiction, short story, fantasy, and various other writers, who opened my imagination and provided a foundation on which to build.

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short stories

*My favorite short stories are in **bold**.

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preface

I love exploring. Whether that be deep into the recesses of my mind, the adventures of countless authors, or the many delightful sights our world has to offer—it never gets old. Unfortunately, the human mind is a bit fragile and memories soon fade, the original idea quickly mutated beyond recognition. To better capture my dreams, life stories, world events, and hone my writing, I've begun writing short stories.

Most people have dreams soon forgotten upon waking. They get a vague sense of something exhilarating, wondrous, or terrifying. From exploring palaces on alien worlds with massive, pure white halls the size of cities to heart-pounding chases through moss-covered structures of liquid design—the walls morphing shape and changing color—with shadowy figures on our heels, my dreams are equal parts inspiring, terrifying, and motivating. They provide a bottomless well of material that I've only begun to drink from and the longing to return to many of the dream-worlds I've journeyed through over the years spurs my writing. These factors have guided the production of many short stories and produced some of the better ones in this collection, such as [Filugori](#) and [The Killer's Army](#).

Events in my life have led to some of the more personal stories in the collection, such as [What is not Known](#) or [The Paranoid Man](#). In this manner, short stories provide an outlet and a way to analyze what is going on at the time. It is often hard, especially in today's fast-paced world, to take a step back and evaluate your life from afar. Capturing important moments in a fictional form is one way focus on learning lessons and seeing the big picture.

World events have inspired many shorts, [Broken](#) and [Flesh and Blood](#) amongst the best of them. [Broken](#) is an equal parts disturbing and terrifying short about a abused girl and her death, it was inspired by reading into the hardships women forced into the world slave trade—mostly for prostitution—face on a daily basis. Others, like [Countdown to Equality](#), stand as ambiguous stories that both support and attack particular world views, in that case extreme vegetarianism. It should leave the reader thinking and evaluating their own stance on the issue. I believe short stories are an excellent way to digest a topic without all the clutter of real world data occluding clear analysis based on first principles.

These short stories are also a way for me to keep my writing sharp. I owe a gratitude to the great writers whose work has shone light on the craft of writing a good short story. Unlike novels, shorts must be mostly unambiguous and have a clear theme or message. In addition, they should leave the reader pondering, often due to a clever twist at the end, such as in [Putting the Customer First](#).

I hope you enjoy this collection, comments can be sent to bahanonu@stanford.edu. The blame for any typos or mistakes falls entirely with me. Remember to always keep a sense of wonder and as Bill Watterson so aptly put it in [Calvin and Hobbes](#): "It's a magical world...let's go exploring!"

-biafra ahanonu

in a world too bright

<LOG>

The sun scorched the skin off of my back; below me was an endless throng of citizens, all about to die. How morbid, eh? Haha, well this is my tale, so I'll start it however I please. If you are reading this, it means you've found my journal, flipped through any of the other pages yet? You should, there are some juicy stories sprinkled throughout. Now, you may wonder why I chose to write a tale at the end of my journal (at the end of each mind you). It is because I love myself and the history I have made, it makes it much easier for biographers to read a tale than a mishmash of notes, events and ideas that comprise my journals. Plus, no second hand account can tell the tale as well as me. Well, that is now out of the way, on to the fun stuff.

I climbed the rope next to me, it was not safe to take the elevators of these tall buildings, some were built years ago, in another era, one in which those above had the power to control everything. Maybe they do now, but it is less visible. Someone screeched below and the men around her were livid and soon her outcry ended. Oh, what fun! A death a day keeps the spirits alive! But you must think I'm sick by now, do not worry, it is only my nastier self coming forth every once in awhile, it may make my tale a bit hard to read, or even unreliable. I am writing in pen, so excuse the marks. But do not despair! I will ensure he is kept in line (or lined through) and the story remains true.

So back to the tale. As I climbed the rope, I surveyed the landscape. What a beautiful sight, the endless rows of buildings that reached the sky, the innumerable bridges that connected them, the deep chasms that defined the old streets below, though I wonder who still traverses there. It has become more efficient to build upwards than to attempt to reclaim the lower levels, which, of course, means this civilization is built on a shaky foundation. Haha, think about it, a couple of well placed bombs in the lower levels and boom! To heaven or hell people shall go! Ignore that. You would expect people to have figured out how to combine cars and planes, after all they could do the same with peanut-butter and jelly or balloons and baskets, what makes flying cars so hard? Well, in any case, we have neither PB&J nor flying cars, which is a drag.

A train screamed by, at least people had the brains to combine magnets and trains. On inspection it appeared to be empty. . .

So upwards I climbed, the skyline becoming clearer, breathing easier, and shooting quicker! Sorry, that part comes later. The people in the buildings could not notice me, someone had the genius idea to make the two-way mirror in the reverse direction it normally is, helps people with their vertigo. Unfortunately, this also allowed for people like me to more easily pick out our targets, without them having any prior warning. They sky grew dark and I scanned the sky, clouds shouldn't be around at the moment. A leviathan of a plane flew overhead, thousands of balloons keeping it afloat, along with several other, more intricate tech. Military? You wish, these were the titans of the modern age, the cargo freighters that carrier the world's demands on their shoulders. The military - I'm not telling you their actual name, find it out

yourself - had hassled private contractors to build them several specialized models, but the money was never good enough. See, see, those capitalist do put priority of their own greed over the safety of others! We should teach them a lesson in selfishness! Been aboard one before, nary a bout of turbulence to be felt and clean as a shaved pus– freshly washed hands. Ever run your fingers through cashmere? It's like that. It continued to float by and the ground continued to become smaller.

Upon reaching the appropriate floor, I cut a small hole in the window and proceeded to enter. Now as a preface, I cannot die in my own tale, as I am currently writing it, which means I'm alive! A couple of pinging sounds could be heard to my left and right and I rapidly lunged for cover, my heart pounding. The pinging continued and suddenly a thud was heard. I surveyed the room and found a bird twitching, seemed to have flown through the hole I created, the rest of the flock having killed themselves on the windows.

I glide to the entrance and the door swung open to my surprise. Ducking to the side of the entrance, I awaited the kill. The timing had been perfect, too perfect. But that is not concerning, I tend to be perfect. As I tensed, a man walked in that I did not recognize from the intel and promptly lifted his left hand in my direction as he entered. My blood turned cold and then I heard a sudden report...

</LOG>

a lovely day in the woods

It was like a fairy tale, rays shone through the canopy overhead, dust glittered in the autumn air, and two children frolicked about. Chirping, the rustling of leaves and the crackle of twigs breaking underfoot could be heard all around. The children, a boy and a girl, ran across the scene. The boy was in the most disgusting of attire, wearing a little butler's suite circa 1800s complete with leggings and those annoying napkins they wore sticking out of their necks. The girl radiated, her skin glowed and her cheeks were the perfect blush, her ample bosom and muscular thighs exuding sexual energy waiting to be released. Complementing this was the slightly revealing dress she wore, the shoulders completely bare, a dark blue wonder complete with frills and various other flourishes. And who could forget those eyes, staring into them was akin to seeing the frozen tundra; it was a white intensity all too rare nowadays. They continued to run through the woods, a stream could be heard nearby.

"Oh darling, why don't we take a little dip?"

"You must not ruin that wonderful dress, cost a pretty penny you know."

"You always have to spoil the fun, don't you? Fine, I'll sit about and eat mushrooms, is that your idea of fun?"

"Understand me, I would love nothing better than to wade in this beautiful rivulet, we mustn't upset mother..."

"She ain't my..."

"Do not use such crude language darling, it is not becoming of you."

"Oh pipe down about your high brow language; I'll talk however I damn please."

"Darling..."

The girl rushed off toward the cottage nearby, a few pieces of her dress snagging and ripping along the way. The boy got up to catch her, but soon thought the better of it and sat down, staring up into the clear sky. It was a pleasant day, he had not lessons from Doctor or obligations to father that day, and being it wasn't Sunday, neither to God. He filled his lungs with the cool air, jumped up and sprinted off toward the cottage.

Meanwhile the girl was sitting on the porch watching a deer walk by. She reached into her pocket and pulled out her small crossbow, carefully aiming it and...

"My dear! There you are, I'd feared you had gone to wade about somewhere else, but I see..."

"You numskull, that dear was as about to die! Oh the sweet juices that would have flowed from..."

"Excuse me miss? May I inquire as to your origins?"

"Oh piss on a bucket; you know who I am, just because I want to indulge sometimes."

"Well, we must be off, mother dear wouldn't want us to be late for crumpets and tea."

"Yes, we must be off."

So the two walked off, following the stream up the hill. The sun had started to set, casting stunning rays across the sky and draping the land in a gorgeous gold. Upon reaching the peak of a hill, the girl turned around and surveyed the valley below her. A trickling sound could be heard, and the fresh smell of pine wafted through the air. She leaned down and picked up an acorn, and promptly threw it as far as she could. A faint noise was heard and a flock of birds erupted from down below, no doubt angry at this most recent disturbance. Turning around, she smiled at the boy and ran off back down the stream. The boy stood for a second, taking in the grandeur of the scene below him, the dips and peaks in the nearby valleys, the brilliant colours of the autumn trees, the ambient noises from the wind squeezing through the trees or the blue jays singing, it brought a slight smile to his face.

"Dearest, are you coming?"

"Yes, yes, hold on a second."

The boy put his hands in his pockets, turned around and kicked a nearby rock, and watched it tumble down the incline, building up speed until with a loud crack, it split a tree and continued to roll for a time after. He turned around and ran upstream.

"Where are you my love?"

"Toodaloo, toodaloo, follow the sound will you."

It was a beautiful day indeed.

what is not known

Ever get that feeling, that the people you know may have something to hide? That the girl you've been with for all this time is cheating on you? Or taking advantage of you? Ever had that thought that the friend laughing with you is just looking out for the next opportunity to fleece you in the name of 'friendship'? Friendship! Base on what?! A couple trite conversations and laughs? Ha, funny that, but what more can a relationship be? Every get a shiver down your spin when you realize that you're all alone, that those around you are just a part of your imagination? Drives you mad, don't it? Does to me. Can't trust anyone, they are all shells, elaborate shells that you can never get behind or crack. Know that girl you just chatted with at the party? Was she thinking about the next dude she going to bang? Or is she actually interested in conversing? What's with that smile, stupid bitch. I'm cynical that way, maybe that's why I'm here, they think I've gone mad. But I'm not mad, I'm not! I just voiced what everyone else was thinking and they declare me mad! But I am not angry, this place allows me to reflect, to remember, to plan. That smile...how I hate that smirk, I thought of stabbing her, right there. But that would have been messy, so I didn't. Another girl I'd known for awhile was talking to me about another person, I looked into her eyes and realized I knew very little about her, her past, ambitions, etc. What did I know about her? What were all those conversations spent talking about? Oh, right, this, the pointless ramble about other people, joking about some hackneyed memory or discussing some irrelevant piece of news. What do others talk about? Is this all there is to social interaction? I must be missing something, maybe that makes me crazy, or special or misunderstood or whatever trite term is the politically correct term-of-the-day. The party ends and the people leave, people brag about their accomplishments and I retreat back into my mind, is this all there is?

The sweat drips down my brow, and I hear screaming in the background, yet I am unaffected, and feel no need to rush and help. Several people pass by me, their faces full of terror, one of them decks me as he runs by, screaming, "Look at her, you sick shit, why didn't you stop him?!" I wonder if he knows I could have killed him, but why these thoughts! I wake up in a cold sweat, a doctor looking at me through the mirror; he jots down some notes and walks off.

I ask myself sometimes, who am I? I continuously distrust my past self, my memories are suspect. Who am I? I killed someone they say, that's not 'normal' even though they let their soldiers do it every day. And in that case, you know what they do? They cheer! Sick hypocritical fucks. And I'm not 'normal'? I'm pretty sure I didn't kill anyone, that's not me, I know myself quite well in that regard. But they say there were witnesses. I'm falling asleep now...

It was raining outside, the cell was cold, they told us the temperatures would drop inside; don't want to spend money on heating. The real purpose was to make us all a bit crazier, to keep their jobs (I hear they are very high paying). The same thing happens when it gets too hot, poof goes the cooling. But the heat is worse, much worse. See, the cold you can hide from, a blanket, a body, a makeshift fire, these all fight off the cold. The heat, well the heat you can only bear, you can't blanket it or shiver through it. No, it must be fought with power, of which we apparently don't have. So we fight through it, a person or two dies, but

that opens spaces for more high paying individuals to come in.

I was sick, I knew I should not have trusted that nurse, fucking whore is sleeping with the others, she's fat and ugly though (probably why she's a nurse), even here I won't lower myself to that level. But I am now sick, with what I know not, but I think they are trying to make us crazy, that's the only plausible explanation. Think about it, I'm like a brilliant stag yesterday and now I'm like a sickly old lady, all of this after receiving my shot. They aren't too clever...

Someone has come into see me, strange, didn't know I knew anyone well enough to warrant this. Must be some government or private entity come to whisk me away and perform experiments on me. Alas, it was my mother. She asked me to stop with this crazy stunt, that it was proving nothing and I would soon be forgotten, the system did that to people. I smiled and gave thumbs up. Told her it would only last a bit longer, this experiment. Needed more time to gather the data, to trick people into believing more that I was crazy, as you all think I must be. Haha, but I'm not.

America needed help. The rise of China, Japan, Germany and various other nations was fast making it an irrelevant player on the international scene. Resurgent Russia and climbing India looked to give America a run for its money, in both domestic and foreign markets. And so on to the scene came Rate, to save America, to preserve and spread truth, justice, and the America way.

Rate was a great man, no two cents about it. He had created the Iconic 7, a septuplet of companies that had acquired such market share in their respective industries as to be declared monopolies in all but practice. They offered ever lower prices, ever better cost cutting methods, ever better quality; in short, they were the emblem of the business world. Info Corp., an information distributor with a majestic infrastructure for supplying fast, searchable news for the entire world. Inhaj, the shining example of food production and distribution, reducing its carbon footprint, water and other natural resource use at every level while supplying the world with ever better, more environmentally friendly food. SinC, the preeminent company for the coinage of private money, the distribution of said money, and the insurance that coined money complied with all standards and that fraud was not committed. Envision, the model software/hardware company, integrating its vast cloud network with reliable and user-friendly hardware to allow for 'access anywhere' of crucial and non-crucial information. HL_2U , the legendary toy company known for such marvels as GIK and C_{401} For Kids! $Rate^{Orbit}$, the forward looking propulsion company that had landed the first privately funded astronaut on the moon. And finally, S_7V , the quintessential venture capital firm that had been initial investors in such world shattering discoveries as Selucon (a partial cure for Alzheimer's disease) and V_i^k (the next generation of artificial hearts). These were the Iconic 7, the renowned titans of American economic might. The legendary tale of their formation can wait another day; the depressing fall is a more enlightening story to be told.

Rate became very wealthy from the success of these companies, he achieved the peak of what an entrepreneur dreams of. But this inherently brought him enemies. From the left came those too lazy to take the risk or work hard enough to achieve the success he had. But they deplored his success and cried that it was based solely on luck and that he was receiving more than his 'fair share' of the nation's wealth. From the right came cries that his companies were destroying mom-and-pop shops, was outsourcing jobs (of no relevance since he created a net plus in jobs created compared to jobs 'destroyed', but how people will twist the facts to suite them), and destroying the idealized 'rugged individual'. So from the left, they set about taxing him to the ground and from the right they began bringing antitrust suits against him, contrary to evidence of his companies beating the competition by reducing prices, providing the best price to quality for his customers, and providing its workers with the best wages and benefits. But this wasn't about protecting the customers; he soon came to find out, it was about protecting the interest of a select few in the name of the 'public good'. So Rate fought back. He raised prices across the board, causing consumer outrage and claims that he was price gouging. So he asked, which was it, unfair competition from prices 'too low' or price gouging from prices raised 'too high'? Who was to determine this?

"Do the bureaucrats, who seek to determine the correct price for my products, believe that

have the mental capacity to determine the wants and needs of all my customers? Do they know the intricacies of the businesses I run? Do they claim to have infinite knowledge or believe themselves gods? It is a fool who believes himself a substitute for the market." so Rate began his assault, using the vast network created by HI₂U and Info Corp. to spread ads and other informational articles. And they fought back.

"Who is Rate to believe that his MONOPOLIES, which OUTSOURCE jobs are good for this country?! Where is Rate's soul? He takes from this country and gives back what? Would you rather have a JOB or cheap goods? Our fathers always told us, 'if you have no work, you'll have no food'. Rate thinks he can refute this immortal advice through manipulation of the system, through clever word choice and deceptive business practices. Rate is one 'p' from RAPE, which is what he is doing to this country."

Rate was the greatest man. He knew that battles did not win wars, that wars did not win ideological battles, that ideological battles subverted the truth. So he did what the entrepreneurs of the past, present, and the future do. He surrendered, in hopes that he would make it out with something left, from which he could rebuild. They attacked his savings, they split up the Iconic 7, and they jailed him for 'tax evasion' and 'egregious accumulation of wealth'—all this because he was great. Rate understood jealousy, he understood greed, he understood human nature, so Rate never complained when the media asked him how he would respond once he was released from jail. He told them, "I will do what I have done and will always do. Provide my customers with the best products, my workers with the best wages, and the environment with the cleanest production facilities. The government can impose laws to prevent me from doing so, but it can't prevent me from innovating ways around them."

So is the story of Rate.

the paranoid man

"Hey honey, how are you? Been a busy day, considering not looking at any work tonight, I'll relax and spend some time with you."

"Oh that would be lovely, but I am going out tonight."

"That's okay, is it a prearranged formal thing, or can I join? Whose it with?"

"Some man, named Uji that I meet while taking a tour of Facility 5. It's a 'business' meeting, so not sure if he wants anyone else tagging along. Sorry"

"Uji? Hmmm, well have fun."

"I will. Don't worry, it's to better make contacts, so I can move up and bring in some extra cash."

"Alright, tell me how it goes."

She closed the door lightly on the way out; the man sat in his chair and pounded the table, hard. He got up and looked around, at all that he had built, all the memories that this place, and his beloved, conjured up. Uji was a great man, he admired him greatly, yet he was uneasy, distrustful of both him and his wife. But she had never acted in such a manner as to deserve suspicion or thoughts of betrayal. Or had she and he hadn't noticed? He hit the table again then walked into the kitchen through the archway, the polished wood, the spacious interior behind it, the dancing of the shadows – the man felt an odd sense of loneliness, of an obsession with a time lost. Memories flooded back, the time they drove through the open country, not a care in the world, joking and laughing. But that seemed to have left, those days were through and they coasted by, hugging and kissing, yet, the joy was lost, that spontaneous laughter, those charming conversations, they seemed to be pulling at weeds, every time they would pull out another hindrance to a smooth and more enjoyable relationship, the roots of the problems would persist. Soon the hindrance would grow again, the conversations started to feel more forced, more contrived, more about them trying to convince themselves that there was anything left in the relationship.

"But I do love her, I really do."

"Really? Truly? What is it you love about her? Is it you are too lazy to attempt another relationship, so you trick yourself into loving her?"

"That is truly absurd, just because you think you are better than me..."

"I am you and you are me."

"Your just inside my head, you don't control me, you should go away now..."

"Hahaha, you must understand, I only seek to help yo..."

"GET OUT, GET OUT, GET OUT! Holy shit, what have I come to, I'm talking to myself, this is crazy."

"I'll get him to leave you alone, but first you must agree to listen."

"Get away, please, leave me alone, I'm already..."

"Torn? You think so highly of yourself, yet look, you don't trust two people who you have no reason not to trust."

"I, I...There are...reasons, a lot of things I have boxed away..."

"Where? Inside your mind? Maybe that is why you are so warped, why people don't understand you."

"Why, because I try to hide from emotions I don't like and attempt to pack them away?"

"Yes, and you don't trust people, that won't get you far..."

"I'll talk to you all later, please just leave me alone for a bit."

So the noises stopped and the man looked across the roomy kitchen. He hit the table again, and then smashed his head on the nearby wall. The anger, it was unbearable, his chest heaved and he hit his head again, that odd, constricting feeling in his skull wouldn't go away. He hit his head again, yelling into the night as he did, the sound reverberating and seemingly amplifying, until he was drowned in it. He tried to stop the deluge, the unleashing of pent up emotions, the demons coming back out. He grabbed his skull and fell to his knees, staring at the ground. His eyes bulged and saliva dribbled down the side of his mouth and pooled on the ground. He turned his head suddenly and ran at the cabinet nearby. He screamed as his shoulder was shot with pain, but he did not tend to it, instead he grabbed his head again.

"Hahaha, oh your funny, shit, what have I done?! I'm a horrible person..."

In a more subdued tone.

"...a horrible person..."

He sank to the ground and saw the world blur and finally disappear.

He awoke to the sound of his name being yelled, and he looked up. It was her, back from her excursion with Uji. That's right! He suddenly got up with a start, the blood rapidly rising to his head, causing him to become dizzy and hit the floor again.

"Oh honey, are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine, how was dinner."

"It was lovely, we conversed about so much, our respective career paths and outlooks on life, what we both enjoy, various other things. It was a great evening."

In a slightly dark tone, he responded.

"Good to hear."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, nothing..."

In a barely audible tone he continued.

“Just a little bit paranoid.”

selling your soul

It was a pristine autumn evening, the street was wet from the recent rain and the trees had become a spectacular array of browns, reds, and yellows. The streetlights cast a surreal glow on the scene. Kil walked down the street, her dress billowing in the wind, her gait slightly off. She was the height of an average man, tall and slender, with billowing red hair. Her bright red lips flared like her dress, her gloves those of someone getting ready for the kill. She turned the corner, out in front laid row after row of office buildings, each housing the hopes and aspirations of young entrepreneurs. Kil reached into her bright blue purse, pulled out her phone and dialed Sorr.

"Will you be ready by the time I get there?"

"Yes, I've been working all day on this."

"I'll extend a bit of pity. I'll be right over so get ready."

"Yes madame."

"Don't call me that."

She strutted down the lane, looking into the buildings to see if there was anyone worth trying to snag. She then thought back to Sorr, he'd invested an awful lot of time into trying to make her happy, would it be right to throw it all away so easily? He was in his late 20s, clean cut and bald. His signature getup was a blue track top and black sweats. He had an obsession with sports, both watching and playing, **but that is a whole different issue**, she thought to herself. She opened the glass door and stepped into a spacious interior. Taking off her coat and giving it to the door man, she glided over to the elevator, level 7 it was to be. In the elevator she struck a conversation with man standing next to her.

"So, ever banged something with soft wood? Some people say hard wood is better."

"What? In reference to..."

"I like soft wood better; you can do more with it."

The elevator opened up, level 5. The man walked out and looked back over his shoulder as the elevator door closed. **Didn't let him get my name**, she thought, **oh well**. Level 7 was reached and she hustled out and to the room of Sorr. She opened the door.

"Is it here? Is it done? Hurry!"

"Kil, seriously, I'm having a horrible day. Aren't we in a relationship, aren't you supposed care?"

"I do, I think you just can't differentiate my business attitude from my personal attitude."

"But can't you for a..."

"I'm on the clock, the papers?"

"Here. Hey, I was wondering, do you...?"

"I'm on the clock, no time for small chat."

"Okay, I'll talk with you about it later."

"Yep, we'll chat."

Kil walked off, looking to her left as she walked. She spotted another potential mate, another chance to move up and find a better product than the one she was using. Sorr looked over as Kil strode over to another man and started a light conversation with him. His blood boiled, **but I thought she...**

"So, have you been working here awhile? Couldn't have missed a handsome face such as yours for so long."

"Haha, no, I've been here for a bit, recently transferred to this department though."

"Interesting, were you in market research before or...?"

"Vision planning."

"Heard interesting things about that department, sounds like an easy job, just predicting and projecting what will happen a couple years down the line."

"You would think."

"Well, I have to go, my significant is probably looking."

"We will have to chat another time."

"Yes indeed."

She got to the elevator, level 18 was the destination. **Oh, I forgot to give out my name again.** The elevator doors opened and she went down the rows of cubicles then turned left and walked toward the door with 'Jik Hatura' written on it. She looked to the left and right, then slowly opened the door.

"Jik? Jik you there?"

"Yes, please come in. I have some questions about Sorr that need to be...answered."

"I can help you with that but..."

"You want compensation, yes?"

"You must understand."

"Oh yes, I've dealt with many whores like..."

"I'm not a whore!"

"A concubine then?"

"That's not even accurate."

"Small talk, now I was saying. Sorr has become unproductive and I need to know, should I let him go?"

"What would be the..."

"Twenty gold-pounds?"

"My honest opinion? He is a hard worker, but that does not mean he is productive. Recently my relationship with him has gone stale, so I think he is having an emotional breakdown of some variety."

"You think? You talk to him about his problems?"

"No, I have better things to do. Look at all the potential in the building, why would I waste it with someone who looks to have reached the relationship limit."

"Stone cold, bitch, stone cold."

"Hey, hey, you would do the same, don't make me look..."

"So I should fire him?"

"Don't interrupt me...I would suggest so, but do whatever you want."

"Not sure if this was worth 20 g-p."

"I have a recording device on me."

"Well then, I'll make the transfer tomorrow by noon."

"Then I guess our business here is done."

Kil strode out and into the elevator again. Level 0 it was to be. **Time to leave.** As the elevator descended, it stopped at Level 7. Sorr walked in and the doors closed. **Shit, great timing,** she thought.

"Kil, why do you do this to me? You think I don't love you anymore?"

"So, let me put it this way, your too 1 dimensional for me, I've figured you out, I'm on to whiter slopes."

"Oh, so if I opened up a little more..."

"You already whine too much."

"So then what? I'm begging you, you're the glue that holds me together, I, I..."

"Quite your whining, I won't disengage myself that quickly."

"Ding, ding, Floor One."

"Well, I guess this is where I get off."

"Indeed."

As Sorr left, he turned around and held the elevator door open.

"Before I go, why?"

"So, you see, market forces and the profit-motive compel me to. The time I invested in you is a sunk cost, but your opportunity cost, well, its too high and not worth the input anymore."

"Is everything to you an economic model to be worked out?"

"Haha, no, but it comes in handy, you must admit."

Sorr's face betrayed him and Kil saw the angst written across it. He let his hand go of the elevator door and turned to leave.

"I suppose the opportunity cost of your soul isn't zero then."

"The opportunity cost of nothing is zero to me; I can always put something to other uses."

"I bet you can."

The door closed and Kil slumped against the wall. **He thinks he's figured me out! Haha.**

"Ding, ding, Floor Zero."

Kil walked out of the elevator into the underground parking and checked to make sure everything in her purse was in order. As she looked up something cold touched her neck.

"You've hurt a lot of people bitch. Overheard your conversation a floor up. Thought you could get something for free? Come on, you know nothing in life is free."

"I, what, who...the papers?"

"Haha, you've done way more than that bitch. You know, about the whole, opportunity cost thing. Not too keen on economics, that body of yours has many uses, various 'alternate' states, shall we say. Does that mean there are 'opportunities' I would forgo by killing you?"

"Yes, many opportunities, please, you must realize the cost of killing me is quite high. There are various alternatives, pick something but..."

"You know, you're one sick bitch. You are implying I should rape you? Fuck that, the best option is to kill you."

"Please!"

There was screaming, then the sound of footsteps in the night.

The pair looked out across the gorgeous vista, the golden plains below waiting to be harvested, the mountains in the distance yearning to be explored, the hidden structures and stories aching to be discovered. The sky was auburn green; owing to the transition between ecosystems as the planet was terraformed. The suits were itchy, their bright white exterior blinding those foolish enough to stare at them. They reminded him of the astronaut suits they used to see from the late 20th century photos. But these lacked oxygen tanks and much of the other waste that was employed then. The leaves rustled in the background, and one of them looked around, **is it time for the artificial wind to start blowing?** The pair walked down the slope, cutting down anything that hampered their progress. The golden fields were not barren, around them stretched miles of city, teeming with life, the slight haze a result of constant construction, not any sort of pollution due to factories. The twin suns scorched the scene, bathing the city in a surreal glow; everything had a slight radiance to it, as if partially lit from the inside. The towers themselves were beautiful, gleaming and reaching toward the sky, several almost hit the top of the dome that protected this swath of land from the harsh elements outside. The breeze continued to blow and an unusual rustle was heard to the man's left. They both looked at each other then surveyed the scene around them, nothing seemed out of place and their sensors did not detect anything unusual. Shrugging their shoulders, they moved at a quicker pace down the mountain.

The worker looked around him, being atop such a tall structure with minimal supports didn't bother him, but he noticed some vegetation move in the distance. **Hmm, so their here.** He looked below him; workers hustled about the construction site, jumping between steel beams, welding parts together and lifting up more materials, it was a cobweb of activity. The city below sparkled and teemed with activity, but the city was unusual in that everything was coated in primary or secondary colours and a pure white. It made for a sleek aesthetic, but one that also screamed of something wrong. The people went about their lives, but the scene was oddly quiet for such a populated city, the governor having installed noise absorption modules throughout the city and on the walls of buildings to reduce what he claimed was 'harmful noise'. The worker hated it here, the last terraforming city he had worked at was bustling with life, the smells of the bazaar wafted from below and the sound of a million voices filling the air, it gave him energy and reminded him that he was alive. Alas, it was not so here, and he sighed and started to climb down a nearby ladder.

Commander looked down upon the new world, another potential forward base in his war against Enemy 125-5-798. The existence of so many enemies and foreign races over the decades had caused humanity to label them by the coordinates at which they were first encountered or where their known home world was. Commander considered this to be one of the better planets, Filugori was perfect in every way. It had been discovered naught 50 years prior by a daring entrepreneur, now deceased, who happened to be exploring this region and came across this beauty. A large portion of its atmosphere was already composed of oxygen, so that allow it to be terraformed much quicker, but it also meant that there were other life forms already present, with all the problems that created, both biological and legal. The Interplanetary Cooperation of Species organization had been a hamper to planetary

development for ages, they continually lobbied the governing bodies in the different regions to enact legislation to protect the obsolete species of new planets. Commander walked to the terminal and ordered the drop ships to commence landing. Commander looked back at Filugori, **but, he thought, there was always something unusual about that place.**

The pair continued their trek, the city never seeming to get closer and the vegetation seemingly getting thicker as they moved farther down the mountain. Again they heard rustling to their side but ignored it. As they neared the first fence, one took out a small device and placed it on the fence. Zzzzt, a few sparks flew and the other went to cut the fence with a small laser. The sky turned dark and the pitter patter of rain could be heard in the distance, rapidly closing. The two suddenly looked at each other with horrified faces and rushed their movements. Breaking through the remainder of the fence, they rushed toward the nearest building and kicked the door open, entering and quickly closing the door behind them, a shriek could be heard in the distance, and their blood froze. Running up the nearby stairs, they quickly moved the furniture in the rooms to block the stairs and one took out a few devices and turned them on, tossing them on the makeshift barricade. They knocked over a pair of tables and pushed them up against the entrance to a room, then jumped over them and hide behind them, waiting. The shriek grew louder.

As he descended, the worker noticed dark clouds building off in the distance. **Hmmm, how bizarre.** But he thought no more of it. As he walked along the steel beams, he noticed another worker stared at the clouds and suddenly grabbed his head with both hands and sunk to his knees, whispering something. The worker started to walk over to him, but he got up quickly, looking around nervously, and then walked at a rapid pace toward the ladder nearby. **Strange.** The worker got on the ladder and started to climb down as well, looking as a bright blue cop car screeched through the stark white section of town. **Something is slightly off about this place, but just can't put my finger on what.** The other workers were all rushing down their respective ladders, several looked quizzically at him and his slow pace, others had a crazed look about them. **I should inquire as to the cause of this...behavior.**

Commander knew what was coming, he knew what had to be done, he knew that he had sent those people to die. **Filugori...**He turned around and looked at the screen next to him, several messages from that pesky organization, saying they had warned him what would happen. **But I didn't even colonize this place; it was around before I was born.** He looked back at the planet and noticed that dreadful storm cloud brewing near one of the cities. **So it comes again...**

Few things scared this pair; they had been through the depths of the Azori Asteriods, the hell of the Ni Black Hole, the soul-shattering Tigi cloud. But this, this was different. In all those cases, they were in the relative safety of their ship, with the knowledge that should they perish, people would be informed. This, well, they would be MIA forever. Their ship could not transmit, for reasons unknown, and the city they were going to, well, something looked off about it, and maybe this was why. The building they occupied was a vibrant red; everything from the tables to the sinks to the ceiling was painted in the same primary colour. Suddenly the door hit the wall opposite of the entrance and dripping could be heard. The two looked at each other and pulled out their tools. A noise was heard from behind them, but neither had the courage to turn around and check, each felt his heart stop and time started

to dilate. Dripping was heard behind them, and a tear rolled down one's eye. *So, after all we've done...*

The worker swore he heard a scream, one that was inflicted with such fear and horror that he thought it a figment of his imagination. People continued to rush toward their transportation units, many looked horrified when they discovered that they had been disconnected from the network and, hence, unable to operate their units. The worker looked for a terminal and found one. Going to the news section, he found that there was only one article, *IT FEEDS OFF OF FEAR! DON'T BE AFRAID! BE HAPPY!* it read. The worker looked around and a feeling of dread came over him. *The pay was too good, I should have asked why.* He rushed toward his vehicle and pushed the button, but it would not start. The cloud had reached the city by that time and the sky started to grow dark, the pitter patter could be heard in the distance, but it was unnaturally subdued. And then he remembered the noise devices and his blood curled. *That's sick, just sick.* Then suddenly he heard a drip behind him and his mind raced. *Just stay calm.* A yelp was heard naught a couple meters away. A tear rolled down the workers eye. *Oh God.*

Commander knew. Commander had ordered it all. But it would remain only him that knew. The cloud spread over the entire city, engulfing it. It would soon be painted red, the interiors, the exteriors, all of it. But Commander didn't like the colour red, it gave him an uneasy feeling, especially when it wasn't primary, *those shades of crimson irritate me so.* So Commander told his nav to set coordinates for Liliugori. *This experiment has run its course. This new...thing...I wish I had the heart to unleash it...but...a chill went down his spine...something isn't right about it, this place. Things just don't seem to add up...*

the heroic ones

Smith was nothing special; he had grown up in middle America in a comfortable middle income family, his parents rather tame—an old line Republican and a right-leaning Democrat. His formative years were spent building forts with his pals, exploring the streams nearby and wandering out into the woods, and learning from the small district that had the elementary, middle and high schools rolled into one large building. He loved those years, he reminisced constantly about them, longed to have them back, but that could not be. So he decided he would give his son a suitable environment, so that he could relish in the same joys. Thus, Smith relived his past through his son. As I said, Smith was nothing special and perhaps, that is what made him so great.

Judy grew up in the big city, the urban jungle, the concrete wasteland. They were, alas, blots on America proper. It did not treat her well, she was a classic case of abuse; her father beat her and only her. This, as you can imagine, left scars. She struggled in school, she could never concentrate and would break out in tears every so often upon remembering what had transpired. She was a social outcast, people thought she was a wee bit crazy and so they left her alone. But as she grew older, she received help, from people who had no need to. Several people organized a fund in their spare time, and raised money to get her treatment; the local psychiatrist got involved and offered his services for free. Judy recovered—for the most part—yet continued to struggle, but not due to laziness, she was working till she fell asleep from exhaustion. The greats forgot her, the geniuses in her grade flew by without a bead trickling down their brow. But they would not be great if it wasn't for people like her, those who toiled and worked day and night—a bit hard, longer, better—all in the hopes that they could rise and climb one more rung of that falling ladder.

Krill knew he had to win, his portfolio was bigger, his CV longer, his smile brighter, his wife sexier, and yet, he had a nagging suspicion that he would lose. His suite was pressed, hair straightened, deodorant on—he was picturesque—yet his brow started to moisten. **This Chinese man, he's good, very good. But I'll pull through, it's our way.** It could not be seen, but behind those smiles, those laughs was a sense of nervousness, of fear. **These are our replacements, these cheap, mass produced people.** He strode into the room and gave his speech; the Powerpoint slides an awe inspiring blend of pointedness and depth. He was the archetype, the hero, the legend; the textbook, the manuscript, the Bible; the craftsman, the master, the renaissance-man. And yet, in spite of all this, he failed. His life's story would make Job's tale look tame and yet, through all this, his knee hit the ground and his head sank. He was a Titan; they, Olympians.

He glanced out across the plains, stretching for as far as the eye could see, hills and valleys breaking up the land from time to time, small meadows and streams enticing the willing explorer. Trickling down, the brook supplied the small forest with nutrients; the soft trickling soothed the mind and parched the lips. A chipmunk scabbled down the nearby tree, stopping and chittering from time to time, its puffy tail waving and its minuscule paws clawing at the air. The flowers were in full bloom—radiant yellows and somber blues—scents wafted through the air and mixed to produce a euphoria of smells that could nearly be tasted, and the sound of the wind rustling, all coalesced to produce a sense of bliss and calm. He sat down in the

field and sighed, looking up into the midday sky, the brilliant blue contrasting with the lazy movement of the clouds shading him just enough to keep cool, but not cold. His face suddenly moistened and he smiled, his old pal was back. The saliva continue to lather his face and he got up to pet his companion, to which it proceeded to flop to the ground and roll around. As he scratched its belly he looked to the West and saw the sun start to fall behind the majestic peaks, casting rays across the landscape, and Jesus appeared to be born a million times over. **Oh what did I do to deserve this, Mother Nature is to kind upon us Yankees.**

Ha ha ha, the smoke blocked his view and the cacophony of sounds limited his ability to follow orders. Btzeeeeerrrrr, he gave a little jump as one of his buddies dived into a foxhole nearby. **Ha ha**, his chest burned and the lactic acid continued to slow him down. Ratta ratta ratta, his muscles constricted for a bit, and soon he was back on his way. "Go go go!" he looked around to see the origin of the command, as he did he heard a couple rounds go off to his left. "Hooah, let 'em have it." The dust continued to swirl, his boots sinking into the sand, the sun blazing through every so often to remind him it was there, waiting. **If the bullets don't get me...**The station was up ahead, but it was soon particles in the air, the origin of the destruction unknown to him as he was lifted a couple feet into the air and hit the pavement, hard. Shapes floated in front and around him, he clawed at the air. **Ah**, achoo achoo, a red mist floated out in front of him. **Haha, they think this is it! I am America, and America pulls through!** He got up, laughing as his lunged ahead, tripping and hitting the pavement, a thunderous applause filled his head. **Come on, come on, let's do this! Mind over...**He grabbed his chest and stood on one knee, inspecting the scene around him. The electronics were fried—so much for Full-spectrum—but he looked skyward, figured his location, then moved toward his target. Hacking and wheezing, he never made it. Whoosh, he heard it before he could respond and for the second time he felt weightless. **Haha, what a great way to go out, at least...at least I tried.** The ground around him shone and turned a darker shade, the dust swirled around him, consuming him and his head hit the ground. **So much for invincibility...**

"Haha, my brother, how have you been?"

"Great. Times are good, money is flowing, bitches crawl all over me—what more could a man desire?"

I sat in the corner through blurred vision, watching them hug and chat. Grrrrrr. There were many things I hated about this house, least of which was the rats. I went to work every day, but that can wait. I got up and was immediately dragged back down. The chains, how could I forget? I felt like crying sometimes, but then they would hit me, abuse me, and occasionally rape me. You may think, why have you not committed suicide? Haha, I'm better than that, that is what these scum want me to do. They take joy in such things; hell, one would probably get an erection from seeing a dead body like mine. It is sad really, that it had come to this, all the hopes and aspirations my family had, now embodied in a cheap whore living out of a common thugs house. It was my mother, I would blame her and the people she carried herself with, the debts she owed...

"Give it up woman, give it up!"

"I owe you nothing, nothing! Haha, you believe...you won't get away with this...I have it all...the calls, the..."

"Bitch, you see that daughter of yours? You want her to stay pretty and innocent? What am I saying, of course you don't, you selfish..."

"Selfish...I gave you all everything, my life, my..."

"Bitch, you gave us money. Money! You really think that is all we live for...money?"

"You going to monologue now!?"

"Dearest me, bitch doesn't know a Quicker when she sees one, let me end this."

People say that it was my imagination, that I had projected my beliefs about what my mother did onto my memories of her. I didn't, at least...

The toy fell down the ladder, it clanked as it hit the different structures on the way down. The sky was a gray; it had been drizzling off and on the whole day. I wanted my toy. I got up and ran towards the edge of the roof; the ladder didn't make it to the bottom, strange. I could faintly see my toy below. I started down the ladder, but heard a loud scream and looked to see my mother rushing over.

"You little rat, are you trying to ruin me; I've already told you, stay away from the ladder."

I was bleeding, the chains had begun to dig into my skin and the brothers thought nothing of it, thought it would toughen me up. I looked around, they'd moved to a new house, ever wary of the police or the Quickers. The Quickers were...not of the highest moral standing, they would rape without remorse, and kill gleefully. I'd met one once, seemed more like a bunch of gangsta wackos, but they were smart, they'd fostered an image of immortality, people

believed that they could not be harmed, that they were some sort of urban legend, some mythical group of people who stalked the land. But, the whole lot of them—these urbanites and rural riffraff that occupied this area—were not the brightest.

“Hey bitch, get up, time to leave.”

“Yoga, listen to the man, get up, we have to leave...NOW.”

“Dumb whore, see, I told you we should have kept her a bit more healthy, dumb shit.”

“Hey, don’t blame me, the clients like broken girls, just catering to demand.”

“Sometimes the businessman knows what’s best for himself and the client, you should take care to note of that. I don’t want my capital ruined.”

“I’m not your property you sick...”

“Shut up whore, hurry up, times leaving us.”

You know when you wake up with an arm tingling and the feeling gone from it, after you slept on it? That’s how my right leg felt, it would move, but it felt obscenely heavy and I fell over several times on the way out and to the car, getting no help along the way. They looked nervous, the brothers, which happened occasionally. One had pulled out an assault rifle and aimed it down the street.

“Come on bitch, hurry!”

It was dusty outside, the meadows on each side had turned brown and looked dead, the parched road had blackened holes puncturing it. I looked down the road and could make out several cars, smoke billowing behind them.

“Fuck, Ich erkl rte Ihnen.”

“Don’t talk to me in that foul language, grab the girl, go, GO!”

He ran toward me and lifted me into the air. Rushing to the truck he barely broke stride as he dumped me in the back and jumped into the driver’s seat. The engine roared, I felt a ting then an acute pain and looked down to see some red substance covering the bottom of the truck bed.

“Hey, ack, [coughing], I’m fucking bleeding back here, HEY.”

They couldn’t hear me, I was lifted slightly into the air several times and each time I came down, I felt the poking sensation and then I realized.

“Oh fucking hell you didn’t.”

Looking down I realized that the bed was punctured with nails. What the fuck, who does that? I crawled to the back of the truck, didn’t see anything dangerous there, curled up and tried to get some rest.

My head hit the sand; a couple children kicked me and laughed.

“Hey Yoga, YOGA. Yeah you heard me, why ain’t you flexible? Haha.”

I looked up, rat. Reaching into my pocket I felt the cold sensation, the solid confirmation, the rigid explanation of this brats fate. I started to pull my hand out...and felt a firm grasp stop me.

"Yoga, don't, he's not worth it."

"Then who is?"

"Not now, this isn't the place, too many eyes."

I let my hand slide back down and crawled to the corner of the sandpit. I shivered and tried to slide into the warm sand. These kids...where horrible. This happened daily, the fucking assistants did nothing to stop it. I'd seen it all, some 14 year old girl was nearly raped on these playgrounds, there were play structures that could hide unseemly acts from the nonexistent eyes of those who watched...

"Hey, Yoga-bitch, get up, we're here."

The day was now night and a lone streetlamp lit the way. I crawled out and the world bobbed up and down, I winched with every step. This wasn't a safe house or even a location, the warehouse before me looked abandoned, a burnt-out shell of its former glory.

"Why are we..."

"Don't talk."

They dragged me across the lot and one kicked open the door, the other threw me in.

"Sorry kid, been too much of a liability lately. We've decided to move up to a more respectable operation. You're too broken to fit into this."

My lungs gasped for air and my vision faded in and out.

"You mean you...[coughing]...your...[more coughing]...going to leave me here? What the fuck is that? You know this place is crawling with..."

"Yeah, we know. Might as well allow...something...a bit of pleasure before you are disposed."

"Killed?"

"You could say that, we prefer 'disposed', kill is a bit morbid."

"Huh?"

"Well, it was nice..."

"Holy shit, are you serious? It was 'NICE'? You fucking abused and used me you..."

"Shhhhh, quite darling or you'll wake the neighbors, unless of course you want the feast to start that much sooner. Haha. Bye now."

They closed the door and the engine started up again, roaring off into the distance. I could hear creaking noises all around me, but I could not see. I could hear whispers, but my

imagination was willing to play games at this stage. A chill went down my spine. They were getting louder.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh, I'M HUNGRY, HAHAHA."

What the hell? The sound pierced me and I felt my heart skip a beat, then the blood flowed more quickly. Oh shit, oh shit, those fucks they didn't, oh fuck, fuck.

"SMELL THAT DARLING, THINK SOMEONE LEFT US SOMETHING."

"HMMMMMM, SMELLS LIKE IT'S STILL FRESH."

I looked down at my thigh and legs—realizing, those nails...

"LET ME HAVE A BIT OF FUN WITH IT, BREAK IT AND MAKE IT SOFT FOR YOU."

"HAVEN'T YOU BEEN SATIATED ENOUGH AFTER THOSE OTHERS?"

"I ALWAYS HAVE AN APPETITE, HAHA."

I could hear their footsteps now and I crawled a bit toward a nearby ladder, maybe, just maybe, if I could get to higher ground.

"OOUUHHHH, IT MOVES."

I looked around me, there is no way they heard me from that distance, especially with the ruckas they were causing, I could hear them far away...

"Haha, boo."

My whole body froze and I stared into its eyes, how? What?

"Should keep your wits about you girl, the senses can be...easily deceived."

"Haha, but the lesson is poorly noted, we're a bit hungry..."

"...and in a bit of a hurry..."

"...so we'll help us all out and make this quick."

I felt a cold hand touch my back, running up it and around my neck down to my bosom—the whole time I could do nothing.

"She a bit broken in already, haha, all the better."

"Hehe, well then, shall we?"

Captain's Log 1.25.2838

My eyes watered at the sight. We had finally discovered what we had spent all these years wandering aimlessly for. Shifting and moving, the silvery substance coated the land, its beauty enticing and dicing. There were several who ventured over its smooth surface, dying one by one. Out in the distance could be seen the splendidous pinnacle, atop its peak a mountain of gold. Men still strove for that most holy of materials, still killed and maimed for a chance to hold and possess it; some said that gold had become more than a sign of wealth and power. No, it had become engrained in the very soul of humanity, driving us forward, providing the impetus to partake on these Herculean efforts to discover and colonize the galaxy. It was an elixir that we could not stop drinking, least we realize that there is no purpose to our sorry existence. So we continue to pile our trade—lusting, craving, hungering for that high, that indescribable euphoria of 'GOLD! We found GOLD!'

Captain's Log 5.65.2828

The ship hung in low orbit, the twin planets were almost touching; several massive craters on their surfaces a testament to past encounters. "Deploy the ships, have everyone on standby," — the captain looked around, — "we shall drop the ships at high 7, commence slow burn." — Here and there people continued at the same calm pace, such was the routine nature of this procedure. — "What're you all, DRONES? Where is your hunger, your ravenous spirit for adventure?" — But the captain was in a world of his own; people had long since ceased caring about that ephemeral fist pump, that momentous adrenaline rush. No, there was nothing to be had here, just a dry run training for the real thing, if even that. — "Captain, give it up, there is no gold to be had; no one is going to get excited over a dry run." — The captain stared straight ahead, his stark white hair flowing as the fans started to warm up, his blue eyes piercing the scene.

"Have you ever seen such a magnificent sight? All these people pass this awe inspiring scene without a second glance, it's like they..."

"Have lost the ability to take in the small things? Yes sir, yes they have."

"No, not the small things; the most grand encounters, mind-boggling of scenarios. But why do they live, for what do they strive? I have led these men and women from Sol to the Outer sector; however, each time there is no gold, they elicit the same reaction—abject state, as if all the wealth we've come across has suddenly vanished."

"Gold is life."

"Indeed, someday I hope to show them what they are missing."

The drop ships drifted down toward the focus of the two planets and the captain walked up and down the cargo hold, his jet black suite in stark contrast to his subordinates yellow attire, their jumpsuits' collection of symbols highlighting the simplicity of his iron pressed jacket. The air was thick with chemicals, they kept it at high pressure to force out any foreign air

that may try to leak its way through the double door once it was opened. Tools lay strewn about the vicinity, the whole place looked a mess—nobody cared to clean it up after each expedition. The decision to paint the whole interior a stark white was paying off; it exuded a professionalism and cleanliness that, despite the mess, satisfied the captains craving for order. As they hit the wispy coat that surrounded the planets, the captain tried to regain his balance and smoothed his hair.

“There’re no dignitaries here captain.”

He looked about for the source of the disturbance, but none was to be found, they all gave him that same—to him eerily creep at times—blank stare, as if there were about to admonish him at any moment. He surveyed the area again and walked up the staircase on the side, cables attempting to slow his every step. The railing almost didn’t save him as everyone was thrown into the air; then the sound of action could be heard all around.

“Get that door opened! Guns ready, shields on, we’re going in Hot, HOt, HOT!”

The doors swung open and the captain momentarily swung their way. The yellows jumped outside, some floating and landing with a confident thud on their feet, others walked slowly, surveying the area; dust kicked up and swirled around the landing zone, the whole scene something straight out of a comic strip. Ethereal and surreal as the particles hid their presence, they donned their old school respirators and set off, the doors closing behind them. The captain straightened his tie and started up the second flight of stairs near the back of the hold toward the flight deck. As he opened the door he treated the rest to the same wide-eyed, mouth agape expression that accompanied their expedition to a new world.

“My god, if only we had discovered this before...”

Captain’s Log 1.26.2838

Having realized the futility of our endeavor, it was decided that it be best if we launched the ships again and landed closer to the gold mountain. The world shone around us as the silvery substance continued to shift and swirl, the dust kicked up by those running toward the departing vessels giving the scene an Arabian feel, at any moment the silvery substance would peel back to reveal its true, parched earth form and men on camels would ride in—screaming and slaying—from our flank. But alas, this was fleeting as the thrusters blew away any hovering particles and brought me back to my senses. I turned and rushed toward the last ship to depart, jumping into the bay just as it gained air. We left the hatch open—strapped down there was no danger of falling out—and took in the dazzle that we were being treated to. We thought that the silver sea was worth the effort tracking down this elusive world, but as we continued to survey this land, our hearts yearned to be down below, exploring this virgin world and unearthing her secrets. Silver leaked into the red ocean that mixed and churned with globes of blue and green, it seemed as if someone colored oil and threw it onto dyed water, adding a metallic shine to blind and prevent full appreciation of the wondrous creation. Floating amidst the churning waves were islands, the liquid being more dense than earth. Towers of rock, some smoothed and beautified by the acidic conditions, and crystalline structures reached for the sky, those that were translucent reflecting and refracting the splendid array of colors that whirled about them. These fortresses on the sea, for all their stark beauty,

were dead. Yet, at the center of all this majesty stood the most extraordinary sight of all, the stoic mountain of gold—assured and confident—amongst the liquid rainbow lakes. It was in this moment of bliss that the radio cut in, breaking the illusion that we finally could be tourist instead of miners on these forgotten worlds.

Captain's Log 12.3.2864

"You realize what the charge is for this crime?"

"Yes, but this is not the most fair of proceedings."

The captain stood up and walked toward the witness stand. He paused for a moment, coalesced his thoughts, and decided on his next course of action. The day had finally come when gold no longer mattered. It happened faster than was planned—humanity, faced with that precarious drop in vigor and purpose that would come with the dying of the last gold mines, had decided to lust after another thing. What they turned to was, at first, inarguably better. Life. Yes, that most holy of crusades was launched, that most forgotten of desires amidst our material lust. Life. No person had yet encountered it, in the several millennia that we had traveled the known universe; no person had yet reported life. However, there was never a desire, after the first gold world was found, to start an extensive search for other living organisms. Sure, there had been the occasional crackball who attempted to cement his name in history by discovering that illusionary non-Sol life form, but they always came back empty handed and disillusioned. But, the gold disappeared, ran dry. No, it wasn't that we used it all or that it suddenly vanished, but to be unable to mine more gold was essentially to make it useless. In some perverse way, that confounded economist and thinkers, the more gold was found, the more its value increased on the market. It was akin to a stream, the more water in the stream, the more value can be derived from its many uses, but once this stream runs dry, its value diminishes to naught, even if the lake it created remains.

"We have decided to find...Life...and you attempted to stop us."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"That is not relevant."

"Yes it is, tell us why."

"No."

The captain—on the inside boiling with rage and indignant that one would desire to halt such a momentous expedition—calmly took out a light and started to fill the room with that most horrid of smells, a couple coughs could be hear reverberating about the cavernous hall. After a couple of minutes pacing in front of the witness stand, the captain stopped and glanced at the accused.

"So you're guilty?"

"No."

"Then are you not innocent?"

"No."

"Thus, you are guilty."

"This trail is a fraud, so I will not play within your pedantic framework. You seek to convict me, the jury wants to convict me, the judge will approve of capital punishment—what am I to do but close my mouth."

"Your appeal tugs at my heart, but I could care less about your conspiracy, what I do care about is whether you're part of this conspiracy."

"No."

Humanity had come to a cross roads, do we begin anew, refreshed in our goals, understanding, and decision making, or do we continue to harbor our addictive past, wrought by the savage inhumanity it had caused us. Some proposed that we start the Grand Colonization, seeding the galaxy with millions of colonies, enough to build a vast network that would fill the void and calm the increasingly desperate and crazed view that we are...alone.

"You're all are scared...aren't you? Deep down, that unthinkable, treacherous fear exists that we may be all there is, that the universe is in fact...empty."

The captain looked about—slightly distressed—and dropped the light on the ground, smothering it with his heel.

"Your honour, I would like to request a recess."

"Granted."

"And your...ack, let go of me, I said let GO...you're thinking to yourselves, we have nothing left to live for..."

Captain's Log 1.28.2838

We landed among the mountain of gold and cried, our suits turning ever darker shades; a man to my left looked to be convulsing (with joy I assume). We waded in it, enjoying the feeling of it wrap around our feet. We molding it like clay and rubbing it all over our bodies. Through all this, we never thought that this would be it. We would be both the legendary, famed heroes, and the detested, infamous villains—forever exalted and shamed—the Last Miners. Every so often a breeze would waft by and looking up I wept at the glorious sky, spread out from dawn to dusk was a spectrum of reds, the sun blazing its trail across the sky. I walked toward the edge of the summit and looked down, feeling a bit queasy. It was then that I appreciated its largess; this would feed the gold stream for years. This was big and—above money—glorious, we would be glorified and people would bow at our feet.

As we jumped up and down, the warmth eloped and caressed some as they slept in its splendor; the sea below gained an acrimonious hue, dull black and gray swaths cutting the serenity that was the rainbow ocean. A ship started to descend and finally landed. Several yellows stepped out, donned their respirators—their wheezing cutting through the rapturous noise—and took out the diggers, flipped the switches and began their work. Several of the others laid down their gear and a couple more waddled over to the nearest ship, climbed in

and patted the side, then drifted off into the distance with a brief roar and puff of smoke. I never understood why we always need so many armed men, transports, and materials. It's not like we had ever encountered life...or ever would...

Ideally, one should read this while listening to [The Great Gig In The Sky - Pink Floyd](#). At least, that is what I was listening to when I wrote it.

There are two goals in life, to reproduce and defy death.

No, you have it all wrong. It is to become at peace with the world and accept death.

You both are fools, it is merely to see Death.

A black cloud descended upon the scene and the three Magi tensed.

So it has come.

Indeed, if we are to be saved...

We must stand...

And...Defy

Accept!

See.

They all drew their swords, their cloaks flowing in the wind. They all knelt in a circle and waited—the gust gathering, the darkness growing, the air moistening. Red droplets hit their faces, their white robes morphing to the look of a canvas after Pollock had done his work. Defy took out his shield and started to chant spells, his eyes turning black as the night, his skin a deathly white, his nails a ruby red. Accept sat in a Buddha position and laid his sword across his legs, and calmly started to recite the Poem, a soft glow emanated from his hands and illuminated his face. See fell to the ground—defeated—the dust filling the air; the stench of the dead flowed past.

Do you now see! Haha, you cannot see death! You fool, you just fight, fight till there is nothing left to...

And yet, by fighting death, you give it power...

Ha, then I shall fight harder!

In the distance hooves could be heard trampling the ground, their huffing and puffing filling the air.

Defy!

Accept!

Defy lunged into the air and sliced at the approaching storm. A head came flying by and rolled past Accept; he looked up, not amused.

You think accepting death will save you from it!

I do not wish to be saved.

The air filled with the sound of a million locusts. The sound seemed to approach, then recede, approach, then recede, like waves lapping upon the shore.

So he taunts us.

Only to those willing to listen.

Defy lowered his weapons and turned towards Accept and put one knee upon the ground.

So you have finally...

Dropping to his knees, Defy became a dreidel—his sword a deadly edge—and the sound of meat on sword soon filled the air; the Magi's robe was no longer just a splattering of red. He jumped into the air and continued to twirl, the darkness growing, and his skin continuing to be leached of colour. Finally it ended, and he fell to the ground.

This is what I must do...

It is what you choose to do...

That makes all the difference?

Only if you want to make one.

Defy dug his sword into the ground, looking around him, smiling. It was darkness.

And if I seek...

You shall end up like those who Saw.

His pushed down on his sword and lifted himself. The locust swarmed near, men were being ripped apart, their howls filling the air, the cacophony of sounds chilling the Magi, freezing Defy in his place.

I have not faced Locust before.

Then you shall die.

How is it that one lives to know that?

Because if you accept...

The Locust ignores you?

Maybe...

Defy looked pale, his nails had turned transparent, his eyes were a bright blue. He took off his robe and walked towards his bag, stuffing his hand in as he chanted a few spells. Water gushed out from below and cleansed him. He took out a clean, blue robe—soft as cashmere, and smooth as silk. He tied a red sash across his waist and pulled out a black-white, striped headband and slipped it on. Cutting the air several times with his sword, he ran out into the darkness, the buzzing growing louder.

And so...we must all pay...

Defy felt his flesh being ripped away, he cried out, but they were drowned out by the noise of the locusts. Falling to the ground once more, the Magi—with several movements of his hand—started sinking into it, becoming it.

NO, YOU WILL NOT!

The Magi felt himself being ripped from the earth and thrown into the air, above the darkness, above the death, above all that he had known. He continued to soar, the air rippling by him and his lungs becoming devoid of oxygen. Finally he slowed; coming to a stopped, he looked around. The world below him was an ever changing sea of light and dark: swirling, morphing, colliding, yet never mixing. The void surrounding him pressed in, he looked around and everywhere there were...things indescribable, the death of an infinite souls was commencing, the blades dropping, the guns firing, the lasers warming and yet, each one was the same: the bleached, white skins; the rolled-back, black eyes; the curled, red finger nails. And he laughed and laughed, but the void stole him the opportunity to be heard.

And so here...

IT SHALL NOT END!

His blood froze as the planet darkened from the shadow, the sun was blotted out, and the heavens shook. The bones creaked and the flesh broke off in bits, as if a zombie had been amplified to the size of a star, the eyes a blinding white, the skin a sordid grey, with bits and pieces of skin morphing between ruby red and carbon black. Defy's hand reached for his sword, but it was no longer there, his shield having long shattered in the cold.

AND SO NOW YOU SEE!

And Defy laughed a bit more as the cosmic hand reached to engulf him and he smiled. But this was not to be! Light shone from behind and a beam plunged into the hand of Death.

and I shall not let your suffering come to pass.

Defy was blinded by the light as the heavens shook and he was flung back, his body scorching as he zipped through the atmosphere—to the darkness, to the death, to life. He plunged into the ground, reaching up and digging his hands into the soil, he pulled himself from the hole. A small area around him was illuminated, the scorched earth giving little contrast to the darkness at the end of the light. He lifted himself up and surveyed the area.

I see.

And he fell, laughing the whole way.

two kinds of odd

I've always wanted to fly—to soar and twirl without a care, to dive bomb that crazy little brat who walks on me every day and spills his rancid milk, or to skim the streets unhindered. Alas, I am here, watching the world pass me by. I was always the odd one out, but that would make me special right? It's always good to be special...

Interesting things happened on this side of the block; all kinds of people passed by and plied their trade. None more so than the man I soon nicknamed Mr. D. With a giant, he used to pick up the mail on his front porch then survey the neighborhood, always with an eye out for the children—he would stare down any unusual personas. Blue eyed and gray haired, I'd only ever met the grumpy side of him, but he told tales to those willing to listen—of his adventures in the Dead Sea and his battles on the scorched plains of the Sahara. Alas, he now tells no new tales, his flowing bathrobe no longer mystified the afternoon scenes that played out in this rather quaint little cul-de-sack.

That little brat was always up to no good, he'd tried to take off 10-60 before, but those mythical builders had made him solid and he did not budge. Often I would get nervous at his passing, at times he would carry his metal baseball bat on him, whacking as he went by, hoping that he would knock one of us off—but we stood our ground. His pearly skin, brown eyes, freckled face, and bowl-cut hair belied his true, wicked nature. He would play games on poor animals, confuse and scare the little critters, all the while using us as shields, barriers to his mischievous acts. It was unfortunate that we were all born with sight and hearing, yet God was so unkind as to make us mute. Oh how I yearned to tell all about his secrets, to divulge to the next passerby the nature of his acts. This was not to be so, and for ages I watched him grow old, until one day his awful deeds ceased to permeate the neighborhood.

Now, it seems that Nature plays a doggone trick on us at times; the little brats mother was, shall we say politely, quite the lady. Having no feeling undoubtedly tempered my passion, but her walk, that sultry stroll and swaying hips as she prowled the block; well, it moved me ever more to break free and fly, so I could revel in the form and beauty that she embodied. However—as always—I was stuck, cursed to witness her age and her once voluptuous figure give a dire warning that nothing is timeless. How I thought that my virtue would not be their vice, but death's gripe never came to me. I waited for that slowing of the mind, that loss of boyish wonder at all that took place—it never came.

I observed one day a small, blue car pull up to one of the houses on a quiet Sunday morning. Out stepped several men dressed in black attire and carrying what looked to be a large box, much like 10-62—who had been born to this world rather large. The old man hadn't come out in a while, but all of a sudden the boy came prancing by and smacked me firm on the face, dazing me for a bit—I subsequently blacked out.

People came and went. I believed our time—our usefulness to this world—would come to an end, we were, after all, relics of the past. With time I'd shown signs of their vice, I'd become frayed about the edges, my demeanor taking on a darker hue. But, how the times changed! With the last sighting of the original neighbors, the little cul-de-sack underwent a radical transformation—houses were torn down, little bits of memory lost and swept away.

I always loved the sight of the small, yellow adobe across from me, over the years it had played host to the most interesting residents. Puff, with unnecessary aggression the house was a plume darkening the sky. I'd never thought about my mortality with such fidelity as then; to my horror a man similar to the one who'd recently occupied the yellow adobe came up to us and started to run his fingers along our heads. A few words were exchanged and with a rush of air accompanied by a deafening roar, I flew into the air. Oh and how splendid it was! Flipping and twirling, I had finally done it! Then I hit the ground.

Awaking to the sound of drills and hammers overhead, I tried to get my bearings, but my sight was blocked by the others. How odd, it seemed most of us were still here, together. They must have been constructing a new wall; I always sensed we were in an odd spot. However, it seemed that several of the others were flapping about! I tried to ignore the sight, but it was too delightful to block. I was giddy again, my whole frame attempted to move, alas, it still could not. Ah well, maybe someday.

This was a new era, people strolled about with more confidence—they wore clean-cut suits and drove sparkling cars. Some of that old happiness seemed to have died with the restructuring, that wise acknowledgment of the simple life. There were no kids at play. It seemed that while the scenery was undoubtedly brighter, whiter, sexier—my times spent enjoying those quirky and eccentric individuals who stopped by this quaint little cul-de-sack were at an end.

It had been awhile since the change and I'd very much grown to like it, the little boy's mother that I used to lust after, well she was an ugly duckling compared to the ladies that did their daily Pilates and jogged around the neighborhood. Oh, but once again this yearning was to no avail, though out of the corner of my eye one day, I spotted one of us not in row or column.

And then that day arrived. I shall never forget it, such was the immense release that it brought. I had noticed some of the other walls in the neighborhood move, change shape and contort after someone pressed their hand against them. The man who owned my lawn, he'd never so much as manually cleaned us—he always strolled to his sleek, black car and drove off into the rising sun. But one day he came back, his assured, usually slick, hair in a fritz and his face gaunt, his eyes sunken in ever so slightly. He rushed into his house and came out, a bulge in the side of his jacket. Dashing up to us, he pressed his palm to me and stepped back. Then it happened! I was wiggling and began to rise. With an ever-growing smile on my face, it dawned on me. I could fly! And I took off, zipping around doing loop-de-loops and dive bombs. The thrill, the sensation, the release—I can still not describe what I felt for those few precious moments. Then my wings went away and I fell. As my descent accelerated I surveyed the world beyond this quaint little cul-de-sack that I'd known and what a sight I took in. In the distance stood towers that glittered in the setting sun, they seemed to reach past the clouds and pierce the heavens. There were lights strung out across the sky, twinkling and changing, morphing and splintering. Oh the sights I saw! I nearly blacked out from the overload before I—thump!—was greeted by terra firma again. The man picked me up, his expression slightly crazed, and threw me into the air one last time. Ah that feeling! You must be getting tired of my obsession with it, but you must understand by now what it means! The ground loomed below and all of a sudden it changed to a green then black hue. With a

clang I hit a wall then an ever so cold ground, its metallic surface not the best of friends. And so I sat there, waiting for him to come get me and place me back in my rightful place. After all, I was special, it's always good to be special...

killer's army

The trees flew past us, the wind almost drowning out the roars, hisses, and howls that permeated the area. The gun felt cold in my hand; it weighed me down and got in the way of my agile attempts to slip through the undergrowth. To my left was Marsha, like a sly fox she twisted and turned to avoid everything Nature did to obstruct her path. To my right was Judy, her movements labored owing to the gash running down the side of her leg. It oozed green and yellow puss—we may have to kill her before she turns. The twigs and branches continued to rip through my clothes and skin, yet it was nothing compared to the terror that drove us forward. The howls grew louder and the falling of trees could be heard behind us.

The department store manager kept trying to catch his breath, but each time it seemed he was ready to talk, it left him again. The reporter looked shaken: her skirt was ruffled and torn in places, hair wild and appeared unkempt, and she shifted between looks of absolute terror and pure joy. This was to be her big catch, the story every reporter dreamed of and dreaded at the same time. A thousand people were trapped down in the basement of that department store, all the elevators had broken, and the architect, a genius, had violated building codes by not installing stairs. They were likely going mad: there was little food or water in the clothing section. The fire department was working around the clock to get the elevators working; yet, every attempt and technique had proven futile, as if something else was interfering with their tasks. The reporter straightened herself out as much as possible, then with a clearing of her throat, gave the cameraman the go-ahead.

“...1...2...3...and you live!”

“Hello citizens of the greater Hitchworth area, I am reporting to you about a series of extraordinary events...”

We could see the road ahead and with it—hope. The car was still there—thank god—but the question remained whether the key was. We were in such a hurry braking didn't occur to us and slammed into the car. The door flew open and we commenced searching for the key: under the seats, in the glove compartment, between the chairs. In the background the sounds grew louder, the streaks more chilling and—for the first time—the stench started to waft toward us. My eyes started to water, whether it was due to the odious odor or the malignant terror that had been steadily taking over our minds, thoughts, and action—I could not know. In any case it blurred my vision, increasing my panic and anxiety.

“Marsha, have you found it!? — I slipped and hit my head on the bottom car frame as I frantically tried to search around the car.”

“It is here somewhere, Judy, Judy, HEY JUDY, get the fuck up, this is no time to sob. Oh Jesus, we're going to die.”

If I had learnt anything in my travels, it was not to trust the government to do a private man's job. These nutcracks thought they could fix the department store's elevators without knowing how they were designed—fools. They had called upon me to help fix this dreary scene; hopefully, I could make a buck or two while I was at it. I had read up on the architect of

this building before arriving at the scene, a Dr. William Jinks, a provost at the University of Northern Hitchworth. He'd had some funky ideas about building design and economizing their production, but this was probably his nuttiest and most ill-received idea—mostly because he was allowed to actually implement his crackpot theory. Not only was there no stairs in the building, he'd designed the elevators so that they use each other as counterweights—again, to save money. Now—don't misunderstand me—I am all about this money saving business, but this was taking it to another level. It was starting to cloud outside, this was not to my liking. But, this was just a sign of the day, rather than an approaching storm. The building was quite large; it was a department store after all, with a beige exterior and a design that was reminiscent of Harvard's Main Quadrangle (if your educated enough to get that reference). Imposing, intimidating, yet somehow empowering: that was exactly how I—rather Hardwork Department—liked to portray themselves to influence their customers.

"There has been a reported surge in the grid, which is said to have caused the elevators to become overloaded and shut down. At this time crews are working around the clock to restore power and save the estimated one thousand people currently trapped in the basement of the store."

The reporter looked over her shoulder at the building, its grid of sixteen big, square planters and their obnoxiously large bushes blocked the camera from getting a clear shot of the happenings. Walking past the crew was a man in a light brown trench coat, his manner a tad bit too austere to be a random passerby.

"Excuse me. Would you mind answering a few questions? — The reporter took a step back as the man twirled and gazed at her with icy blue eyes."

"It will only take a minute..."

"What do you have to say or ask?"

"Do you know what is going on or has transpired?"

"Only that someone did not finish the job and cut corners. Now, if you would be so kind, I have business to attend to."

RAWRRRRRR, AYEEEEEEEE, HAHAHAAAA. The sounds grew ever closer; our hands started to sweat and grow numb, making it all the more difficult to feel around for that god-damn key. Clouds had started to drift in from the east and we could hear the pitter-patter of rain in the distance. Please, please let the rain wait a bit, this would go from impossible to hellish real quick if the rain came pouring down.

"I FOUND IT!"

I rushed toward Judy and lifted her off of the ground, kissing her continuously. We quickly got in the car and tried to start the engine. BBBRRRRRR, pck pck pck, BRRRRRR, pck pck pck. The car wasn't starting—typical. I rushed out and opened the hood and looked around—the rain had started to fall. Haha, like I was going to find anything wrong with a cursory glance. I fell to the ground, the world was spinning around me as my head throbbed; I could hear Marsha yelling my name from inside the car. BBBRRRR, pck pck pck, bbbbRRRRRR. The car started, yet I was in too much pain to get up, something had hit me—hard. I felt a cold hand touch the

back of my neck, then another grab my leg and I was momentarily weightless before being thrown into the back seat.

"go, Go, GO!"

I looked at the wiring on the elevators and shook my head; whoever the electrician was that did this job was incompetent in the extreme. He'd wired the whole thing up in series, one thing is this complex circuit could be wrong and—poof—the whole thing goes to hell. No wonder the crews could not fix this thing, it was a near impossible task. As I labored on the elevators, I noticed a man in a brown outfit wandering about, observing the scene and being the paranoid man I am, decided to figure out what he was up to. Approaching him, I inquired as to his name.

"Davin."

"You are here because?"

"I am observing the work, my master sent me. I am an apprentice and this is a great opportunity to learn."

"...Well, please stand as far back as possible, we're watching you..."

Not one to trust a stranger, especially one that uses 'master' in any phrase, I asked one of the firemen to watch over him. The rain continued to soak through my clothes: my body shook, hands tingled, and teeth chattered—just stripping a wire grew laborious. Then I happened upon a wire that had not (or should not have been) touched, deep in the wiring on the elevator. If it was just a tear, then no problem, but this was a clean, precise, fresh cut—to one of the vital components no less. Turning around, I nearly jumped out of my skin to see the stranger staring over my shoulder.

"Just need some paste to fix that, mind if I help?"

"What? No, this isn't your spec..." the man procured a badge, it read 'Electrician's Conglomerate certified' "...ialty. Alright, yeah sure, the tools are over there. I'll watch over our shoulder."

"Thank you."

The camera continued to roll, but the reporter, exhausted from hours on the job, was taking a nap. The trees still obscured some of the scene, but to the far left of the building, opposite the crews, a shadow flickered along the tree-line. The cameraman looked up, but seeing nothing, refocused on the crews, trying to get a better shot.

"You think we should move closer? They probably wouldn't mind, right?"

"Ahhh! Oh, it's you, when'd you wake up? We could try, can't make any promises."

"Alright, let's do it."

The car bounded across the deserted streets, every once in a while a car would rush past, though never toward them. Judy was driving, but she never was a hotshot and it showed—the windy street was causing her all sorts of problems—they were probably averaging thirty miles-per-hour.

"Hey Judy, can you speed it up any? Those things were..."

"Are you kidding me? We outran them through a dense forest, how are they going to catch up to a car on an open road?"

"It's just that...I don't know. Things just haven't been right...or adding up. I'd rather be in a safer location..."

"Yeah, we hear you, just rest."

The trees continued to rush past, the rain growing steadily heavier and Judy's breathing faster. She sounded exasperated when talking to Marsha; at times I worried she might just veer off of the road and into a ravine—trapping us, to be surrounded and devoured. But she drove steady, if slow, and we continued on our way.

This man was doing something, unusual. I didn't like it and reached over to stop him. He turned around and with those steely eyes, froze me in my place. Now, I am not one to be easily intimidated, I'd been in my fair share of twitchy situations, but something about this man was starting to unsettle me.

"Mister, I think you've done enough. Please, I can finish the job."

"No, you cannot. Someone previously did not do their job adequately; it is now mine to finish."

I was going to respond, but I felt this man was...dangerous, that he had more than he let on. Yet, I didn't want him to damage the hard work we'd done. I'd give him a couple more minutes then ask the crew to forcefully remove him.

"Think this is a good angle?"

"Oh god yes, this is perfect, get ready to roll."

Unfortunately for us, Judy tended to have fleeting...blackouts. But that half a second was enough for the car to skid on the wet road and soon be off it, careening down the hill toward the clearing below. Luckily, we only touched a couple trees on the way down: unluckily, the car was pretty much dead by the time we came to a stop. Crawling out, I grabbed my gun and surveyed the area. RAWRRRRRR. My heart skipped a beat and I looked at Judy, then at Marsha, who'd started to tear up.

"What, how, they were behind us the whole time!? Oh god, shit shit shit, what're we going to do?"

"I don't know, run? Find the street and run, maybe a car will drive by and we can catch a ride. Judy — I walked over to her and gave her a smack in the face — get up, we need to leave, NOW."

She looked up at me and smiled—that scared me, much more than it should have. Then she pointed toward the far end of the clearing. There was rustling, behind us as well—hell, it became apparent that we were surrounded. Aiming my gun, I fire a round into the trees and a squeal could be heard, followed by the sound of ripping flesh and laughter.

"Judy...Marsha...this is probably the end of the line..."

"Shut the fuck up, we're going to run!"

"Marsha, give it up, we've been running all day, and they've nearly caught us every time."

"Nearly—I don't want to die, I won't, can you at least try one last..."

"Sometimes trying isn't enough. Miracles don't happen in real life, so scratch that off. At least let's go out fighting."

I signaled to the crew that time was up, but just as they started on the man, he got up. Turning around, he grinned a bit as he walked past me.

"All done, hope you guys like the job I did."

He continued on and I rushed toward the elevator, but not in time as I realized what he had done. Paste, good lord what was I thinking, paste! You don't paste together wires to fix them. On the other hand, it makes a great weapon...Swssshhhhh, the elevator started to descend and I turned toward the crew.

"Get him! Don't let him get..."

I flew off of my feet as an earthquake occurred; flames leapt out of the elevator shaft, licking my back. I could see him in the distance, laughing as he strolled away. Then I noticed, with an odd mix of horror and wonder, that the flames were a bright green and smelt of burnt flesh. A second tremor came and I started to run. There were shadows in the flames, shadows were no living thing should be to create them. The reporter and crew started to flee, scabbling toward their cars, but I felt this was futile. RAWWWRRRRR, I turned around, wet myself: he'd transformed them, those poor souls trapped in the basement, into...something. Who was that man, what had he created...

"Get in the vehicles, NOW. Good lord what the fuck is going on!"

"Ma'am, the camera, it's too heavy..."

"Are you kidding? Take the video and drop it, let's go!"

They started to lung at us and I continued to fire until I was empty, we'd gotten atop the car, but that wasn't going to save us. The deluge continued and slowly drowned out their yelps and blood curling screams, but it did the same to ours. They tore at our flesh and it finally hit me—we're going to die here. There was no hope, no helicopter gunship to save us, no Superman to fry all of them with his stare. My gun, and its blunt end, had little effect, beyond increasing their bloodlust. Oh and what bloodlust it was, I could feel it in my bones, my head shook under its intensity. They had no other purpose, no other goal, than to kill, eat, and move on to the next victim. We'd fought so hard, run so long, but sometimes, that just isn't enough...

freedom in a dying world

Flash, crackle, bang. Pit-pat, pit-pat, pit-pat. The flare skidded down the long, narrow tunnel that appeared to stretch downward forever. Another corridor, if you want to call the passages in this labyrinth of a make-shift cave that, ran to our right. Behind us a sliver of light, flickering on and off, spilled in from the opening from whence we came. We all gave each other the look-n-nod, donned our breathing masks then proceeded to attach the hooks and ropes. Minutes later, one by one, we rappelled down into the abyss below. I landed first and immediately dropped to my knees, overwhelmed. There wasn't a foul stench, an unbearable sight, or a rapturous noise. No, something felt so wrong about this place that I couldn't handle it. Donning my mask, I looked around as the rest dropped down near me and flicked on their lights. A purple mist hugged the ground and a small rivulet of water passed by us, its trickle amplified by the still, quiet air.

"Hey, captain!" Jacque yelled, causing me to jump several feet in the air. Jacque was our resident technician; he was average at what he did but made up for it with humor and an unwavering tenacity.

"What?" I blurted.

"Come look at this!" he hollered once more as I rushed over.

"What? There's nothing..." my voice trailed off as I pointed my flash-light down the corridor to our right.

For as far as our lights could cast, there was coal. But this wasn't dirty coal. It wasn't, by the looks of it, even natural. No, this had been placed here.

"There aren't any mines for thousands of miles. This can't be..." I quickly turned around and ran in the opposite direction, through a small underpass and into the opposing corridor. Nothing. Nothing but rock and dirt could be seen. Turning around, I ducked out of the passage and ran toward the others.

"Should we call..." Kit mumbled as he took out his receiver and started to dial. Kit came from a well-to-do family and his timid nature only amplified the sense that he'd been entitled and sheltered.

"We need to leave this place..." I said. Things weren't adding up. I started to back away from the cave toward my rope. I gave it a tug, strung it through the rungs at my waist, and began to ascend.

"Wait, but..." Jacque stuttered as he also began his ascent.

"Now!" I yelled.

Turning around, I gave him a hand signal—both thumbs extended, wiggling. Immediately he began scaling the wall ever more rapidly and I could see Kit down below slowly putting away his equipment. "Hurry the fuck up Kit!" I bellowed as I reached the top of the tunnel and drew my pistol and flashlight. Our lamp had flickered out and I couldn't find the exit. Lighting

another flare, I turned around and helped Jacque over the edge and looked over to make sure Kit was doing fine.

"Krill, what the fuck!? Why..." Jacque began, but I quickly cut him off.

"Jacque, did you see it? The coal, all that fucking coal? That isn't ours!"

"Calm down, Jesus. It's just coal. We can take it, we need all..."

"IT'S NOT OURS. Don't you understand? Didn't you feel it down there? Why was there another tunnel, empty? The purple mist? The goddamn water!? Water! There can't be water here. Where are we?"

"Ummmm..."

"The Mojav Desert! It hasn't rained in a thousand years. There's no aquifer nearby! Something's wrong, very wrong. We need to leave."

"You're just paranoid Krill. This could be our out! A way off this fucking planet."

"Shut up! Just shut up. Go help Kit."

I continued looking around for the exit and couldn't find anything. Then, a split second flicker alerted me to the location and I ran over, throwing another flare through the hole. Red light flooded the entrance and I looked behind to see Jacque and Kit sprinting toward me, their eyes wide.

"Krill, go! We saw someone down there! Holy fuck, you were right. What the hell is this place?"

I jumped up and out, drawing my pistol along the way. I peered into the darkness around us. Above me the moons shone bright, as always, and I could barely make-out our vehicle in the distance. Kit, then Jacque, climbed out of the hole. As soon as they were clear, I tossed a grenade inside and we ran. The darkness was pierced with a ray of light momentarily followed by an obnoxiously loud roar and then all was silent and Night's cloth once again enveloped us. We made for the car and clamored inside. I revved the engine and gunned for the base.

"So, you found coal, eh?"

We were greeted with the same, snarky comments by everyone who listened to our tale. None believed us. None wanted to. We couldn't find coal here; it was a dead place, stripped of all its beauty and resources years ago. But we stayed. We had to. The company demanded it. So long as the possibility of mining that putrid substance remained, we were stuck here, on this dying planet in this out-of-the-way star system in a poorly charted portion of the galaxy. But hope remained that they would one day send a ship to retrieve us. There were clauses in the contract that would cause immediate evacuation. Unfortunately, most of them involved us already being dead.

"So, what do you think? We might be able to go back with more people and at least ID the stuff, right?"

The star that held this system together was dying as well, long past its prime. Its red light barely reached us and what little did was normally blocked by the many moons orbiting this hell-hole. Night. It terrified most, but we'd gotten used to it. Unlike other planets, where the night meant death, for us it meant life. Other operations had run afoul of their planet's natural inhabitants—most encountered species appeared to have a chip on their shoulder. But nothing lived on this scorched rock, at least, nothing that we didn't own...

We threw our packs onto the car and jumped inside; it creaked a little and took a couple tries to get it going. "We're heading back! We're going to settle this matter," I yelled over the roar of the engine.

"Why don't we bring others along...that place freaks me out. We saw someone else down there as we were leaving! Remember!?" Kit said, clutching his pistol.

"You were seeing things. There ain't anybody on this planet but us," I responded and pushed my feet to the floor. Kicking up a storm of dust, the car lurched forward.

We arrived at the place, the earth around it still bearing the burn marks from my ill-advised grenade toss.

"Brilliant, and how do you propose we get back in?" Jacque said and began climbing out of the car.

"Get out the shovels."

"Really?" Kit pipped in, he hated manual labor. I stared at him just long enough for the silence to become uncomfortable.

"Does my face read 'I'm fucking kidding' right now? Yes, get the goddamn shovels."

We began to dig. Kit was having a hard time and Jacque constantly grumbled. Slowly but surely the ground gave way and the red flare flickered back and forth in the night wind. In the distance I could hear what sounded like howls, but when I stopped digging to hear, they faded to nothing. I looked over at Jacque several times; his face was expressionless and beads of sweat had begun to roll down his face. Suddenly I heard a yelp and turned around.

"Jesus! Where the fuck did Kit go?" I turned toward Jacque, but he'd already rushed past me toward the hole.

"Calm down, he just fell into the cave. Let's go," Jacque said as he secured his pack and jumped down into the hole. Grumbling under my breath, I followed.

The place was as we'd left it, dark and slightly humid. Lighting a flare, I tossed it in front of us and began to walk toward the edge. Peering over, nothing could be seen through the darkness. I lit another flare and tossed it down. It flickered for a bit and a slight breeze could be felt as it went out. Kit stood a bit back, his gun drawn as he looked nervously about with his flashlight scanning the walls in jerky arches. Jacque walked over to the edge as well and took out a small orb. Twisting it, he threw it over the edge into the darkness below. Nothing

happened for a couple of seconds, then a light brighter than any I'd seen in ages pierced the darkness.

"What the...why do you have that?" I demanded and looked over to see Jacque smiled as he began to drive his stake into the ground.

"Think just because you're the **captain** you get all the goodies?" he said, smirking.

I reached into my pack and pulled out the ropes and other equipment and began preparing for the descent. Kit didn't look to be having any of this and sat down near the edge. A couple minutes later the ropes were secured and we began to rappel down. Kit stayed where he was and watched.

"Guys, I don't think we should..."

We ignored him and began rappelling down and hit the ground a minute later. Jacque and I pulled out our guns and I signaled for him to go right—where the coal was last time. Walking towards the cave, we peered inside and saw nothing, not a trace of the pile that laid there before. Jacque turned to look at me and the blood immediately left his face.

"What? It's not that big a deal, we might have just been imagining..."

"Shut up and look behind you," Jacque whispered and pointed over my shoulder. I slowly turned around and suppressed a yelp. Two white orbs hovered in the darkness opposite us, the blinding light from the orb appearing to cease at the entrance to the other cave. I looked back at Jacque then at the orbs, they'd shifted slightly to the right and I saw them disappear and re-appear momentarily. Reaching toward my back pocket, I pulled out a grenade and silently released the pin. **One...two...three...**, the seconds ticked by and my heart began to stop. **Four!** The grenade rocketed towards the otherworldly orbs.

"Grenade!" I yelled and jumped toward Jacque, knocking him to the ground just as the cave exploded. The breath went out of him and I dragged him up after several seconds. He was mumbling something incoherent. I fought through the dust, found our ropes, and guided his hands onto his.

"Up, up, up!" I screamed and slapped Jacque on the face as hard as possible. He looked at me then snapped out of his dazed and began to climb. I followed suit. A half-minute later we reached the top and as we were about to climb over, something big flew over the edge and hit the wall opposite us. A screech was heard and a loud thud below extinguished the orb's light.

"What the fuck was that?" I looked over at Jacque. He just stared at me, his eyes wide and his face white. Fearing for Kit, I quickly crawled over the edge. He stood near the back of the cave opening, his gun drawn. He looked completely gone and as we rushed toward him, he pointed his gun at my heart.

"Code! Give me the fucking passcode!"

I stopped, confused for a second. No one had asked for a passcode since we were first shipped to this wayward planet. I fumbled through my mind.

"Figs..."

"That isn't the whole thing!" Kit screeched and I could hear the pistol's trigger compress.

"...in a winkle. You fuck-tard, I wasn't finished," I yelled and Kit immediately lowered his weapon. I pointed towards the edge. "What was that?"

"You playing some game on us you sick fuck," Jacque said and tried to crack a smile as he walked towards Kit. Kit was still expressionless and he occasionally gripped his gun tight and lifted it in front of him. I eventually disarmed him. Then suddenly, Kit was back with us and he jumped into the air.

"We need to leave! Something attacked me. I don't know...fuck, what the hell was that? I couldn't really see...it had eyes. There was no life in them, like two flashlights floating in the darkness..."

Looking at Jacque we both gave a silent 'oh-my-fucking-god' and immediately ran towards the hole and crawled out. Turning around, I reached down and helped Kit up and out then began running towards the car. The engine failed to start, not a sound was heard. I quickly popped the hood and jumped back at what I saw. The engine had been removed, clean cut; pipes and wires the only indication of its previous existence. Jacque and Kit came over and saw the carnage. They looked at one another then back at the car.

"What the fuck!?! How does this happen...?" Kit blurted, his voice cracking a bit. "Give me back my gun. Krill, give me back my gun!"

"They don't pay us enough to deal with this kind of shit," Jacque said and drew his pistol once more.

"I bet someone at base is getting a kick out of playing games with us. Guess we're walking back. Grab your stuff," I said and slammed the hood shut. We got our back-up packs from the back and threw them over our shoulders. As we followed the car's tracks back to base, I heard a howl in the night.

"Hey guys, stop for a second," I said and stood still. There was nothing.

"Give it up Krill, we're just imagining things. The night does that to people," Jacque said and continued walking.

"Yeah..." I said and peered into the darkness behind us. I swear that the air shifted, but it was only for a moment. "...you're probably right."

setting the record straight

The sun beat down and I raised my hand to cover my eyes. It had been days, weeks, maybe even years. Who knew? I surely didn't. The dry sands whipped our faces, blurring our vision and making us believe we saw things. Water, chief among them. Haha, it's funny how that most abundant always seems to be the end of us. You either drown in it or die from not having it. No one wins. Someone told me that they'd managed to survive a month without water. I don't believe it, but guess I'm about to find out. We'd seen other things. Silver buildings that rose into the sky, it blinded us and as we got close, a sandstorm would appear and when it was gone, so was the house. It is incredible what you imagine when under stress...

Anyhow, this was no place for man. The suns burn. I'm growing tanner by the minute and there isn't anything I can do. We didn't have our suits. They normally protect us on hostile worlds like this one. They always had a slight glow, as if someone had turned up the exposure. Not sure why they were like that, but they weren't even white, like the old space suits. They were an bright green. Horrible for camouflage. We rarely needed it and it wouldn't help in this sweltering heat. We'd just be cooked inside. Several times I swear my skin sizzled. Little blobs of it bubbled up and plopped on the ground nearby. Not sure. When I patted myself, everything seems fine. Could be the hallucinations. Should have brought more water.

We were a couple days in and an interesting dune appeared ahead. It rose like a spire. Maybe it was made of rock. We hadn't seen any rock. I looking to my right to give a signal to move toward the spire. I saw Juri walking with a slow limp. This isn't place for a fat man either. He blundered about. At times he would swipe the air around him and other times would kneel in the sand. He would grab sand, sometimes, and bring it to his mouth. I'd have to run (let's be honest, I was walking but it felt like a sprint) over and swap it out of his hand. He'd sometimes look up, confused. I never wasted time explaining things to him. He was long gone before I was. We continued to walk toward the spire. It seemed to retreat as we got nearer. I hope it's not another illusion. Life's cruel that way.

One might feel sorry for us. But in truth, I'd be laughing my ass off while eating popcorn to watch two fools like us try to do the impossible. You see, we knew this would happen. Well, not entirely. I might as well explain. To avoid confusion. Or misunderstandings.

We belonged to **Chyll**. She was one of the most esteemed cargo vessels in this region of the galaxy. From Xirxi to Jolk, we'd seen it all. Now, not to mislead, we were not exactly the most honest of cargo haulers. That didn't pay enough to support the upgrades and massive crew she had. No, we made money on the side, searching the galaxy for lost treasures. Or goods. No people. Never mind, mostly goods. Thieves? That'd be a bit harsh. Bounty hunters? You might call us that. Smugglers? Sometimes, but that wouldn't capture the essence of our...can't find the word. A most direct example will suffice.

Some rich matron on Earth had lost some treasure. Or trinket. We were not entirely clear what it was. The captain just said to trust him. There was urgency to what he said, always. We obliged. However, a year past and nothing arose. Was found, mind you. As you can imagine, I prefer to get paid, rather than not. But we also crave...adventure? No, we'd had

plenty of that visiting the hoodlums of the outer colonies or death traps of the inner worlds. Money? No, we had that as well. Plenty, in fact. We desired a goal, with a beginning and end. Obvious objectives. You know, a purpose. This past year was spent on a wild goose chase. I hate geese. That didn't sit well with some of us, you see. Not my attitude toward geese (though some people were at odds with me over that), but the hunt. So we decided to do something about it. By that I mean jump ship.

Now, it was nothing dramatic. A Jok Granger-style action sequence with explosives going off as we roll down the hills of a foreign world with space chicks at the bottom, arms spread wide? No, we simply told the captain and he dropped us off at the nearest planet. Said good luck. Turns out we hadn't read our contracts quite right. They had a (tiny) 'mutiny' clause as they called it. Says that if we 'mutiny' then we lose all claims to wealth earned and must forfeit our presence on the ship within a day. Well, forfeiting ship in-between star systems is...unpleasant. For obvious reasons. So our captain, being the gracious man that he is, waited till we arrived at this hell hole orbiting twin stars. Dumped us right out, he did. But where was I?

The desert. Unlike any I'd seen, in a while. It wasn't just barren, but lifeless in every sense of the word. Not even small weeds grew. We'd put a couple water bottles and breathing masks in our packs before being dropped off. Good call. Unfortunately, years of endless water had left us unprepared. We'd finish it off within the first day. Luckily the nights were cool. Too cool. Freezing even. Every once in a while I would bury my hands in the sand and give a sigh of relief as they sucked away every last bit of warmth. The next day I would attempt to strip down (stupid in retrospect, I know) and prevent myself from simultaneously burning to death and losing consciousness from water loss. Juri, the fat one (the only other one, pay attention), had lost some weight. He'd probably last longer than me, all the blubber does come in handy. But he was having a time of it. Occasionally he'd fall down. Then roll down a sand dune and settle at the bottom. It was kind of pathetic. Anyways, it's best to tell a more cheerful story for the time being, until we find something...

We had decided to land on Jori (not Juri, that'd be funny). It was a populous world. With insane population density. Here was a world with 12 billion 'people' (aliens aren't people, but I'll count them in the tally since they waste space) on a 'planet' the size of the Moon (our Moon, i.e. the one orbiting Earth). Imagine, every inch was occupied by skyscrapers, save some bizarre temple/plaza in the 'capitol'. I'm not entirely sure how the whole thing stays together. They surely couldn't have used the 'planet's' (that spelling looks awkward, doesn't it?) resources to accomplish this. No, they had brought all the materials from a nearby world. A dying world. It's surface was cracked and lava continuously shifted about, giving it the appearance of a radiant, shimmering jewel. Jewels, you know, we'd been to a planet with gorgeous jewels, really pretty things. They sparkled differently depending on the color of light that hit them...Anyways, the 'planet' itself had no strategic advantage and wasn't at the crossroads of major trade routes. It was located in a system with a star like ours (you know, the Sun...) along with two much smaller ones that orbited one another. It made for a spectacular sight. Hardly worth the effort of building such a massive city-planet on the edge of known space. I'd always wondered about that. Asked around a couple times, but never got a satisfactory answer. Like people were hiding something. Didn't bother me much...

Several days into our journey, we realized that it was either me or him. Or at least, I realized that. But cannibalism would probably kill us both. Plus, that wasn't really my style. Not that any kind of killing was, but...you understand. Anyways, we talked about it, whether one should go on and the other just stay behind. Wait for a rescue party. Seemed like a bad idea, so we took a vote. It lost 0-2. Hard to argue with a unanimous vote. So we proceeded to walk through the wastelands, occasionally seeing things shimmer in the distance. This place was rather boring. Wish I could fast forward life and just see where this episode would end. Unfortunately, when recording one's thoughts, you can't just skip forward in the story. You could. Probably shouldn't.

fyi, I turned off the recording several times, hence the, you know, time skips...Not sure why anyone would be listening to this, but time for another story. It's how I keep myself sane...

"Get up Cintynce," I heard someone say to me and opened my eyes. Bad move. I was immediately blinded and raised my hand to cover my eyes. Blinking, I looked around and started to adjust. Juri was to my right. He'd lost weight. Gaunt. I was momentarily confused.

"What's going on?"

"Congratulations!" I heard someone say and looked to my left. There was a man, middle aged. With black hair. His eyes were blue and his suit matching. "We did a performance review and you passed. Psychological readings were normal during the recording. Juri and you are free to go; all charges in the murder of **your** crew have been dropped. "

"Which recording did you use?"

"The latest one on record. Unfortunately we have to wipe it afterwards. Protocol," he responded, a slight hint of a smile crossing his face. Briefly. Then it went away.

"Okay," I whispered, looking around once again. I didn't setup recordings when I was little. Not that I remember. "Performance review?"

"We test a variety of psychological and physical responses to a stressful scenario," he responded mechanically.

"Where was I?" I said, eyes narrowing. I vaguely remembered being in a hot place. Too hot. My tongue felt parched and I was craving salt. I'd never felt this before. Don't remember being in a place like that.

"Can't say, but you might have been there before," he noted, his face carried the same expression. He was lying. Wasn't sure, the world was still too bright.

"What was the name of my ship? You said I had a crew?" I inquired. The crew part was news to me. Never captained a ship. Or a vessel. To my knowledge, at least.

"Ice. Do you not remember? The medications will wear off soon. Then you should be able to remember everything."

"Everything?" I said with a hint of weariness.

"Except the most recent recording. Protocol," he said again, his face vacant.

"Are you serious?" I exclaimed. He was getting on my nerves. One of those superior types. "What is going on here? Tell me!" I began to rise out of the bed. The man looked slightly distressed. I realized I was clutching a needle. Tightly. Don't remember picking it up.

"Now, we're going to put you back to sleep. Another performance review is needed. You understand," he said. He leaned to his side and pressed down two buttons simultaneously. I started to protest but then felt my left and right arms start to chill. I looked to my right and saw Juri move his head slightly. Then something cold clamped onto my head and I felt a slight pressure. I momentarily blacked out. Then my eyes burst open to a new world.

My skin felt sticky and all around me the sounds of the jungle could be heard. To my right Juri, one of my crewmates, was hacking away at some underbrush, sweat rolled down his face and stained his shirt. He was a rather skinny man, anorexic even. We'd been out here for several days, wandering through this endless forest with no end in sight. It was a trap ridden environment. Quick sand. Solid ground that was actually a hole filled with water. Occasionally we ran across some exotic species, an ostrich-looking bird with fangs like a saber-toothed tiger. They would hiss and haw then scrape the ground several times before charging. Juri was quick. He would often lure them away from me. I'd grown fat and sluggish over the years. But I was a better shot and would hit them from behind while they attacked Juri. It seemed to draw more of them over, each time we killed one of their kin. No other choice. Hopefully we'd find safety before their numbers grew too large to handle.

Now, you must be feeling sorry for us. But in truth, we'd gotten ourselves into this scenario. You see, we had planned for this to happen. Well, not entirely. I might as well explain. To avoid confusion. Or misunderstandings...

putting the customer first

“So, Mr. Paterson, I have heard great things about your business. The earnings reports you gave me look stellar. But there aren’t any real details about what your business **does**. I couldn’t find specific information on your considerable series A funding. As a series B investor, I would like to know a little more before investing.”

“Certainly, would you like me to tell a couple stories about the company’s founding? Many find them quite informative.”

“I would be glad. Just give me a minute to get out my notepad.” I stared at the young investor. She was quite cute, with curly blond hair and a petite body. She reached forward and pulled out her small laptop. I waited a bit for her to get ready and then began.

“When I was young, I watched a special on TV about a sterling executive, Bill Randon. He was quite young at the time and headed a Fortune 500 company. Bill was a kindly man, very hard working and a home-town boy. While other executives were receiving massive compensation packages, he only made a workman’s salary. He would sit in the workshop thinking of some new idea or creating it instead of buying a yacht and going fishing. He gave an interview during the special about his early years and it entranced me. He hailed from a little known town in Illinois called Johnsbury. He’d spent many years working in his father’s grocery store. Nothing special but he learned a lot. His father had a habit of disappearing to an old cabin several miles north in Silver Lake. Normally, no one would come with him; he preferred to go alone and sequester himself from the world. His buddies would often joke, when they came by the store and asked Bill where his father was, that his father went to jerk it. The mother had passed away years ago and his father was not interested in finding someone else. One time, Bill had nagged his father about the cabin and he took him up to Silver Lake one weekend. His father had built the cabin himself. It was small and wasn’t completely sealed—there were holes where some logs met and when it rained the place would become extremely uncomfortable. The morning after they arrived, Bill lay on the floor and stared at the wall for hours. Not a single noise would permeate the room and he often looked over and checked to make sure his father was there. His father sat with his eyes closed and knees crossed, somewhat reminiscent of the Buddha. A small stream of water poured onto his balding forehead, but he didn’t budge. The following morning they got in their old Ford and drove back south to Johnsbury. This single trip greatly affected Bill, not right away, but with time. He began to understand, as homework piled up and duties at the store increased, why his father routinely took these trips. He needed to clear his mind. That last sentence stuck with me and still guides my work.”

“That’s a touching story.”

“Yes. I believe...relief...is what many people seek, but it is hard to find in modern society. I provide solace, a way for people to reflect and move forward. People like it.”

“I heard other things about the business...”

“Yes, yes. Let me tell you,” I said, shifting in my seat a bit.

"I had moved out West, to the glittering metropolises of LA, San Francisco, and Phoenix. Unlike the congested Northeast or the dreary Midwest, these people knew what it meant to be relaxed, to have a good time. I lived for a while the Bay Area, a little south of San Francisco. Walking around the city, traveling in the surrounding areas, and doing business in the downtown also taught me another thing: there are an extraordinary number of con artists in the world. I had the pleasure of working in software at the time and was courted by the most respected companies, many of which you probably don't remember. They would often host events where people from competitors or freelancers in the Bay area would come and sell their wares. I would often see pitches for amazing pieces of technology, some of which seemed too good, too professional, to be a one man job. As you might infer, I'm a bit arrogant and at the time, a bit of a hardass as well. Now, I would start to question them, beginning with the dreaded 'Why?' questions. This would eventually reveal their falsehood. But not always, some were rather clever. They came prepared and answered my questions with a plethora of jargon and other industry speak. I would eventually relent and go find another person to harass. However, not everyone at my company was so...cautious. There were a couple products we bought for large sums of money only for them to turn out to be duds. Big, fat duds that didn't live up to their billing," I said with a bit of a grimace and stared at the wall for a second.

"That's life, right?" she said, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

"Yep. I hadn't encountered conning at that scale before. To this day, I'll never forget the look in those men's eyes when my boss shook their hands. They were in a world of bliss. I realized conning could be a profitable business."

"So, you launder money?" she asked and her left eyebrow began to rise.

"Not quite, I make people happy. Let me tell you one last tale," I said, leaning forward.

"Sure," she said as a hint of interest and confusion ran across her face.

"After a while out West I began to crave the hustle and bustle of the East. So I packed up and went out to New York. I never really liked the place, even though I grew up nearby in Jersey. I worked in finance, algorithmic trading. Very boring stuff: long hours, many egos, and good pay. I tended to go out with the boys for drinking and dinner at the high-end establishments. We'd play credit card roulette: all cards would go in the middle of the table and the waiter would choose a random one to charge the entire bill to. Fun times. Many conversations would inevitably center on people's portfolios, the latest hack they'd figured out to make their algorithm run a nanosecond faster or other self-centered bullshit. You see, unlike conning, which required a dash of intelligence mixed with the balls to keep a straight face through the entire scheme, this was just... narcissistic."

"What does this have?..."

"Patience, I'm about to finish. You can put a con man to use. A hard worker is even better, as was the case with Bill. But what do you do with people that are completely narcissistic? Well, I came across the brilliant idea that narcissistic people will pay big money to boost their ego and sense of self-worth. And there is no better way to do that than to find out what other people think about you, right? It's true, so I help these types of people out. Then I realized,

the con man and those seeking relief also would value my services. So I setup shop. And here I am.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Paterson. I love your stories, but what exactly **is** your business?”

“Oh, it’s quite respectable. I help people get themselves kidnapped.”

countdown to equality

It was December 31st, 2089 and I was feeling a bit hungry. The neighbors down the street were throwing a New Year's party; they were a superstitious bunch and assumed all their savings would disappear on New Year's Day due to a computer glitch. I decided to pitch in, though I'm not the superstitious type, just to show my appreciation. The parties from past years, after all, were quite a hoot.

I headed over to the store at half-past eight and got there before the morning rush. I carried a small basket with me and walked down the aisle, throwing in groceries as I went: a load of rye bread, couple crackers, can of salsa and couple slices of Gouda cheese. As I walked over to the counter, I rolled up my sleeves and stared at the bright blue numbers glowing a couple inches below my wrist:

Water: 3,402/3,605 gallons

Land: 45/50 acres

Air: 90/100 kg

Waste: 697/761.6 kg

Total: 4,234/4516.6+3,402

Good, I was way under and I would have roll-over for next year; I already had over three thousand in savings. I thought it was weird that they combine the surplus into one number; after all, 1 acre is much more valuable than one gallon of water. Anyways, I was always excited about my ability to reduce my footprint. Some people flouted their ability to calculate the exact buying habits needed so they would just hit the limit imposed by the government, but I found that to be quite stupid. The limit was based on consumption habits from the early part of the century, a safe level the government set to prevent depletion of resources. The Earth's population had leveled off around nine billion after a series of epidemics reduced Indian, China and Indonesia's populations to a large extent around mid-century. The pandemics were made worse by the world's dwindling resources and droughts that hit the prime growing regions of the world. The United States was largely spared; we had ample reserves and the money to buy any surplus on the international markets. Nevertheless, this shocked the nation into action.

The RESOURCE project grew out of the mania. Several engineers in elite American universities produced a small device that could be implanted under the skin. This would allow the government to track the resources used by each citizen. The engineers, fearing they would be tracked by the new device, disabled its ability to give an exact location; it would send the data to the nearest wireless hotspot and since every packet was going to the same central server, it would scramble the sender location header. People's fears were greatly relieved when this paper from the project's leader was leaked. It also allowed rapid adoption of the new technology, spurred on by an unending series of bloody revolutions, famines and other events going on in Eurasia, Africa and South America. Thus, rather than a slow phasing out of the dollar, we elected a fanatical president who made a clean, quick break with the past. We were all implanted within a couple years and on January 1st, 2070 the devices were activated. All banks were closed and it was a hot mess for several years. But I think it is for

the better. We all do.

Anyways, I scanned my items and put my arm under the reader, a few seconds later it flashed red and the numbers updated:

Water: 3,452/3,605 gallons

Land: 46/50 acres

Air: 91/100 kg

Waste: 698/761.6 kg

Total: 4,234/4516.6+3,402

I will probably buy something nice for Paul, my husband, next year; my savings were becoming rather large to safely walk around many parts of the city. I shoved the food into a plastic bag, even those cost something now and they also count the accrued land-use and waste due to landfills and plastics inability to easily degrade. It was rather warm outside and the sun shone unabated. I walked over to my neighbor's house and rapped on the door. Kolin, the host of the New Year's party, opened after several seconds.

"Hey! How are you doing? So nice you came," she said and signaled for me to come in.

"Great, great. I went by the store and got some food. Thought it'd be nice if we had some sandwiches," I said and flung off my shoes before walking in. The room was a bit warm; A/C costs a pretty penny nowadays. I never liked the cold anyways. I walked in to the smell of fresh fruits and steak grilling in the back yard. I hadn't experienced this aroma in a while. Meat was very expensive; it used to cost the world hundreds of millions of acres to raise the animals and many more growing the food used to feed them. It was disastrous and, with subsidized farming, the price never quite reflected the true costs. But this new system solved all that, it was nearly perfect. Each person was allotted the same amount of resources and they stayed constant year-to-year. In the nineteen years since its initiation, the resources used per capita dropped considerably. Of course, there were some who did not survive the new regime (pun not intended) and shortages still occurred, but it largely work. And with improving technology, prices were under a stead deflation. Everyone won.

"So, what are your plans for Independence Day?" Kolin asked me as we sat ourselves in the dining room.

"Oh, that's quite a ways off. My husband and I are probably going to sit on the patio and watch the fireworks. Nothing too special, you?" I said.

"Probably the same; perhaps we'll get another steak."

While I generally put up with Kolin's spending habits, her taste for meat annoyed me greatly. "You know they have vegetable substitutes for meat, they're quite cheap."

"I know, I know. You've tasted real meat, right? At least before RESOURCE you did. You agree about the taste," she said, smacking her lips and looking off into the distance. "No vegetable concoction can replace that. Damn the price."

"How are you able to live with having no savings? What if something happens? You know

they took away the safety net. The Earth has no room to wasting resources like that..."

"We know!" she said, a bit irritated. She tended to get this way when I ask her about meat or savings. "Stop preaching. It's better to enjoy things now and hedge against a system glitch than hold onto meaningless resources. Plus, it's not like in the past, there's no interest. So why save?"

"Yeah, I just like to have them, you know, just in case. John's trying to find work?" I inquired, changing the topic to something less intrusive. Her husband had been unemployed for a year now; RESOURCE didn't allocate more resources if one worked longer, harder and faster. It was becoming a problem; many of the people who made this country tick, like John, now just sat around and watched TV or went into stasis to save resources. John used to have two implants; corporations were considered their own people with resources shared between the employees. But it had been a pain and the effort to manage the resources and avoid abuse proved too much. He quit and didn't make a single gallon or acre off of the twenty years of hard work. Unfortunate that.

"No. He has no motive. I've been trying to get him to apply for menial jobs, so he doesn't just waste away, but I'm growing tired. At the end of the day, it doesn't make a difference. We'll just be allocated the same resources as everyone else."

"True, true. I've been having the same problems with Paul, he just sits about and does nothing," I said and shook my head. I reached over and turned on the TV, the mid-day news was on.

"A new report from the Dept. of State shows that the Earth's population is starting to grow again. The President and Dept. of RESOURCE Chair will be making a joint appearance before the nation to speak about coming changes in light of this recent development..." I reached over and turned off the TV. I never liked the news and much less hearing from the Dept. of RESOURCE Chair. Kolin and I walked over to the patio and found John and Paul there; Paul and I always arrived at parties or occasions separately. We didn't want to appear like the clingy type. We continued to chat and waited for the announcer to begin the countdown.

One minute until the New Year. I smiled and looked again at my arm; I'd saved a good deal of resources this year. Paul got up and sat next to me on the patio as we all watched the dazzling display of green, red and yellow that filled the sky. Then the countdown began and the sky filled with massive numbers. I looked over at Paul and we simultaneously began the chant along with everyone else, "10...9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1...Happy New Year!" We screamed and I leaned over and gave him a long, hard kiss. I lifted up the sleeve on my jacket and took a look at my newfound savings:

Water: 0/3,505 gallons

Land: 0/49 acres

Air: 0/95kg

Waste: 0/751.4 kg

Total: 0/4400.4+0

"What the...Paul...look at your arm for me," I whispered, a slight nervousness entering my

voice.

“What is it honey? Didn’t get your savings?” he responded jokingly and gave me a poke in the rib. I batted his arm away.

“Stop! Just look at your arm,” I said again, my voice rising and a bit more crazed as I gave my arm another a look. Nothing had changed.

“Okay, okay,” he said and lifted up his sleeve and let out a small yelp. “What the hell?”

Kolin came running over, having come to the same realization as us. “The system had glitched. I told you!” she yelled and I glared at her. This couldn’t be true. RESOURCE never glitched, at least, not like this. I got up, ran to the TV and flipped it on. The Dept. of Resources chair was announcing something.

“...a planet without humanity is one without cancer and is healthier for it. On this day, RESOURCE’s twentieth anniversary, some changes have been made to the system...”

weatherman's god

"You know Harry, I don't understand this God."

"What about him Bob?"

"He went through all the trouble of creating life, only to make it mortal."

"Yes, and...?"

"Well, why did he go through all the trouble of making us, if only to let us die. Seems like a waste."

"There's a lot of waste in the world Bob, this ain't no different."

"No, but think about it. He's omnipresent, no? He sees and knows all. Past, present and future. The whole shebang. But he can't make us immortal?"

"Maybe he can't. Or doesn't want to. That ever cross ya mind?"

"No Harry, it didn't. I mean, why would it? He's God, right? He built the Universe!"

"What if he's just God, not a god? Ever think about that? What if he can only build, Bob. What if he only has some nails and a hammer."

"What? No, God the Builder? That can't be. He's just an overblown **engineer**"

"You know Bob, people probably think we're Gods."

"What?"

"Think about it," Harry said and adjusted one of a thousand knobs on the control panel that controlled the infinitely complex computer simulation running on the screen in front of them.

"How many people even know what we do? Or understand it? I'll give you a dozen people, tops. To everyone else, what're we doing?"

"Simulating the weather."

"Predicting the future I would call it. Who else predicts the future? Oracles? Witches? No, we do. Precisely and accurately. Then we hand down our judgments from on high. We're gods! Do you feel like one?"

"Well no Harry, I don't. And I don't see where this is going."

"Your no god, I'm surely not," Harry said and pointed to the rolls of fat near his waist. "What kind of god would give himself a body like this?"

"Agreed," Bob said and Harry shot him a dirty look.

"You weren't supposed to agree. Anyways, maybe God is like us, you know, an ordinary guy who happened to create the Universe."

"But that doesn't explain why he made it so cruel, so unforgiving..."

"Look at our simulations. We delete entire worlds with a single keystroke and create new ones in the same fashion. Are you cruel?"

"I generally consider myself nice Harry."

"Well Bob, to those little people in the simulation, you are a cruel and evil deity. You bring tornadoes whenever it is convenient and start forest fires just to see how it will affect crop growth."

"It's just a simulation! Jesus Harry, don't anthropomorphize a couple 1s and 0s."

"But what if, Harry, what if? Maybe God's just an engineer," Harry lifted his finger and pressed a red button on the panel, the elaborate simulation of **El Niño** in twenty years flickered into nothing. "Or just a bored weatherman trying to get by."

"So maybe God isn't so vengeful after all..."

"...he's just trying to adjust the dials and screws up from time to time," Harry said and looked up. The screen flickered on and focused on a landmass that looked like the end of a frying pan handle.

"You think he notices all the people suffering?" Bob said and leaned his elbow down on the panel, accidentally depressing a bright blue button with a little swirly symbol. The scene on the screen flickered for a bit, then a massive hurricane began to form and tear its way across the sea towards the handle-like landmass. Bob took no notice and stared off into space, thinking.

"Probably not, Bob," Harry looked up at the screen and jotted a few lines on his notepad. "Probably not."

killing time

"You have been charged with killing Time, how do you plead?"

I looked up at the investigator and then around at all the others in the room. "Not guilty. I don't even..."

"SILENCE!" the judge screamed at the top of his voice and began wagging his jeweled, plump finger at me. His grey hair was full of little bells that jingled every time he moved that oversized head of his. His eyes shone an unnatural magenta and I couldn't for the life of me identify what graced his lips. "WE WILL HAVE NO DISOBEDIENCE IN THE COURT."

"Thank you Judge Wendly, permission to treat the witness as hostile?"

"GRANTED!" Judge Wendly bellowed and leaned back, patting his watermelon belly. The courtroom filled with the sounds of bells and a faint odor wafted my way. He always seemed to grin after making his grand pronouncements, normally accompanied by equally obnoxious pointing of his finger. I had a mind to call him cur, but kept my lips shut tight.

This was all a bit mental. One minute I am loafing about on the beach, the next here I am, being tried for killing time. Not exactly sure what that meant. Some good-for-nothing was campaigning for re-election and thought it would be a brilliant idea to charge people with killing time. Either that, or it was the new DA trying to appear tough. Or...I don't know, there were a million hypotheses being thrown around in the jail. Yes, they threw us all in jail, an enormous insult for such a petty crime. I didn't really know who to believe, surely not the fat oaf who wandered about during lunch trying to steal people's food and definitely not the slimy one who slithered about asking people for hand-outs. But in any case, those are the facts and here I am now.

"You were at Rawling Beach last Thursday?"

"Yes?" I didn't know where this was going, that was the last place I recalled being and they didn't tell us the time. It was quite queer. I'd asked once and the guard, laughing, said, "You killed Time. Now, kind of hard to tell you anything about Time when there ain't no Time, isn't that so?" Anyways, the investigator was staring at me; apparently my wandering mind was plain to see.

"Are you there? Is that a yes or a no?"

"I'm not sure, nobody has told me the time yet."

"It is Wednesday."

"When, what's the date?"

"Judge Wendly, permission to treat witness as bellicose."

"Wait, what? That's not even..." I started to rise from my seat, stammering.

"YOU WILL BE SILENT UNLESS QUESTIONED. BE SEATED! PERMISSION GRANTED."

Bellicose witness? What court of law was this? I couldn't tell if they were making shit up as they went or if this was just some comedy hour that I'd been left in the dark about. I scanned the room once more and recognized the faces for the first time. They were all perfumed and had make-up lining every inch of their faces. Many wore bright, warm colored lipstick—even the males—that contrasted sharply with their pure-white faces. All of them had eyes like none I had ever seen, reds swirling in a sea of auburn and black or beige cutting across a tango-inspired background. Their pupils were audaciously small and they all looked a bit like dolls. You know, the ones that seem to stare into your soul when you look them in the eye. Very uncomfortable. They were human, no doubt, but some mangled approximation at best. I remembered them, they were the people that never saw sunlight, always working at their desk, in their cars or at their homes. Heard they hated lazy people or allowing time to waste away.

"You are Mani Koll?" the investigator said and began flipping through a large binder that had surreptitiously appeared in his hands. Whence it came and how I had not noticed him walk a hundred meters to his desk and back, I cannot say. But it was there, and that was that.

"Yes. You have that on record..."

"Shut up. You are a bellicose witness and I may respond with punishment as I see fit. Take care to only answer my questions," the investigator said as he cut me off, a slight smirk crossing his face.

"Okay..."

"I said shut up!" he yelled, causing several eyes in the audience to widen, something I thought impossible given the make-up. He looked around and straightened his purple suit and craned his head from side-to-side. He took a deep breath, eyes closed, then looked at me with a calmness that hid an unnecessary fury, given the circumstances. "Now, **Mani**, what were you doing at Rawling Beach last Wednesday?"

"But you said **Thursday**...?"

"Officer, can you cane the witness please," the investigator said and beckoned a man who looked a grotesque cross between a walrus and an elephant. He waddled toward me, lifted his baton and hit me on the head twice. Hard. He then turned around and waddled back to his place near the entrance of the courtroom. He wasn't wearing make-up.

"Next time it will be four. Then eight, you see where this is going? Now, you killed Time."

"No, I was killing time before someone kidnapped me and brought me here."

"Oh, so you **didn't** finish the job? How unfortunate. Yet we still found Time unavailable..."

"I mean, if you're that busy..."

"Officer, please," the investigator said and the walrus waddled over. As he lifted the cane, I reached up and grabbed at it. He looked at me, shocked, and wrenched the cane free. Every inch of his face was covered in pimples and warts; it almost hurt my eyes to look at

him. I desperately wanted to borrow whatever stylist transformed the people in the courtroom crowd into the hellish beauties they'd become.

"Don't make this hard on yourself," the investigator said and took the cane from the walrus and began to pummel me faster than I imagined anyone could. Four smacks later and my lips were bleeding. It hurt. And I still didn't know why I was here. I looked over at Judge Wendly and he seemed to be picking at his teeth. When I started to make a noise, he peered over at me and smiled. I knew better than to continue.

"Now, Time was not available. Time, no find. Understando?" he said with that same, irritating smirk. That wasn't even castellano. What was he getting at? "How do you explain this? Answer the question."

"Maybe you had other things to do. I don't know, doesn't everyone kill time every once in a while?" I blurted out. A couple droplets of blood flew across the room and landed on the investigator's shiny yellow shoes. He looked down and then at me, his yellow eyes narrowing. The courtroom went silent for a second then erupted in a chorus of voices.

"How dare he accuse...I never...the nerve to say such things...we are all innocent and hard-working...these street hooligans think everyone is like them...the murderous loafers..."

"SILENCE, I WILL HAVE SILENCE," Judge Wendly bellowed and wagged his fingers at me. "YOU WILL **NOT** LAY ALLEGATIONS AGAINST THOSE IN THE COURTROOM. UNDERSTAND?"

"Yes, Your Honor," I said, cowering back a bit at the sudden fury behind his booming voice. "I'm just trying to understand the case. What exactly am I being charged with?"

"KILLING TIME! IS THAT HARD TO UNDERSTAND?"

"Sorry, I just..."

"Shut up you." the investigator said, suddenly a foot away from me. He leaned over the witness stand and that same smirk that irritated me so had returned. "I have another question. Do you know a certain Time Riddle?"

"I do! I know many time riddles. Though, not all of them were good."

"Were?"

"I don't like to remember them so rid myself of them after a while. Nobody liked them."

"You don't say. Who were these nobodies?"

I felt like this was a trap, a way to play with me and get me to say something incriminating. Looking into the investigator's yellow eyes, which were spotted with black flecks that seemed to shimmer, I saw nothing. He squinted and then turned around with an excessive flourish to his movements. Arriving at his desk, he opened the binder and then turned to face me again.

"Perhaps you have forgotten what you killed. Time was very popular; everyone would change their schedules to get more Time."

"Nothing unusual there," I accidentally blurted out.

"SHUT UP! Beat him, beat him!" the investigator's demeanor changed once again and he was in full rage. Apparently wasting time is a big offense here. Eight beatings later, he returned to his dialog. "But Time became like that officer over there, ugly, useless and a drag. We needed to make-up Time, a new look for a new era. And you took away that opportunity."

"But killing time is not a crime! Just because you frown on it..."

"Do you hear this? Judge, I trust you will find this man guilty."

"IT SHALL BE SO!"

"And punish him for his crimes. We can't have anyone else killing Time. People have better things to do."

flesh and blood

Like many people, I was programmed to like my job, least I grow bored or suicidal. But this was the future! The biologists were supposed to engineer out man's desires and policy makers slowly outlaw this barbaric practice. But it is hardly surprising that didn't happen.

"You ready women? Two minutes. TWO MINUTES. You hear me? Why aren't already sanitary, think a customer wants to see you like that? Hot messes ain't useful to me..."

I stared up at my boss. He was rather pudgy and wore a pressed Armani suite; he thought himself a legitimate businessman. It was a bit pathetic. Sometimes I would snap back, but he'd beat me. First couple times it didn't hurt, but he'd gotten wise and started tasing me. Left bruises and I would sit for several hours in the corner, twitching. I made a sorry sight, my tongue hanging out, tears rolling down my eyes like a little girl. That made me all the more angry, but more at myself than him. Would often take the pencil from the draw near my bed, where I kept all my beautifiers, and drive it into my leg. As if that would make me forget the pain.

"Bitch, hey BITCH! He's here. Pleasure him!" he shouted and a young man, naught thirty, strolled in. I looked him in the eyes and just stared, waiting for him to turn away. Weak men did that sometimes, those embarrassed by what they were doing. It gave me a bit of power over them, allowed me to wear them down and make the night go easier—on me. But there were other men, like this one, who didn't avert their gaze, but responded in kind. And some had fire in their eyes...those were the ones that scared me most. He had that fire.

"Get on the bed, I have a meeting in an hour," was all he said as he went about his business. No foreplay, no love, no talk. I lay in the corner a half-hour later and drove the pencil into my leg once more. It would soon heal, and I was good with creams, no one would notice. I fell asleep.

I awoke several hours later and felt oddly calm. The rage was gone and the wound had begun to patch itself up. Getting up, I immediately fell back down, the world spinning. I panicked a bit, this had only happened once before and they had sent me back to the facilities were they found women like me. I hated that place, it was all white and everyone poked, prodded and took notes while another went about his business carving me up to see what was wrong. They never put you under, cheap bastards. Some snickered and said we'd lost the ability to feel anyways. But this was different. I tried once more and got far enough to slump on the bed nearby. The door flew open.

"Ah, I see the sedatives are working! Didn't startle you, did I? Government mandate. All you vapid whores were acting up!" I looked at him, a bit confused at what he was talking about. I couldn't quite think straight, it was very strange and rarely happened, even when a customer was climaxing in me. But then I started to realize. "Haha, think you were all alone in this room at night? We watch, you're expensive. Can't let my own property destroy itself!"

And that's when it began. They sedates us. All of us. But that was years back and I try to forget the intermediate period. They eventually lifted the mandate and I started to feel again. This pleased the customers. Most used to complain when we would stare blankly at them

as they filled us. Others expressed anger. One used to hit me, screaming “Stupid cunt! I’m better than that, I’ve pleased all sorts of women. Don’t act bored with me!”

A couple customers responded too strongly to this sudden expression of emotions by their pleasers. There was one, who fell in love with more than my body. He wasn’t the most handsome man, but he was rich. Never really loved riches, I had no use for money. If I won the lottery and became a millionaire, it wouldn’t free me. I couldn’t buy my way out of this hell. Legally, I was bound to this place, never to leave except for a check-up by the company that had sold me. But he would come often, both in and to see me. I didn’t much mind his company, it helped fill the boredom and loneliness—hours could pass in the room between appointments and I wasn’t allowed to leave. Trying to daydream only worked for so long. He talked about his wife and how, oddly enough, she approved of his visits with me. Apparently she viewed me as no threat, the inhuman thing that I was. I almost slapped him for even mentioning that, but I had learned to control the flare-ups. With the sedatives no longer coursing through my body I had to be careful. They’d warned that they’ve be reapplied if we did anything...rash. He started talking about the new speedjet he planned on buying, but I’d grown bored with talk and auto-piloted the rest of the conversation.

Everything was going well until some Romanian monkey-whore ruined everything. Taking us off sedatives brought in mountains of cash (people like emotions in their play-things), but there were risks. Apparently reversing the mandate also lifted other bans. And some countries newly lax laws about how they breed us came back to haunt them. In place of sedatives, we were supplied serums. Some places spiked it with a little dopamine and nitrous oxide, to give us the kick needed to keep going and to smile the entire time. Others added a little estrogen mixed with acetylcholine. It was an orgasmic mix and that is what they intended. Some would have controlled release; they implanted probes into our hypothalamus and could detect when we were about to reach that...high. However, some Romanian company pushed this too far. One day an owner walked into a room that had been occupied all night...against regulations. Also, it was losing him money since he operated a fixed-rate enterprise. Retard. They say he kicked open the door in full rage and jumped back several feet. A man’s head rolled toward him, all blood drained away. His lifeless body still occupied the bed, his penis erect. The girl sat in the corner, motionless. When he called out her name, she didn’t respond. Barring the door, he ran and called the facilities. The company sent over their operatives and they shut her down for good.

But this didn’t quell people’s paranoia. They feared us now, for we were everywhere and suddenly a threat. In a flurry of passion, several laws were passed that stripped us of our rights; after-all, we were just whores—no one would defend us. Some said we were inhuman creatures that should be destroyed. Ridiculous, if we were train operators would they say as much? They put us back on sedatives and this destroyed business. My boss would come in and taser me often. And he’d taken away the pencil. The tasing made my head hurt even more now that the sedatives were back on. I hated it. On the weekends, when I might go a day without anyone visiting me, I would often lay there. We weren’t fed; apparently we could survive on the nutrient mix in the sedative.

On the weeks when I brought in more customers, he would taser me less. And so I made myself more likable, so clients would return time and again. They even started to pay more

and I had a hint that some had come to like me. This made the boss happy and the tasing subsided even more.

The talker, the one whose wife was okay with this barbaric practice, had returned. He'd been away the last couple years on business, but they had relocated him back to the city. And his lust for me hadn't subsided during those years away. He was like an animal this time and I repeatedly shoved him away during our 'reunion' as he called it. I wasn't made for this level of intensity. But my lame attempts didn't stop him and only spurred him on; he had grown to like a little resistance. He finally pinned me down on the bed and as he thrust himself into me, I opened up, as I was programmed to do. He ran his hands through my hair, tugging at it a bit then bent over to kiss my face. Right in his moment of climax. His hand spasmed a bit and he yanked down on my hair. Hard. A bit harder than I've been prepared for. He suddenly stopped, withdrawing and a look of horror crossed his face. In his hand he held bits of my hair and scalp. Several small tubes leaked red fluid.

"You're a robot!?"

who needs oxygen?

LOG 2320.09.11 | GPS 101.201.222 | Vessel: GALTRON

We have entered into unknown territory, the nebula around us swirled with shades of pink, purple and orange and the light of stars long dead. It is a breathtaking sight. Several young stars drifted through the ether, they flared and burned the sky. They twinkled and each has a multi-colored halo around it. Some appeared to be pulling the gases toward them, creating an endless variety of patterns upon the sky. If you stared hard enough, you could see shapes and objects in the mist, as if you were cloud watching. How I missed clouds. Or worlds like our own. It has been two years since our last encounter with a solid planet and some of the crew had started to lose it. Luckily for us, we'd been given some ridiculous suits. I think they pumped in sedatives to keep us calm.

```
LOG->cmd(\rm{END-49:END})
```

```
LOG->cmd(\error{REDACTION})
```

```
LOG->cmd(\commit{Last sentence would make STARCOM suspicious})
```

...

Redaction accepted.

Sorry, have LOG->print(ALL) enabled so some suit commands might still appear.

I spent an unhealthy amount of time marveling at the suits. I'll describe, for anyone reading this log, these wonders of modern science. You see, the old astronaut suits had been a bit...clumsy. You wore this huge outfit that needed to be compressed by pumping in oxygen. Very inefficient. So they constructed this material mixture of copolymers, graphene and epoxy resin that allowed us to stretch the suit open then have it compress around our bodies once inside. It was terrible the first couple times you tried it on, felt like your ribs were being mutilated. But you got used to it and it provided an ample amount of maneuverability. We still needed to connect breathing mask to small tanks at our backs, not ideal, but we'd made do.

The nebula appeared to pulse and we all got ready, one of the astrophysicist had mentioned that this place should have hospitable worlds for us to explore. But that all depended on their equations and increasingly false 'theories'. I viewed them as mere hypothesis with a paucity of evidence, but I never say that to their arrogant-ass faces. We'd once spent a whole six months pursuing a dot on a screen, a possible planetoid that had been detected. Turns out it was a dead MOSFET capacitor on their old CCD camera. Fucking ridiculous. I was being paid and had no family to go back to, so what did it matter to me? But for the others, those with wives, children and relatives. Well, it took awhile to convince them not to murder some of our fellow crew. Either that or they increased the sedative dose. We couldn't disconnect the suits to check else we'd die. Or so they told us. Ah well.

"Hey! Hey! We've got something at 101.201.222[12]. Come take a look, captain! CAPTAIN!" one of the comm officers was yelling in that grating, high-pitched voice of hers. She was an ugly abomination and rightly so. She'd be endlessly harassed otherwise. Actually,

every 'lady' on this forlorn vessel seemed to be a hybrid between a woman and a beast. Betting STARCOM did that on purpose, to prevent space orgies and the inevitable lawsuits and offspring that would result. But it made all the men very...uptight. Always itching to kill something. Anyways, she kept up her chatter. "Someone bring the ship around and burn thrusters. We need to get there FAST. If it's not aligned between us and this star I can't track it."

Apparently someone was listening to her holler and the ship jerked. I walked around to the main console room and gazed at the screen. Around me people typed stuff. They were ALWAYS typing. Looked like gibberish. The room was an eerie white, all clean and such. Around the walkways and catwalks were red lines accented with black borders. The names of the different rooms were indicated with an arrow and massive, bold white letters. The screen flickered as someone changed to another, more expensive sensor that gave a proper view of the world. And what a world it was.

We had only encountered several M1, or Earth-like, planetoids during our many adventures. One had contained aliens; they beautiful specimens, but weak, and we put them down pretty rapidly. They appeared to be a cross between a jellyfish and a Gila monster. They would float in the air and had claws the size of forearms. Their teeth were poisonous, at least to us. One of our astrobiologist found that out to his detriment. But the best thing about them? Their bodies glowed as you shot them. Made for great killing, there was no ambiguity if you missed. Like playing a video game, if you will. Anyways, since then, we'd been a bit cocky and were itching to destroy other inferior species. After all, this was our galaxy.

The planet continued to enlarge and slowly filled the screen. We could see the blues, reds and greens that swirled. There didn't seem to be any defined landscape, likely owing to the twin stars that appeared to light both sides of the world equally. There were huge patches of ruby-red floating in a sea of blue. Earthen-brown structures jutted from the green and blue landscape that we assumed were continents.

"Alright! Everyone knows what to do. This is an M1, treat it as such. Let's do this!" our captain bellowed with his customary energy and fist-pumping rhetoric. He wore a pitch-black suit that had a gold strip running down the backside, where his spin should be. He looked over to me and beckon, I was part of the drop-team. First in, last out. I bent down and did a couple stretches then jump in the air a couple times. Little karate kick here, another there and I was good to go. I followed him and the rest to the pods, little wonders of engineering that allowed us to pull several tens of Gs with turning into bloody splotches. I grabbed the railing above me and swung back, opening the latch. Before I could swing forward, a comm officer ran by and pressed the ready button and the pod lite up a bright blue. I gave her a thumbs up then kicked off of the wall behind me and smashed my feet into the slots at the bottom of the craft. A latched hissed closed above me and my feet were bolted into place. Several more machines whirred and clamped me down then with a deafening roar the pod exited from its docking point. There were no viewports, but minutes later I felt the atmosphere angrily greet me followed by a sudden deceleration. **Thump!** I jerked forward a bit then reached down and put my hand around my INC-224, or as I like to call it, the Liberator.

The pod hissed open, I jumped out and was momentarily blinded by the surroundings. This

twin star thing didn't agree with my single star eyes, but I adjusted after a pause. Around me several others were crawling out of their pods and dialing into the panels. With a whir each pod shut closed, awaiting it's owners return.

"Form up!" our captain yelled and gave a signal with his remaining two fingers. I looked at the back of my right hand, the compass kept spinning in circles. "Captain, there's no due north," I called out and pointed to my hand. He gave a nod then pulled his own INC-224 from his back harness and armed it. "Everyone set the pods as home point, all directions are to be based on those as origins." Several seconds later, everyone was ready and we moved out.

This world was covered with vegetation and we had to hack our way through foliage dense as fog and underbrush that seemed to reach-up and grasp at our knees. It wasn't all green, as we were used to, but all manner of colors. Those twin stars probably allowed the plants to be inefficient like that. Several trees had bright yellow trunks with red strips scything their way up from the base. Their branches were a mixture of blue and white with leaves a blinding gold. Several times I had to hit someone over the head to break their awe-struck gaze. This was exploration, not sight-seeing.

We continued forth and a mountain appeared in view, towering above the surrounding landscape. But something, surprise, was wrong about it. It seemed to jut upwards at times, then sink again and it was made of a crystal-like rock that reflected the stars light in all manner of directions. You could see into its core and out the other side. We all stopped and marveled. "Captain, think we should..." and at that instant, all hell broke lose.

To my right, one of the crew was lopped in half and before the upper-half of his body could hit the ground, it vaporized. I dropped to the ground and hit the upper part of my left hand twice, three times then paused and smacked it one last time. The world around me went dark, but I could hear the screams all around and the sound of fire. "STOP, STOP MOVING!" our captain bellowed and I hear echoes of the same, rhythmic tapping—two tap, three tap, SMACK. I felt a slight prickle confirming that other members had gone dark, or invisible. We'd perfected the technology to where you couldn't be seen, but neither could you see. The panels merely used all the information from light hitting one side of your suit and projected it to the appropriate panels on the opposite side. Simple, but effective. It never failed. The prickling helped us locate one another while dark, but suddenly, bit-by-bit, the prickling stopped. And I heard a gurgled scream each time. Holding my breath, I slithered along the ground towards the closest tree I could remember. I blinked twice and a small area around my eyes opened up. I crept up the trunk and settled down on a nearby branch and looked below.

We were being slaughtered. One-by-one. I could hear no noise even after amplifying the signal, except the very faint, rhythmic breathing of those still left below. Faint, but it was there. That's all that could give them away. And would soon give me away. Whatever was killing us, I wasn't escaping it. I got up and dialed `ERS \o \admin`. Hopefully STARCOM gets this signal, they'll need it. I jumped down and hit the ground with a thud and yelled, "Everyone, lights ON! They can hear us, invisibility won't work here!" as I said that, my Liberator materialized in my hands and I began firing in all directions, hoping to get a glimpse of the hidden enemy. People began to appear and also started firing, making sure not to hit each other. But time

and again, someone would be sliced in half and their body vaporized. We could see no enemy, hear no sound, and feel no movement. This was futile, we would all...

TRANSMISSION STOP

LOG 2323.12.23 | GPS 101.201.222[12] | Vessel: NOBEL FORCE

We were tasked with finishing the mission that STARCOM's last vessel failed to complete. They were incompetent, arrogant and lost their entire crew in the process. We had received their distress signal, or rather the signal from a lone crew member who followed protocol, reporting of an attack by an unknown force. Word had leaked of the first human casualty to an alien race and STARCOM didn't think this looked good for the company. They also wanted to know what defeated their suits. So they sent us to ameliorate the situation.

As we approached the planet, I tried to yell a command, but then remember I couldn't. They had removed our lungs and instead supplied purified oxygen directly to our blood stream via IV. Some new buffer slurry was also mixed in, the bicarbonate system failed without our exhalation of carbon dioxide and they didn't want the entire crew dying of acidemia before we even left. It was entirely uncomfortably and it meant we had to first think of something really intense, to activate the mind-readers, then transmit our thoughts. Inefficient, but if this was how we would defeat this enemy, then so be it.

Shall we commence landing? A voice next to me inquired. **No, not yet.** I responded and looked at the screen once more. I had a mind to just glaze the planet, but STARCOM wanted evidence that these beast existed. So I blared **SUIT UP** and ran to the nearest pod, slammed my feet into the slots and blasted down. Minutes later, I was crawling on the ground. The rest of the team had initiated our sysLINK, so all thoughts were transmitted unfiltered, and had gone invisible. I amplified our sound signal and all I got back was noise. **Alright, sounds clear. Move forward.**

We continued to slide along the ground, silent and deadly. Based on the signal from the last transmission, we should be nearing the mountain that the previous crew encountered. We entered a clearing. **STOP!** I bellowed over the sysLINK. We stopped moving and no sooner did our sysLINK temporarily overload. **Ahhhhh! kzzzzzzz..** No one bothered to move or check. We all knew what that meant. My hand drifted toward my INC-437. But a coldness gripped it and I suddenly could not move. **kzzzzzz. Ahhhhhhh! kzzzzzzzz.** Our sysLink was starting to die. I rolled over and turned off my invisibility...

TRANSMISSION STOP

```
LOG = new Log()
```

```
LOG->setLocation(101.201.222[12])
```

```
LOG->setDate(2350.05.01\12:01:02.123)
```

```
LOG->startRecord(this->getDate(),END)
```

```
No errors, log started
```

```
LOG->startTransmission(STARCOM,10.29.111.2012.22,PERSISTENT)
```

```
...
```

```
Transmission established
```

```
Database = new Database(LOG->getTransmission())
Obj created, initialized
Database->connect(STARCOM,EMPLOYEES,REPORTS,*****)
...
Connection established. Password accepted
Database->loadTable(crew GALTRON && crew NOBEL FORCE)

Database->getStatus(GALTRON)
MIA, presumed dead. Last known transmission on 2320.09.11 at 101.201.222[12].
No survivors seen.
Suit: version 2.12.
Use getStatus(GALTRON,FULL) for full report.

Database->getStatus(NOBEL FORCE)
MIA, presumed dead. Last known transmission on 2323.12.23 at 101.201.222[12].
No survivors known.
Suit: version 12.209.
Use getStatus(NOBEL FORCE,FULL) for full report.

CREW = new CREW(database->loadTable(crew 00215))
ERROR: Note, can't modify own crew. Permission restricted, read access only
granted.

PROTOCOLS = new Protocol()
PROTOCOLS->setDropship(CREW->SpyOp)

LOG->print(ALL)
Outputting all transmission to terminal.
```

Planet 102.201.222[12] appeared in viewport. Initiating transmission to STARCOM. Sending myself and team SpyOps to the surface of the planet. Two previous crews are assumed dead or terminated. Their whereabouts, status or recovery are not the primary objective. Their logs have been analyzed, proper adjustment have been made. Hands are operational, suit is fully charged, servos function exactly to spec. The rest of the crew has been charging during the journey, they should be at capacity. No discharges recorded.

Pod entered, standard protocol followed, foot slots functioned within threshold. Encountered an average of forty times Earth gravity on planet entry. The pods have landed, we set ordinate at landing point as instructed by previous crews. Surrounded by jungle, visible spectra shows variety of colors. **LOG->video(:10,VIS)**. See short video for exact detail of surroundings. Other spectrum appear neutral, some readings in the UV range and little signatures besides the stars on the IR spectra. **LOG->video(:10,UV\IR)**. See video for more detail. Proceeded toward source of original disturbance. The crystal mountain can be seen. Bright signal in the UV spectra, signal ignored...

```
OS->new OS(\admin,ELEVATED).  
Powering suite...done.  
LOG = new LOG(OS->load(\usr\.tmpVARS))  
Last session variables loaded. Error DISABLE_SERVO!_GSL1232.  
LOG->transmission(\admin,EMERGENCY).  
Signal has been boosted.
```

Suite just initiated a automatic restart, power spike detected. We are under attack. Invisibility and powering down does not seem to affect the assault intensity. We have removed our heat signatures and initialized UV noise jamming. Attack stopped until battery low, had to drop countermeasures. Lost five of eight SpyOps. Still no sign of the enemy. Suggest suit revision...

TRANSMISSION STOP

a lasting impression

It is a century and a half in the future and I am staring at my grave. Vines crawl up the sides and bits of stone have fallen off in places. Across the top my name is barely visible and the dates of my birth have long since been worn away. I look around the graveyard, at my friends, enemies, confidants and others. All of them are fading, the last vestiges of their existence being worn away by wind and rain. I hear a beep to my left and sigh. The machine only gives me ten minutes per jaunt into the future. And there is no going back, only forward by ten year increments. I started it twenty-four hours ago if my watch is to be believed.

The beeping grew louder and more urgent. I haven't actually tested what happens if I don't re-enter the ship at the specified time, but given the wastelands I keep ending up in, I'd rather not find out. I passed Marleen's gravestone on my way back and stopped. She'd been everything, until she left for some tech magnate who was to be the Next-Big-Thing. Yes, he was to leave a lasting mark on the world and who was I? Just some engineer slaving away in the depths of a DARPA project. Nothing too exciting. He'd come from Bermuda and had the backstory, charm, and looks to complete the package. I was from Cairo. No, not that Cairo, the one in Illinois. I often lamented while staring at the mirror at my nose; though everyone said otherwise I am convinced it bends rightward. Don't remember his name now, probably for the better. The beeping grew louder and I snapped out of my daydream.

BEEP BEEP BEEP bzzzt BEEP BEEP BEEP. The machines cries grew more urgent, louder and an ominous tone crept into the tune. It sounded as though the dead would wake at any moment and come clawing at my feet to drag me down, keeping me here forever. I swallowed the lingering fear, ran over and climbed into the craft. The door closed with a satisfying hiss and the machine began to whir, a sound which I could never find the source of. The viewport to my right shone white and suddenly I was in a grassy hill. It reminded me of a time long past, when my father and I used to go hunting for crawfish in the stream near our house.

"Hey boy, slow down! We've got all day, you hear?" my father called out to me as I bound down the hill. My pack bounced against my back and my small net fluttered in the wind. The day was partly cloudy and had that blue hue that I so associated with those summer days when the stream was full of life, the forest felt like an endless playground and the town smelled of fresh food. Father caught up to me and started to setup shop. He'd gotten so efficient at it, I sometimes wanted to blind-fold him to see what would happen...

The machine began whinging again and reality gripped me once more. Down below the river had run dry and fish bones littered the shore. I looked out into the distance, over the rolling hills with their wilting flowers and dried up trees. Past the forest, dense and dark, that used to be our play area. I could make-out several houses that we used to call our own. The one I had spent years in with Marleen was naught more than a chimney stack and a pile of bricks. Out beautifully decorated room, gone. I loved that room, with its dazzling parquet wood floors, an old Citapore rug from Khairabad and some odd trinkets from our trip to North Maluku. I'd installed the chimney, spent a whole summer designing it by hand and layering each brick myself. Our son, Arnold, used to sleep there. He loved the fire and the warmth of the carpet. I would often have to go and move him back to his room while he

slept. He always assumed he was a good sleep walker. Guess he'll never know, he's dead now.

BEEP BEEP BEEP bzzzt. It called out to me and I looked back one last time. I picked up a steel sign that had marked our street, the paint long gone, and ran over to the machine. Ducking under the entrance, I sat down on the cold floor. Nothing happened and I had hope this ordeal was over. Then the world outside went white and we were on our way.

I sat in the corner of the machine and scratched my name into the blemished steel. Opposite me sat the small bag I'd brought. It had some food, but most importantly, I'd carried along an escape plan. Suddenly I was flying through the air and hit the ground with a thud. I looked out the viewport and saw nothing but an endless sea of buildings. Around me buzzed the sounds of the city and a vehicle of some sort whizzed by me. It is all quite fantastical, but I see nothing of my old world. I've taken out the escape plan and got it ready. Hopefully this works.

The train pulled up to the station with barely a hiss. "Edgware Station. This is an interchange. Passengers please alight," a feminine voice announced. I glanced at the piece of paper I had chanced upon while taking my preferred shortcut between Blocks 36 and 37. It was under an old scrap of steel that I threw away. Pity people still littered, thought we'd done away with that abhorrent habit. I was about to throw away the paper, but it seemed to contain a portion of someone's screenplay. It is alright, but there are certain parts I would ameliorate. "Doors closing," called out in that annoyingly calm voice.

I leapt into the air and dashed out the door right as they slammed shut. There was a trashcan on my way to the gates where I discarded the paper. Whoever wrote it has a copy anyways, no one will miss it.

when darkness falls

“You can’t **prove** other stars exist!”

We lived in fear. Those in the past cannot understand this fear. Swirling under the sea of anxiety is hatred, a deep abhorrence for the past and all it held. I skittered along the barren floor, my features obscure and hidden by the dearth of light. A hundred, thousand, countless years ago there was light, said the old text. But none was to be found. They warned of a time when no ‘stars’ would twinkle in the sky, but they were wrong. There were never stars.

Several astronomers had begun to question our now common assumption that stars never existed and would never exist. We had only one star and that was ours. It burned so brightly that even during the night the sky shimmered. We worshiped it. It had been studied, ripped apart, and probed. But one thing baffled us, why was there not others like it?

Prominent theorist—in physics, chemistry and other fields—had begun to revise their original hypothesis in the face of endless evidence that no other entity like our star existed in this universe. We had launched probes that went past the farthest planet we had detected orbiting our star. The signal was eventually lost several decades into the venture and at no point had its far-field optics, UV, Gamma, X-ray or microwave detectors picked up anything of note. The sky was silent except for the flicker of energy from a passing comet or asteroid and the glory that was our star.

The paucity of evidence lent credence to many religious zealots who espoused the theory that a god created our star and the lack of any other objects in the sky similar to it prove our uniqueness and greatness. Relics indicated similar religions that punished scientists for claiming that our star was one among many. Maybe those old religions were right, about us being the center of the universe. It might even be possible that we were the universe. Us and our lone star. That made some people go a little crazy.

But something grated at everyone, the past. They told of skies filled with stars, so many of them that they had never cataloged each one. Stars that shone red, blue, white and all other colors therein. Stars that made our star look like a planet. Stars the size of buildings, whose condensed mass held enormous energy. Stars with brilliant clouds of dust that surrounded them and gave rise to names like Firestorm and Mystic Mountain. And stars that collapsed and became black, disappearing from view. But even these last class of stars could be detected and they had volumes of data showing clusters of them in entities they called galaxies. The records were so copious, detailed and exacting that few questioned their authenticity. However, their validity? That was in serious doubt.

Other theories arose about our star system, that we were surrounded by some massive cloud that prevent visual or any other information from penetrating. Or that some hostile force wanted to trap us within our little world and prevent our escaping or finding out about the larger world. Numerous studies investigated the physical requirement to erect such a shield and the results boggled the mind. No civilization, no matter how advanced, could maintain such a machine. Those proposing this hypothesis acquiesced to this reality.

Then came a brilliant young man, Iris Eli Il Soclow, from a rather prominent family. His father,

the simultaneously renowned and hated Eli Soclow, had first begun to theorize that there were in fact stars, but that for some reason we could not detect them. Maybe they were so far away as to prevent detection with our current equipment. Better equipment would show us stars, many of them. He bet his fortune, and company, on this fact. Iris took the logic further.

While performing a routine check on the distances between stellar objects, he noticed that Neptune, we'd kept the old Roman names that the ancient text spoke of, had moved a little farther from Uranus. The data before he begun measuring showed no deviations, hence no one had looked into this. But, it was no measurement error; I can assure you that our machines are precise down to the atom. No, there was no memory corruption or calculation error—our systems make those pathetic RAID 42+1 systems look like backing up your data on a piece of paper near a furnace. No, what he had found was the answer. He checked the results against Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Earth, and Venus—Mercury had long since tumbled into the Sun after a botched landing by a large probe. In each case, the difference was smaller but inexorable the same. Every planet was moving farther from Neptune. That in and of itself was not mind-shattering. Rather, he also found that each planet was accelerating away from every other planet. In fact, every object that he had been tracking was moving away from all other objects!

That he and his father's theories were all but ignored bothered me. I dug through the archives, it seems such an observation had been made years ago. The implications were... depressing and it had been shunned. Every object was slowly accelerating away from all other objects until not even light was fast enough to reach across the vast distances separating them. I looked at the pitch black night sky and back down at the text. This was pure faith, fantasy really. Only a couple bygone works, the few that had survived the Growth years when we advanced so rapidly and changed so thoroughly as to banish the old faiths and sciences as works of primitives and lesser animals. But it seems they were onto something. I sent an message to the Scientific to organize a meeting about the matter; I'd spent enough time tauting their false hypotheses to gain some favor.

"And what is the subject on which you have convened this most distinguished assembly of minds?" the old assemblyman bellowed.

"To prove that our star is not the only one!" I yelled, rising to my feet with overflowing confidence and a slight smirk across my face.

"By what postulates, datum and theories do you base such a preposterous claim?" he exclaimed and made a grand sweeping gesture with his hand. He quickly pointed his index finger my way. "What proof do you have!?"

"The ancient texts, the work of Iris and logic!" I responded in kind, laying out each piece of evidence upon the gigantic screen that filled the front of the auditorium where we had assembled. A jumble of old garbled English and German, rows of data and intertwined network of nodes filled the screen. No one could make head or tails of it, least of all the old fart.

"You have no evidence, only lunatics work, erroneous data and nonsense symbology! I will have..."

"...But..." I pleaded and began advancing to the next bit of logic that held everything together.

"Do you believe us dimwits to believe this? That you can rewrite the truth by connecting the dots. How can you **prove** other stars exist!? You've never seen one! Meeting adjourned!"

...Click, click, zzzzzz...click. BOOOOOOOM! ssss... click. BOOOOOOMMM! Ahhhhh, oh Lord, Danny...I can't see, I CAN'T SEE, help, Jesus, help me...Go, go, go! It's going to happen again. What the hell...

"I was blown off my feet! The entire place was a mess, people everywhere! I don't know what to say, I just...I don't know, it was just...Jesus! The people, there were **people** all over the ground!"

The microphones dipped and allowed the young reporter to sob a bit. She was still clutching her camera, the only bit that I really cared about. The camera and her eye witness testimony. The testimony part might go to the police first, but we had first dibs on the actual story. The part the rest of the world waited thirstily for. What did the scene look like? What happened? Who did it? Is anyone safe?

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my little gold watch. It was Swiss, supposedly well designed except for the small part where it always seemed to be ten minutes ahead, no matter how much I tried to fix it. It showed 0933, exactly three hours after the explosion rocked the streets of Indianapolis.

"And then I heard a scream and rushed towards a broken concrete slab, it had pinned a small girl against the concrete and was slowly squeezing..."

chk BOOOOOOOM! zzzzzz I jumped back a bit as a thin spray of blood filled the air and the young reporter was nowhere to be found. My camera was out while everyone else fell to the ground. **Click, click, click.** That should suffice. I then flopped to the ground like everyone else. **BeeeeRRRRRR BeeeeRRRR.** Police could be heard screeching in from all sides. **chk BOOOOOOOM! zzzzzz.** Another person disappeared and my new white jacket was becoming rather stylish red on white. **Click, click, click.** Three more shots, three more cover stories. Thrusting my hand into the jacket's pocket, I ripped out the golden watch and stared at the time. 0937. Perfect.

"Everyone stay calm! We have the suspect under custody and his weapons are now in our hands," some officer bellowed out over a megaphone. Undoubtedly a lie.

0938. The clock continued to tick and a small bead of sweat began to form on my brow. This was just the beginning. I took out a small roll of film and popped it into my old Kodak. This next part required a different type of shot.

"Hey, you. Yeah you! Where are you going?! Stop! We said STOP!" the officer started to yell at a man (shabby, middle-aged and black) who was stumbling away from the gore littering the former interview site. The officer pulled out his pistol and got it ready. **Click.** The white-cop-shooting-black-folk people will love that.

I continued to fumbled with the camera and after a bit finally got it calibrated. I crawled over to a bush on the side of the street. Wasn't exactly sure how the next part would pan out, but it was supposed to be **big.** I looked down at the watch once more, 0943. I was getting a bit

anxious and the heavy jacket I'd decided to throw on wasn't helping much. Looked back at my watch, 0944. It was past time, that happened occasionally, but we'd gotten pretty good at this. Maybe this was one of the 2% that was incorrect...

Chk BOOOOM! Not quite sure what happened, but I was on the ground and no longer in the comfort of the bushes. A small glass shard had wedged itself inside my left armpit and my hand felt like it was about to fall off. Nothing could be heard and I tried to roll over and see if my other ear was functional. No dice. My right arm was still good, I reached up and pulled off my glasses just long enough to see someone roll to the ground, her face half blown off. I could feel a slow wetness creep up my legs. I was bleeding out and I hadn't gotten the shot. Guess that commission wouldn't mean much anyways if I was dead...

"That is quite enough!" a voice bellowed out.

"What? Oh, but I haven't finished. A bit more happened before I blacked out," I said, looking around at the suits assembled before me. Their eyebrows had raised at my last comment, about missing the shot. I fucked up. Real bad and no amount of long-winded storytelling was getting me out of this.

"Do you realize how many people died that day? If we aren't going to help, we have a moral obligation to at least get something..."

"Now, no need to start preach, I think he knows what he has done," one of the suits said and leaned forward. "And I'm sure he will not do it again, now will you Johnny-boy?"

The man backed up, his face a grimace intermixed with a smirk. I looked around the room and finally realized the magnitude of my fuck-up. Neal Johnson, Tod Ellison (the sarcastic douche who just called me Johnny-boy), Dick Mav, and Phil Collins were all in the room. The same look of disgust painted on each face. In the back, sitting in a chair, was Dr. Maurice Dells. Fucking Dr. Dells. She was a blond-haired, blue-eyed devil without a tail plus some tits. They must have drugged me up good for me to miss out on those details before telling the story. I **never** missed the details.

"Now, let us look at this another way, shall we? Why would Johnny-boy here fuck up so badly and not just tell us. Could he be **hiding** something," Neal said. He leaned in and poked me in the rib. I bit my lip and stifled a yelp. Not in this company, not now. "At least he is still the proud mother-fucker we sent to get that shot. That ONE FUCKING SHOT. What is wrong with you Johnny-boy? Lost your touch? Our half-million dollar compensation not good enough for your pretty-boy ass to take?"

Several of the men laughed, especially Tod. Hated that snake-eyed **pedazo de mierda**. He always wore a white on black pinstripe suite with a little green handkerchief. A name-tag was pinned on his left breast, gilded with black lettering in that pretentious font (Sabon if you care), was TOD ELLISON, DIRECTOR. As if you wouldn't know that. But Neal was right, about the fuck-up. I ain't no pretty-boy.

"You fucking kidding. You really think I got myself in this..." I gestured to my bandaged ribs, gorged out armpit, and broken leg. "...condition because I wanted to? What fucking incentive would I have to do that?"

"Because..." Dick stepped up, seems they orchestrated this so each would get their turn. Their little snide remark. "...you be working for someone else."

"Or the machine is **broken**," I yelled out. The second that came out, the magnitude of my next fuck-up hit me. "I mean, what if my goddamn watch was wrong..." **chk Boom!** Dr. Dells hit the floor.

"What, what the hell..." Phil walked over to her and cupped her face in his hands. She was looking about wildly, her face a mix of confusion, rage, and fear. She was attempting to wriggle free, but Phil had been pumping iron lately. "Trust me, darling, this is nothing personal," he said and put the barrel to her head. **chk boom!** A thin mist filled the room.

"Mmmmm, such a shame. I rather liked her. Now look, Johnny-boy," Neal said, gesturing to the body on the ground. "Dr. Dells is dead. Wish there was a **real** reporter in the room to get that story. Do not talk about the fucking machine. Ever."

Honestly, I hadn't really anticipated this...reaction. If I knew about the machine, surely Dr. Dells knew about it. She was the chief medical officer here. She talked to every injured reporter these slimeballs brought back from whatever conflict, accident, or other disaster arose.

"The fuck? She talked to Mike. Remember Mike? The father-of-five you sent on **DreamCatcher** when you knew it was going to sink. Yeah, he sure well told her about the machine."

"Shut up! Shut the fuck up! Don't matter if she knew now, before or after, we'd have to kill her either way. Can you imagine what would **happen** if people knew about the machine?" Dick said and stepped forward, putting his barrel on my temple. "Don't worry Johnny-by, I won't kill you, not now. Who else are we going to send to Cape Town in two weeks? Surely not Hilda, or Paul. Maybe Gil, but, honestly, I don't like that fucking Jew. And neither does anyone else," he turned around and looked at the others, they nodded. He turned back towards me. "Now Johnny-boy, you're going to rest here. We'll calibrate the machine and find out if it was that precious little gold watch of yours," he said and held it up, letting it swing back and forth on its delicate gold chain. "or you."

Neal was already at the door and Phil was holstering his gun. Tod was punching something into his phone. Dick slid his gun back into its holster with a faint click and started through the now open door.

"Oh, and Johnny-boy. Remember, it is just a machine. It does not actually **see** anything. Do not forget that," Neal said and closed the door behind him.

Dr. Dells lay crippled in front of me, blood all over the back wall and chair were she'd been sitting. The blood had begun to congeal on the floor around her. They'd just left her there. I suppose some janitor was in for a fucking surprise. There was no real point in trying to run away or anything. Those pricks probably put a tracking device in me already. I rolled over several times until I found a comfortable position and dozed off.

"John, hey John!" a voice called out and my cheek suddenly stung. My eyes had crusted over a bit, must have been rubbing them in the night. Eventually they opened and there she was, good as new. I hadn't seen Hilda since her harrowing escape from an armed uprising

in Tanzania several months back. Supposedly she allowed herself to be raped to get safe passage across the border to Kenya and onto Nairobi, where we had an office.

"The hell? Where've you been!?"—I blurted out and reached up to hug her. She backed away."

"Sorry John, not here. Not now. What the fuck happened to Dr. Dells? No one has seen her in several days."

"Have I been out that long? Shit. I don't know. Should probably ask Dick."

"I don't talk to dicks. What happened to Dr. Dells?"

"How the fuck should I know? Leave me alone, I want to rest."

"I'm going to find out one way or another. You know that," she said and started to walk out. She began to open the door but stopped and leaned over. Rubbing her finger against the edge of the wall below the chair, she turned her head and raised an eyebrow. She quickly got up and left.

Several days passed before anything eventful happened. I watched the news and marveled at some of our reporters. One had been at the scene of an assassination of Kazakhstan's president, the only reporter in the obscure town of Taraz where it occurred. It was a massive story, he'd been there for a (formerly) secret meeting between the Russian finance minister and a Chinese general. Both were also killed in the attack. I wonder how much money they pulled from that. I switched off the channel when they started talking about the actual politics. I didn't really care. Was tired anyway, these fucking meds are doing wonders for my physical strength.

Turned on the TV one Saturday morning to see what new reality show had been coughed up by the networks this year. Nothing interesting, the basis was that some girl needed to find as many guys as possible on a trip across the US. She was something of a whore, to say the least. Was changing the channel to something less mind-blowingly bad when Neal and crew walk in.

"Hey Johnny-boy! We thought you had left us. Wake up," Neal said and did his customary welcome. I felt an acute pain across my ribs and stifled my yelp once more.

"Why is that necessary?! What's wrong with you?"—I hissed."

"Now now Johnny-boy, that is no way to speak to your boss. We have decided on a change of plans. We are sending you to Singapore! We think something real big is about to happen."

"You mean the machine thinks..." a cold sensation gripped me and Dick was at my side in a flash, gun at my throat.

"Now, Johnny-boy, do not think because you let slip about the machine once you can just go blurting that phrase out whenever you feel like it. No, **we** think something is about to go down."

"And it don't involve no future-predicting machine either," Dick said without a hint of his normal snarkiness."

"We think someone else has one. And we are pretty sure they are not using it to report the future," Neal said, his tone flat. There was a hint of fear, and a slight hysteria, in his voice. I'd never heard them like this. — You know, Johnny-boy, we have never used it to change the future. Not once. Even we realize the danger. Do you know how we do it, Johnny-boy? Do you understand how it works? It is quite fascinating, really. It does not actually see the future, only predicts a possible future. We have something equivalent to an MRI machine, it can detect the slight change in magnetic field induced by people's thoughts and dreams then convert that into probable ideas, actions and feelings of each person. This corresponds to the transition probabilities in our hidden markov model-like simulation. We have a massive matrix of possible states each country, state, county, city, borough, neighborhood, and person could be in. It crunches the numbers once a day and chooses the most likely next state. —

"I don't give a fuck how it works. And it shouldn't matter if someone else could play the same game."

"Johnny-boy, if you could predict the future, and only you, what would be your first move when another person comes along? Eliminate them. And if they tune their machine, they will see our machine clear as day. It does not think about the future, but lives in it. It destroys the algorithm, the math breaks down. We are a bright red target..." Neal leaned forward, a smile starting to play across his face. "And so are they."

"How much for the expose? You want to show the world who they are?"

"...Exactly! The perfect red herring to keep others off our trail."

"Won't they just predict that we're coming?"

"Only if they programmed that specific state into their machine. Why do you think we never go after the small town stories Johnny-boy? Or report on Silicon Valley? Why do we avoid cutting-edge science like the plague."

"..."

"Because we do not care, our audience does not give a damn and the machine cannot. It only sees the big picture and the states fed to it. It does not get lost in the details or see anything new," Neal said and began to walk out of the room. Dick finally pulled his gun away from my jugular and flicked it into its holster with a near silent click. "Oh, and Johnny-boy. Keep silent about the machine. And stop thinking about it. They definitely can pick that up," Neal remarked, closing the door behind him with a bang.

I sat in the room for several hours, soaking in what he had just said. He could be lying. I wouldn't put it beyond that fucker. Get me all riled up so I'd have more incentive. Why would they come after me? I'm just the reporter, I don't know anything...

"Fuck," I whispered. "Damn it Neal, you slimy fuck."

The next day I was flipping through channels, trying to get a feel for what was happening. There was Gary, at the front lines of a riot in Moscow, something no one had seen coming.

But we were there, getting the story. Near Shenzhen, a reveal of the mythical phone produced by a cooperation between Apple and Google. It was found in a trashcan near the Foxconn factories hidden behind several trucks and other items. There was no explanation for why it was there or how we got our hands on it, but the story was sold to the New York Times for a pretty penny. Yes, we were on top of things alright. **Click**. I flipped to Channel 5: news from the underground. They were talking about a developing story...

"There have been reports on the US-Mexico border of armed conflict between SEALs and Mexican cartels. The reason for such a harsh response to the killing of a US citizen in Juarez is at present unknown. We have a reporter from the Straits Times on the ground. Xiaoxi, can you tell us what you are seeing?" I stared at the screen, trying to recall who the fuck Xiaoxi was. We have a Huang and Yasuda, but no Xiaoxi.

"Linda, I'm near the location of the fire fighting," he ducked as a bullet whizzed by the camera. "There are what appear to be SEALs on the ground here in Juarez, we also have reports from another Straits Times reporter in Mexico City that there is gun fighting near Pantitlán and inside Mexico City Airport. We cannot confirm..."

His mic cut out and the video started to become choppy. In the distance could be seen several armored troops, what appeared to be US soldiers, gunning down an unarmed Mexican national. The death of the US citizen had only occurred a day earlier, so the speed and severity of the response was surprising. This administration was known to be a bit more cautious, especially given the ongoing tension between Mexico and the US over Mexico's positioning of state troops at the border. Anyways, that was enough news for the day. I switched off the TV and went back to sleep.

SMACK! I awoke with a start and began thrashing about to ward off the attacker. **SMACK!** A small rivulet ran down my thigh and I continued to flail about. "Stop fighting Johnny-boy, it is only us. Time to get on a plane to Singapore!" Neal said and the attack stopped abruptly.

"Why do you always do that?"

"Builds character, right Dick?" Dick nodded in approval. "You will thank me later. In the meantime, get dressed."

The floor felt colder than usual, but I forced myself up and walked over to the sink behind the bed. I looked at myself in the mirror for the first time in days and jumped back with a start. My eyes were sunken in and it looked like I'd OD'd several times over. I twirled around, but Neal and company had already left. This wouldn't fly in Singapore. A suite hung near the door and I got dressed as quickly as possible then bolted out of the door. Neal was waiting outside.

"Sorry about your appearance, the blast really banged you up. We did the best we could. Really," he said without a hint of sarcasm. The whole time he was fiddling with a manila envelope. "Now, Johnny-boy, I have included your tickets and hotel reservation in this folder. Please do not lose them," I nodded as he handed it to me. He reached over and handed me a suitcase. "Your clothes. And a camera. Get that story!"

The entire trip over, I went through the manila envelope's contents and pondered on how I would get the scoop without getting caught. Apparently the Straits Times was the prime suspect, a rather mundane new organization headquartered in Toa Payoh, in the central part of Singapore. Maybe I could go in as an American reporter looking to get more information and contacts about the rise of Singapore and the places to watch out for. That might get me a tour of the facilities or at least some idea of where else they might have the machine located. But that seemed too obvious, if they knew someone was coming. Fucking Neal, he didn't tell me anything. There were some cryptic coordinates and references to a yet-to-be-built building. The meds were still clouding my judgment and the flight wasn't the most comfortable. I decided to fall asleep.

The plane touched-down at Changi sometime later and I awoke in a haze. My head throbbed and it seemed I had begun drooling in my sleep. Combined with my meth addict appearance, this would bode well for my entrance into the country.

"Check that you have all your belongings before alighting from the plane," a flight attendant reminded us over the intercom. I reached below my seat and felt around for the envelope. It wasn't there. I got up with a start and frantically searched the seats around me. No way someone could have stolen...then I spotted it in the seat pocket in front of me.

I got past immigration without incident, apparently my story about being a reporter won them over. Jumped in a taxi and headed over to the Mandarin Oriental. Rain pattered against the windows and obscured my view, but I could see the Marina Bay Sands and other hotels and skyscrapers of Singapore in the background. Fuck, they had even built up the Esplanade area even more, if that was possible. Tipped the cab driver and before I knew it, was asleep several stories up. The investigation could wait another day.

My phone was ringing. I reached around and eventually got a hold of it. 13:00, it said. Seems I hadn't adjusted to the time difference. Flicked open the phone, it was Dick.

"Hey Johnny-boy! No hard feelings 'bout the barrel on the temple, yes? Any details yet? We want our story!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Give me a couple days," I said with a little more ice than I intended.

"We're counting on it."

The click seemed louder than usual. I got up and cleaned myself up. Went over and opened the windows and looked upon Marina Square. Someone was staring up at me, but I ignored it. There were a lot of envious natives who didn't like us tourists. Put on my jeans and t-shirt then swung my camera around my neck. Time to go hunting.

I got on the MRT and headed over to Toa Payoh. The headquarters was nothing special. Got a short tour and talked to several reporters but immediately felt that nothing would become of this. I thanked them and left toward the MRT. The sun was started to beat down and the tropical climate didn't help. I flicked open the envelope and scanned over the coordinates that were given to me. Only the machine could have produced such a string a drivel. Yet, after staring at it for an hour, I realized it was perhaps the worse encryption that one could

think of. They'd merely taken the original coordinates and done some simple arithmetic to arrive at the scrambled ones. Luckily this wasn't some CIA shit or people's heads would be rolling. Punched the coordinates into my phone. Pointed to a spot on Sentosa, that disgusting resort island that tourists seemed to love. As I got up, I noticed some wide-eyed Indian women staring at me. As our eyes locked, she blushed and skirted off.

It was getting dark and HarbourFront was packed with people. I got on the Sentosa Express and headed over. I already knew where I had to look, there were several depots hidden from the tourists. They were new enough that no one would think suspect activity would happen there. But I'd been through too much and seen it all. This was amateur stuff.

As the tram slowed to a crawl and the doors opened, I jumped out and jogged over to the south-side of the island. Dusk was fast approaching and this would be all the harder at night. The depots were surrounded by flimsy looking fences. I walked over to the nearest section, got down and strained. After a bit of heaving, there was enough space to slide under. After the run-ins in Somalia or the harrowing escape on the Baltic, this was nothing. Except the fucking scrapes on my legs. Always hated that part. I dusted off and looked around. Nothing unusual and yet my hair was on end.

The lights were on in some of the buildings and I crept to the closest one. I'd turned off my camera, it wouldn't be needed in this case. The shutter would be too loud and the pictures probably wouldn't tell people anything: it was likely they just had mainframes, servers and other hardware rigged up. Nothing too sexy. Surely not a Bond-style villain's den. I peaked into a window and then turned around with a start. A man stood there, a gun raised and a bored expression on his face.

"Let me guess, you're searching for a 'story'," he said and started to approach, his gun waving lazily about. I raised my hands.

"Just a bit curious, you know how nosy we Americans are."

"Nah, I don't know. Never been. Try to avoid those fat-asses," he grabbed at my t-shirt and threw me to the ground. Amateur hour indeed. I twirled around in the air and swung my legs together, catching his right leg in a grip. With a slight jerk he went tumbling to the ground and a split second later I had his gun in my hand.

"Ain't the first time I've had a fucking gun pointed at me," I blurted out and pointed the gun at his head. "Not going to kill you and I don't..." I felt my hair stand on end again. There were more. I punched him in the face and ran back toward the hole in the fence. Sliding under I tossed the gun into the sea and sprinted toward the tram. I was never one to be terrified, but this city was supposed to be too benign for this type of shit. Dashing through the line, I slipped onto the tram just as the doors shut. Turning around I saw faces in the crowd staring at me. Those weren't no astonished tourists.

I flipped open my phone and called Neal. He didn't pick up, even after repeated calls. Neither did Tod, Dick or Phil. Looked at my watch, 20:16. They should be fucking awake, those lazy shits. I opened my wallet and thanked god I'd taken the black card, more than enough money to get out of town.

The tram slowed to a crawl and I saw those same stares in the crowd outside. I ducked low and followed the mob out into VivoCity. The place was packed and I continued to weave my way around until I was outside. A taxi was pulling up and I cut off a young couple.

"He douchebag, that was ours..."

"Go fuck that tiny bitch of yours or something," I yelled and slammed the door close. "To Changi, now!"

The taxi pulled out and raced off down the highway. Behind me I could see several cars pull out and begin pursuit. The fuck? This can't possibly all be due to me fucking that amateur hour. Jesus. Why didn't Neal tell me they'd pack heat?

"Can't drive like this, no good for me. Out, out!" the driver screamed after a bit and dropped me off near the Marina Bay Sands. Cursing his mother, I got out and threw some cash back in the car. I ran toward the mall, best to stay in a public area.

Dashing past Avalon, the club was blaring and people were all around, I came upon an idea. My t-shirt was just borderline stylish and my jeans fit the look. Not many people would be by yet, but that cover would be enough. I slid into line, flashed my ID, paid the ridiculous cover charge, and went inside. Blue light washed over me and several well-to-dos gave me looks of disgust as they walked past in their swanky attire. Gliding over to the bar, I ordered just enough to keep me company for awhile, the heat would simmer down with time.

Several hours went by and the club began to fill with people. The DJ was playing some of that fucking awful house music, but I'd take it over a bullet, for now. A rather attractive, somewhat familiar looking, Indian girl slid up beside me. I was always awkward in one-on-one situations.

"Hey."

"Hey. I can't really hear," she bellowed out and pointed to her ears. The music had gone up a couple decibels. "Let's dance!"

She grabbed my arm and lead me over the dance floor. Just then I felt a cold sensation across the back of my neck and whirled around. Three men were staring at me, another had his pistol out while the third was pushing back the gathering throng. Guns were a **very** unusual sight around here, so I heard. Fuck, not even sure how they got those past the bouncer.

"Look, people," one of the men yelled out, his gun sweeping the crowd. People scampered back, falling over one another. "We don't mean any trouble, except for this little shit."

I began to back up and tripped down the stairs leading to the dance floor. The girl had melted into the crowd. Stupid bitch. The man walked down the stairs and pointed his gun at me. I looked left and right, hoping for some out. Maybe a roaming cop, or a daring onlooker, would save me. Nothing. They all looked on with a mix of pity, disgust, and terror. Until I saw one girl, her expression cool as the night. A camera was draped around her neck and glasses slightly obscured her features. She seemed to adjust her dress awkwardly and walked with a bit of trouble. For the split second before I turned back towards my aggressors, I deciphered the clues. **Hilda!** That fucking bitch. Who'd she sleep with to get this story?

'Reporter killed under mysterious circumstances', I could see the headlines now. But I wasn't about to let that happen.

"Now look, I don't know..."

"You fucking well do, fucking American. Think you can just trespass on government property, attack a guard, and walk off scott free? Wasting me time, let's get this over with."

He raised his gun and pulled the trigger.

simrun: stage one

This short story was written with a slightly different goal in mind. I basically sat down and wrote the entire story in two sittings. While creating the story, my eyes were closed during much of the typing so I could just visualize the world and worry less about the exact wording, etc. Going to try this style more for first drafts of future stories before going back and editing them. This one is presented in a more raw format. There will probably be a follow-up tale...

BEGIN LIVE FEED.

I bobbed my head up and down, the music reaching a crescendo. My arms lay stretched out in front of me and I did a few punching motions. Rotating my head, I look to my left and right then down at my feet. My laces were undone. And the clock was ticking. **3.** I gazed into the distance, where the crowd had gathered. Whooping and yelping, they were in a ravenous mood today. This was to be the big race. Not the championship. The Championship. Few ever got to this stage. **2.** Nary a dozen had tried in the last decade, of the tens of thousands of racers. They had all given up, all broken under the weight of it all. The game did that to you. It sucked you in with its allure, glitz, and glamor. Many mediocre racers enjoying celebrity status back home or a least got some chicks at a bar to come home with them. **1.** My laces were almost perfect; I looked to my left and saw Array fixing up his elbow pads. His face was like stone, as usually. He took these races way to seriously. To my right bitch-queen, known by name as Jinji, was doing her thing, always adjusting her skin-tight outfit. Her breasts were prominently displayed with a Rickon logo emblazoned on both nipples. She was pretty alright, but...**BEGIN!**

Without thinking, I dug my heels into the ground and launched forward. I was a little slow off the mark and Jinji had already taken a massive lead. In these races, seconds counted for minutes and minutes for days. But I had won last year. I knew the course and what it did to your body and mind. Array was a circuit amateur-cum-pro who'd spent most his time on the rigged together tracks of the outer colonies. Those were pussy-shit, only showing that someone was athletic enough to get off the couch. I wasn't having that; I wasn't losing to some half-breed. Then there was not-as-sexy-as-she-thinks Jinji. I wouldn't mind playing with her for a night, but she was a class A bitch-queen. Dominating, soulless, and dimwitted: she exhibited all the qualities of a female from the inner sectors. They all thought they were hot stuff because they still had blond hair. And green eyes. Either-way, she was only here because the marketing department needed to get horny males to watch. They both continued to edge away from me.

"And we see Array making a daring move down the stretch. If Michelangelo could SimRun, he would run like this guy. Look at those arm movement, the speed, the raw power. It seems the best his competitor can do is..."

"Now hold on Davis, we all know about this course. That initial lead means squat around here..."

"Did you just interrupt me? I was in the middle of a great..."

I touched my hand to my ear and shut off the chatter. The commentators seemed to get worse every year and there was nothing I could do about it. One year they had brought in this mutt from the outer sectors, some wise guy who had convinced the owners that he knew how to get a crowd going, but he was playing them for a fool. Worst SimRun championship ever, probably coupled by the fact that I lost that year. In either case, the real part of the course was coming up and I slowed down a bit. To better admire the mistakes of my fellow racers.

As I took a step forward, a tube formed around me and extended in both directions. For a split second I was unnerved, this hadn't happened in my many years on the circuit. Not once. I had become a bit placid, used to the previous years tricks. There was very little they could do now, given the past hundred year history of the sport. I had studied it all: the very old history, current trends, and predicted future events. You could almost say that I knew what the tournament directors would do before they even got to the planning stages. But this was a bit...different. I reached over and touched the glass that surrounded me. It felt real enough. I leaned down and ran a nearby wall and ended up flat on my butt, my shoulder suddenly very sore. I touched my earpiece.

"It seems the directors decided to try something new this year! Look at Gui's face, he looks absolutely shocked!" I could hear the announcers making fun of me. I looked around, but nothing quite made sense. I felt a slight falling sensation and then suddenly the world went completely black. A moment later all I could see were stars. Left, right, up, down—there was nothing but small white dots on black ink. And my earpiece had cut out.

"Hello!?" I screamed and pounded on the glass walls once more, then thought better of it. They might have actually transported us to space for this race. That would be new. Sitting down, I took several deep breaths and closed my eyes. It was best to reflect a bit before going on. They expected me to panic, to flounder when challenged with a completely new scenario. But I was better than that...

Several years ago, I stood in the same spot. My laces were tied, my suit hugged my skin just a little bit tighter and no bitch-queen jiggled her breasts for the crowd's enjoyment. No, this was a different level. Justin sat to my right, his body a perfect reflect of a modern Buddha. To my left was Ujan, poised and ready to go. He was a good two feet taller than me or Justin and his muscles rippled as he flexed. The clock above had begun to count down.

"Yo, Ujan, how much do you want to lose by this time?" I brazenly called out while doing a little stretching motion. His face hardened even more, if that was possible. He was slightly tan and his bald head bore a tattoo he had gotten after winning the inner sector's championship. A little vain, but that was Ujan.

"Hmmpf," was the extent of the response I got. But I wasn't quite done yet.

"Yo, Ujan. I heard your sister is bangin' that music artist who thinks he's hot shit in the outer rim. Someone said he's got two man parts..." I trailed off as he turned my direction, his eyes narrowing. But this was too good to stop now. "You know, penises. She probably likes that, one in each hole..."

"Stop," was all he said as he started to edge forward. I backed off a little as I smelt a smidgen of bloodlust waft through the air. Wasn't quite...**GO!** a voice bellowed out with the crowd

erupting into a frenzy.

I planted my feet then dashed ahead, the soles of my feet barely touching the ground as the crowd roared. It was lovely, the lights were flashing as a million photos went off. My timing was impeccable, my form timeless, and the look on Ujan's face priceless. Justin had begun to move, which was a bad sign this early. He usually gave opponents several minutes before thoroughly crushing their dreams and aspirations. But maybe he actually feared losing to me. Or just wanted to put me in my place.

"GO! GO! GO!" I could hear the crowd urge me on and I responded in kind. My shoes began to glow and I was about ready to enter mode-hyper when the field suddenly changed. We went from a scorched desert to a rain-soaked icy tundra. Ahead of me was a mountain that stretched to the sky. Its red form in stark contrast to the blues and whites surrounding me. I reached down and felt the solid ground below me. Still a simulation. Looking back, I could see Justin flexing and Ujan sprinting to catch up to me. I slowed down a bit, took a couple steps then bounded forward at twice the speed I had before.

"And there goes Gui, his signature red and black shoes on display. He has been the rising star of rising stars. The George Washington among mortal men. There is no telling where his story will lead next, but we know one thing: this is his moment," the announcer roared as I dug my foot into the ground even harder. My lungs were going crazy and I could feel my heart attempting to burst from my chest. Luckily this was a shorter course this year. Plowing through the snow, I reached the base of the mountain in now time and felt the ground below me start to curve upward; they decided to actually install a real mountain this year. Nice, even worse for Ujan. Looking over my shoulder, I could see neither of them.

"And what do we have here, Ujan and Justin are duking it out at the base of the mountain with Gui set to decimate the record time!" another announcer said as I squinted to my left and right. Seeing nothing, I started to climb up the mountain at a brisk pace. This was probably more like a massive cliff, they would surely install a plateau to make the race longer. As I scaled the mountain, it began to shift and warp. I looked behind me and saw the world falling away.

"What twist do we have here folks? Is this the long-awaited 'surprise' the directors have been hyping? It seems like the ground is falling into a dark, deep abyss. That fall would surely KILL any contestants. Could this be the FIRST tournament with no winners?!"

I smiled a little and turned around. They hadn't really thought this through. They couldn't kill all of us, they would lose too much money. Plus, this was SimRun. No one died. Ujan and Justin were supposedly going at each other at the mountain base, which made the race as good as mine...

BOOM! An explosion rocked me from my recollection. From the next couple hours of pain that had shaped my style for the rest of my career. That championship had left a lasting impression, and not only because I was the only one to finish. No, it was the first when they stopped doing pure simulation and started adding in props, real-world objects and a variety of other obstacles. But that's all they had been, annoying little obstacles. But this was...different.

BOOOOMMM! Another explosion shook the tunnel and I looked around, trying to find the source of the disturbance. In the dim distance, I could make out a orange glow that appeared to be getting larger. They might have also changed the rule on there being winners, in which case I was a sitting duck about to be roasted. I tried to power up my shoes, but they failed to turn on. Kneeling down, I took a couple deep breaths, planted my hands into the ground and got into a crouching position. If they didn't charge up in this position, this was about to get to a whole new level of annoying.

"It seems one of our contestants forgot the new rule, **NO TECHNOLOGY!** This will be a pure race, an endless race, a glorious race!" the announcer bellowed with a hint of Nazi-esque fanaticism coating the last line. The other announcer seemed to have quieted and this man's voice seemed to be changing with each passing announcement. A slightly ominous tone was entering his pronouncements, as if he was lusting for something...

I got up and took another couple breaths then looked around me once more and saw a new arena. We were still in 'space' or wherever the hell they'd transported us to. But now there was a maze of glass tunnels. Several miles in the distance I could see Jinji sprinting down one corridor with Array hot on her heels. There was a desperation to her movements, a jerkiness that meant a survival run, not a race. And Array looked to be chasing her, not to pass her, but to overrun her. I couldn't see his face, but I'm guessing a hint of testosterone and bloodlust were mixed into one.

Looking behind me, I could make out the orange glow racing my way. No better time to get a move on it. I planted one foot in front of the other and was soon off to the races. No sooner had I reached full speed that I lost my footing and started to slide in the opposite direction of the orange glow. As if I was falling **down**. Then suddenly the space outside started to develop crystals and the stars that filled the background crept into the foreground and began to expand. This was lunacy.

"And now, for a world of **fire!**" the announcer said, his voice booming. Then with a barely audibly whisper, his voice hissing. "And **iceeeeeee.**"

Pure, unequalled ridiculousness. We were all wearing the equivalent of latex suits with very little insulation, we would all freeze. "Who will race to the exit of this stage before they all die of hypothermia!?" the announcer kindly noted.

I continued to plummet downward with no end in sight. I was gaining speed rapidly, too rapidly. Below me was a wall of white that could only mean a solid block of ice. I looked around me, desperate for a way out. There was nothing but smooth ice, freezing water, and glass surrounding me. This was a shitty way to die. Then a cheap idea came to me. I dug my feet into the smooth surface and waited a bit as the friction heated up my shoes. I then jumped to the opposite side of the tunnel and slide down for a bit, my shoes becoming even hotter. I continued to jump back and forth between sides of the tunnel until my descent started to slow, but not quickly enough. I needed an out...

Suddenly, a blast of water and brine hit me in the face and my body was wracked against the opposing wall. The sides of the tunnel were collapsing and I realized that we had never quite been in space, only miles underwater. Clever...cheap, but clever. However, that meant

that the situation went from instakill via vacuum to die a slow, painful death by drowning. Not very preferable. They also couldn't really transport us out of this situation. Water started to pour in from above, all the areas were I had bounded back and forth had weakened the walls. The whole things was starting to collapse.

"It seems were are about the witness the first suicide in SimRun history! Folks, it **doesn't** get much more **exciting** than this!" the announcer shrieked, putting unnecessary emphasizes on certain words. I'll have to choke him if I make it out of this alive.

I continued to drift downward, but the tunnel was rapidly filling with water and after several seconds of falling, I hit a pool of liquid that had developed below me. Convenient, if I could just stay out of the way of the several waterfalls attempting to drown me, I could just float my way out of this...then I remembered the fucking fireball. Who had the brilliant idea of adding lava to this? Looking up, the orange glow had suddenly made its presence very, very known. The water around me started to heat up and it became apparent that I was about to be party to a little episode between water and fire. Not an event I was privy to join, I took a long breath and dived down into the abyss below, running my hand along the sides of the glass tunnel, searching for a place where the wall had ruptured. The space around me continued to fill with orange-red light and the water around me started to bubble.

HELP! HELP! Off in the distance, I could hear gurgling and a few desperate pleas. I knew immediately it was Jinji, but she wasn't really a priority at the moment. Maybe Array was raping or killing her, either way, she had it coming with her skimpy attire and bitch-queen attitude. **Help! help! help...** the voice started to trail off and the sound of a struggle could be heard closing in on me. I found an edge and wiggled through, cutting myself at several places in the process. As I swam away, I turned around briefly to see fire and water engage themselves in a length game of tug-of-war. It was pretty, in its own explosive way.

But my oxygen supply was running out, I'd trained awhile to tackle the possibility of swimming portions of a race, but I had a certain hatred of water. **Abhor** might not even cover the rage being underwater filled me with. It put me out of my element, nullified my abilities, and strained my senses. I looked up and could see a sliver of light. This would be possible. I might pass out before I reached the surface, but this was definitely a water/brine mix, I was floating upward with little effort. I started to swim up, but then remembered that would just waste all my oxygen. So I went against every instinct and floated, slowly but surely toward the surface. Half-way up, I passed out...

Not sure how long I had been out, but the air above me was filled with dust and smoke. I splashed about frantically for a second before calming down. Looking around, I spotted a structure out in the distance. Peering harder, I realized it was a audaciously large mangrove. Its roots were the size of skyscrapers, elevating the tree above the surrounding ocean like classic pneumatophores. And its trunk pierced the heavens. I could barely make out its canopy. Besides its absurd size, it also had an equally bizarre color. The roots and trunk were bright red with hits of black flecked here and there. The barely visible leaves were a shimmering gold with silver running along the edges. And it pulsed. I don't know quite how to describe it, but it pulsed. As if it had a heart. Well, it was pretty obvious were they wanted us to go.

As I swam toward the tree, a body floated by me. I looked over and recognized Array, his throat slit from ear to ear. I gave a muffled yelp and pushed it away from me. That could only mean Jinji was still alive and kicking. And suddenly an all to real threat. I spun about to quickly make sure I wasn't she wasn't sneaking up on me. Looked all clear. I started to begin swimming toward the tree again...

THWACK! A moment later, I was underwater and thrashing. My head throbbed and my hand was bleeding profusely. **THWACK!** Another blow dazed me and I started to lose consciousness. I waved my arms around wildly, but underwater and in this all-too-viscous solution, my efforts were greatly slowed. The assault stopped and after a few moments, I floated back to the surface. In the distance I could see a form gliding rapidly toward the tree. Fuck that bitch, her massive breasts unmistakable even at this distance. I started to swim but quickly lost my way and had to wait a bit as my head recovered from the savage attack. Around me was a pool of blood and my hand had several lacerations. Where she had gotten such a weapon, I don't know, but I desperately needed to be back on solid footing. I began again at a slower pace, knowing that at any moment the world around me could change.

Some indescribable amount of time later, I finally reached the tree and carefully prodded the red surface. It hadn't seemed to ominous from far away, but now that I was up close, I could see the red color was just a shell, a living, beating moss-like covering that oozed red slime. The tree itself looked to be made of obsidian. I grabbed a chunk of the red ooze and pulled myself up the nearest root. It seemed pretty strong and I grabbed another chunk a foot above me and started to climb. The cuts in my hand were well salted on the way over; the pain that this red ooze presented was minuscule in comparison to that. As I began my ascent, I noticed what seemed like a kilometer up, another figure attempting the same audacious feat as I was about to embark on. No doubt this would rapidly become an unsustainable venture. The tree was at least twenty kilometers up. There was no way we would have the stamina for that. And to make things worse, there seemed to be a six kilometer stretch of trunk between the highest root and lowest branch. Places to rest would approach nil in that region. There must be a different way.

I continued to climb and every once in awhile would knock at the tree's skin where it presented itself. Parts of it seemed hollow and I finally decided to test out this observation. Several minutes later I came across a root that had a massive section of skin exposed and was relatively flat. Walking over, I jumped as high as I could and stomped down on the exposed surface. It gave...a little. Again and again and again I jumped and slammed down until finally it gave way and I crashed through to the inside. I had the luck of picking one of the smaller roots, but I still fell a good ten meters before smashing into the ground below. Light filtered in from above and illuminated the space around me. It was hollow indeed and looked to have been occupied previously. This was just getting better and better.

"Woah, woah, woah, what do we have here folks?" the announcer cut in, his continued descent from benign idiot to malicious, sarcastic overlord all the more evident with each passing word. "It seems one of our **contestants**," apparently we were no longer racing. "Has figured out a key to this riddle! But what of the fair lady who attacked him earlier. How will she fair? Can she possibly scale the eight kilometers to the nearest branch? What adventures will our protagonist, the pompous, arrogant Gui, have on his way up the tree of **death!**? Stay

tuned!" he screamed and I could imagine him curling his fist into a ball and slamming it down onto the table, the veins on his neck pulsing.

He continued to blare stupid remarks and I tunned them out as I began to explore the massive cavern ahead of me. **Tree of death?** That was probably just one of his crowd pleasing remarks. We'd already lost Array to the disgusting and unnecessary brutality of Jinji. And in her stupidity and arrogance, she was attempting to scale several kilometers without support. That ruled her out from this race contest. No doubt they would then try to prevent my death. Right?

As I moved away from my entrance point, the light grew dimmer and I was soon surrounded by shadows. I pulled a tiny flashlight from my shoes and flicked it on. It barely illuminated the space above me, let alone the vast expanse that stretched out before me. I needed to get to the base of the trunk, quickly. A brisk walk turned into a jog and I was soon on my way. Rounding one corner, I jumped back several feet as a corpse swung from the ceiling above. What the fuck? This course had never been used to my knowledge...

"Gui has discovered a past **contestant!** Look at the confusion and fear written all over his face, doesn't that make you-all feel alive!? This is what the best races are made of. Excitement, death, glory, wonder. Can I get a cheer for our contestants?" a muffled, but long, roar could be heard emitting from the announcers microphone. "I like the energy! Now let's see if the contestants can return the crowd's enthusiasm for this spectacle of spectacles!"

I pushed the body out of the way and started to spring up a nearby passage, it had a gently slope that quickly turned into a vertical accent. I shoved the light into my mouth and grabbed onto small hand-holds that presented themselves here and there. As I began to ascend, I heard a shriek behind me and turned around expecting Jinji. But my blood ran dry when I saw a small puppy looking up at me from the darkness below. Cute things in strange places does that. I could see its bright blue eyes and shimmering black fur, despite the fact that my dim light was pointed in the opposite direction. It **glowed**. The fucking black fur seemed to emit light. It was a deeper black than the surrounding dark, yet it seemed lighter. Fuck.

The puppy continued to shriek but didn't move. The noise it made didn't correlate with its tiny body and then I saw it. Another puppy, a little further back, but slowly making its way forward. And then another. And another. A whole fucking brigade of blue-eye, black-furred shimmering puppies. This was madness. What the hell was the place?

"And crowd, meet the puppies we've spent years engineering for maximum cuteness...and deadliness! These little buggers will..." I tunned him out once more. I didn't **want** to know what these little beast were capable of. But I was safely fifty meters above the cavern floor, so I was presumably safe. One of them started to walk toward the vertical section I was scaling and pawed at the wall then let out a muffled mew. I laughed, an awful, slightly crazed laugh. And then the beast seemed to finally take note of me and its eyes went from puppy-cute blue and wide to demon-red and narrow as slits. It growled and all the rest off the puppies followed suit. The sudden transition caught me by surprise, but not as much as the sudden display of claws. The puppy scratched the surface several times then dug its claws into the obsidian and began to scale the wall. Fuck my life.

I started to scale as fast as possible. Rocks fell down as I grabbed at loose outcrops several times. One or two of the rocks were large enough to knock down one of the puppies, but there were hundreds more to replace it. They continued to claw at the surface, the combined sound tearing at my ears and rocking my teeth to the nerves. One hand in front of the other, I continued, sweat dribbling down my brow and blood running along my arms. Several times I could feel my fingers give, not from lack of effort. I hadn't eaten in who knows how long and I'd been in GO mode for a good part of the entire time. Nevertheless, I pushed on.

The puppies continued to gain on me, but up ahead I could see a ledge. As I crawled the last couple of feet, one of the puppies finally got to me and nibbled at my heel. Trying to shake it off proved too risky and I let it slowly destroy my leg as I made the final ascent. Dragging myself over the edge, I turned around and smashed the puppies head against the ledge. It split wide open and brown goo oozed out and slid down my shoe, melting it.

"The fuck!?" I screamed and tore off my shoe, throwing it over the edge. The remaining goo started to eat away at the ground, burning large holes wherever it landed. Awesome, acidic blood. I peeked over the edge and saw the horde approaching. Without thinking I stamped on the ground near the edge and cracks started to form. Just as the first wave got over the edge, the whole thing gave way and went crashing down. Scrapping and bumping against the wall, the gathering storm of debris flattened everything in its path. That should stop those fuckers for now.

Looking around, I saw a slow, stepped incline leading up the trunk. Gazing upward with my light, I could only make out the first tens of meters before the darkness took hold again. At least I had a passage up. As I began to climb, my foot throbbed from the puppy bite and ensuing acid attack. But the fear of facing those red-eyed monsters was several orders of magnitude greater than the pain and I pushed on.

Several hours into my ascent, I could hear the shrieks echoing from down below, but here and there I would stamp at the stairs behind me, initiating an avalanche of loose obsidian to crash below. It would stop the yelps for a time, but just as soon they were back. I couldn't see or smell them, but the bloodlust was there. What did those things eat? There couldn't be **that** many contestants, right? I would have heard of this show by now.

As I continued ascending, I saw a bright light piercing the darkness up ahead. It didn't feel like I'd gone several kilometers up, so it was likely something had pierced the tree's trunk. After the shit I'd been through today, I wouldn't be surprised if it was an armored harpy with fire arrows. I turned off my light, hunched over to all fours, and like a ninja, approached the opening. There was no sign of the abnormal, but as I neared I heard a rustle up ahead.

"Go away! GO AWAY!" I heard and a piece of obsidian flew past me and crashed down into the abyss. "You should be dead! Why are you here?! Leave me alone."

I finally made out the voluptuous form several meters ahead of me. Her outfit was torn all over, I'm sure the crowd loved that, and her face was scared here and there. But overall, she still looked like the bitch-queen Jinji that I'd come to hate.

"Realized how idiotic your idea was? I should probably just toss you over the edge after the handicap you gave me," I said all too casually, edging closer. Her eyes grew wide and a

slight frenzy overcame her. She lunged at me, no doubt hoping to implement my plan on me, but I had anticipated that. At the last moment, I twirled out of the way, grabbed her hand and slammed the palm of my other hand between her shoulder blades. She went down hard.

"Get off...oh god, your going to rape me on live television. Aren't you!? You'd like that, put me in my place. Go ahead and try, you'll end up like Array..." I smacked her hard in the face at the mention of Array.

"Shut the fuck up bitch, I don't want any part of your STD infested vagina. Either you're going to listen or I'm going to throw you off this edge and the puppies can have their way with you," I said and threw a pebble off the edge and let the sound of it disappear before continuing, staring her in the face the entire time. "And I guarantee you, those things will do more than violate your nasty private parts."

She shut up at that, I think she saw the slight fear that entered my eyes when I mentioned the puppies. No doubt she hadn't encountered them yet. Killing her would be satisfying, but she was better as live bait than dead bait. So I needed her alive, at least until I figured out how to finish this goddamn race. I got off her and walked toward the opening in the trunk, peeked my head out and looked up and down. We were about three-fourths of the way up, pretty fucking impressive for a bitch-queen.

"So here's how we're going to do things. I'll lead and you trail. If any puppies appear, you kick them off the edge then break off that section of staircase," I began to say then forgot, bitch-queen didn't know what puppies were. "The puppies look like puppies," I said, making a gesture outlining a puppy. "You know, those disgusting furry creatures from the old movies. But these ones have blue-eyes, if they haven't seen you, or red-eyes, if they have. Their fur is black, but it glows," she gave me a blank stare and her eyes started to narrow. "...you'll know what the fuck one is when you see one..."

"Why the hell should I do anything..."

I smacked her across the cheek once, then twice and a third time for good measure. "Should I just kill you now or do you want a fucking chance to live? You cut my fucking hands! And bashed me over the head. Consider me an angel for not gutting you right now and feeding you to those ravenous puppies," my voice harbored no room for discussion. I was growing weary with her and a small voice in my head was just saying to end her now.

"Stop hitting me! We're on live..."

I hit her once more. "Yes, we're on live TV. And maybe I should strip you out of those clothes and make you walk naked the rest of the way. That'd sure boost ratings for all those perverts you know whack off to you every day."

A tear rolled down her face and she began to sob, first it little fits then with great heaving motions. This went on for a couple minutes then she looked at me with a level of hatred I hadn't known existed.

"I'm going to cut your fucking eyes out and dump acid into the sockets when we're done here. Then I'll cut your..."

"Shut up, either you follow my plan or I kill you here and now. Yes or no? You're wasting my time," I said and edged closer to her once more. She backed off.

"Get away from me! I'll follow your fucking plan!" she said, a hint of desperation and weakness in her voice was all I needed to know that she was putting on an elaborate show. That calmed me more than anything else that'd happened today. This part, at least, was going to be easy.

"Okay, take flank, it looks to be getting dark outside and I want to finish this thing before that happens," I said and began to climb. She grumbled something but I was past listening to her quips.

We climbed for several more hours without much incident. She had finally stopped talking after I'd pushed her over the edge a couple times, only to catch her at the last second. The show I'd predicted she was putting on came to fruition and she became rather meek by the time we reached the lower branches. There was no real indication of what we were supposed to find or accomplish. I kicked a hole in a nearby and a little light streamed in. It was getting dark and I knew that would mean death. My light was running low and the gash that puppy had left in my leg prevented me from running and recharging it. Jinji was as useless as I had anticipated and she carried nothing survival worthy on her.

"Okay, so here's the plan, it seems that we only ascended one, small vessel of this stupid tree. Blocking that path doesn't seem like it would..."

"You want to **wait**?" she shrieked, terror laced across every word.

"Will you shut up!? I haven't finished, Jesus. The plan is to continue walking throughout the night. I can slowly recharge my light and we can feel our way up the tree without light for a time."

"That's a stupid idea. Those puppies will catch us."

"Then I'll break your kneecaps and let you fight them while I run," I said, my voice lacking the sarcasm I intended. Her eyes went wide again and I feared she would start her bawling again. "I was joking, good lord, what's wrong with you?"

"Ten points to Gui for having a sense of humour in these trying times!" I nearly jumped out of my skin as the announcer's voiced blared over the intercom. "The night grows near and the darkness will come to consume all in its path. But our crowd wants a show! And a show we will have! The contestants have officially completed stage **one**. Congratulations! An airship is on the way to take you to the holding cells until stage two commences."

I looked over at Jinji and her face was a mix of joy, exhaustion, and terror. She looked at me, her eyes pleading for me to tell her that he was joking about this just being stage one. And for a brief moment I wished she wasn't a bitch-queen and we'd met at some bar. She was pretty and somehow this horrid series of events had brought that out more than I would like to admit. I shook my head back and forth several times. No. It was just the hormones. Just the hormones.

"What, you want me to tell you it's going to be alright? I bet they are joking about the stages,

they just want us to have some crazed reaction for the crowds...”

“And least the contestants forget. There are seven stages! Each exponentially longer than the last stage! Seven stages of face paced action, blood curdling obstacles, and hero-making life-and-death situations! This is the stuff legends are made from! This. Is. SimRun reborn! Stay tuned for more.”

I slumped down against the wall and looked over at Jinji. Might as well get used to that face...

“Gui, can we talk before the airship arrives, I think...” Jinji started to say, her voice suddenly much softer than I liked. It implied something I didn’t want to deal with and I looked away.

...or at least stop hating the bitch-queen. This was how they planned to take the race, which had become rather stale over the past decades, and turn it into the new spectacle. We were part of a zeitgeist moment, that much I knew. This would change races all across the galaxy, from the inner to outer sectors. Racers could die. For a brief moment I saw Array floating in a pool of blood and, with a sudden flash of intense anger, Jinji’s assault.

“...we should discuss a strategy for dealing with future...”

The rush of lava, the brief moments in space, and those fucking deranged puppies. All this, for a race? No, they had something bigger planned. And I intended to finish this thing to figure out what. Six more stages? I looked down at the cuts in my hand that had begun to heal in fits and starts.

“...hey, hey! Are you listening to me? We need a plan, who knows what they’ll throw at us next time? If they built a tree the size of fucking government office-blocks just for stage one,” her voice cracked and I looked over briefly to see her eyes glaze over as she tried to image what else they could conjure up. “I’m sure they’ll get more creative the next round.”

Bring it on.

END LIVE FEED.

sharing minds

We had just met and she knew everything about me: where I'd come from, job, favorite books, hideaway where I went to think, special Sunday bike routes, time of day I woke and slept, first time abroad, family members' names, secret hobbies, wants, desires, people I abhorred, my first love...everything.

"So, tell me about the time you slept with a prostitute from Orchard Tower..."

I looked into her bright, turquoise eyes—small black flecks filled her iris and she stared with an intensity that burned. A tad short, bit flat chested and ample hip size gave her a slightly contorted look, but she was beautiful, that couldn't be denied. She carried a slight tan and her lips were a bit puffed, she swore she'd never had surgery and her record indicated as much—but people had gotten good at hiding things from the mind link.

"Hmm?"

"The prostitute, who was she?"

It was a bit scary, this new...thing. I knew more about this girl than anyone else in the world, even my parents or siblings. She'd been to Antarctica, slept with lions in Tanzania, seen a man blown to bits in Jordan, loved to draw pictures of the night sky, hated tomatoes (of all things), was a raging conservative with an unusual liking for both Rand and Keynes, used to piss out behind her middle school for fear of having to deal with other girls in the bathroom, saw her father beat her mother on various occasions and lived through a highly acrimonious divorce, had both nipples pierced then decided the better of it a week later, and...oh god, there was so much more. Everything. I could wade through it, hold it, smell it, whatever I wanted. The feeling was like no other.

"You know exactly who she was," I said in a tone laced with a bit more acid than intended. I hadn't slept with her, even though the mind link implied that I did. It did that sometimes, I swear it wasn't as objective as those CalCOM engineers made it out to be.

"No, I don't, it isn't in the mind link...or it is, but you're actively blocking it..." she mumbled. I stroked my hand through her hair, down the back of her neck and traced a path along her spine. She shivered a bit but gave in and leaned over to give me a kiss...

"WHO WAS HE!?" I said, jumping back several feet. I'd been distracting her by putting the prostitute in a prominent position within my mind link to allow me to wander about hers more freely. I wanted to know who she was before we got...involved. The CalCOM engineers had been smart, I'll give them that. They designed the system to be flexible and malleable in terms of how the content was presented to other users. The content was kept locked down...supposedly. But I just found something deep in her mind link that disturbed me ever so...

"Wha..what was that...you just ruined the..."

"No, get away from me!" I shouted, pushing her back then stumbled out of the bed, reaching for the door to the apartment. Her intense stare from earlier returned, only this time it hid

something else. I severed the mind link and began turning the doorknob.

"Holy hell, calm down. What're you talking about?" she said, crawling out of bed. She wrapped the sheets around her and strolled over to the kitchen.

"I saw that memory, why? What did he do?" I was sweating a bit now and the door seemed locked from the inside.

"Oh, are you talking about Charlie?"

"Who the fuck is Charlie? There aren't name-tags in memories."

"Jesus, just tell me what you accessed."

"The guy you were cutting up, WHO WAS HE?" I finally got a solid grip on the door and flung it open. She'd poured herself a glass of orange juice and walked back toward the bed, sitting down. The entire time her eyes never left me. And she was as calm as a lion stalking its prey.

"That isn't my memory," she noted rather plainly.

"Yes, it is. How else did it get..."

"You're a plumber, right? District 58, Lot 9, Housing Unit 47? Parisian style blocks with beautiful facades and a leaning toward Corinthian capitals? Rich place. Nice place. Heard you've only had one violent crime in the last..."

"We're no longer mind linked, you can stop now," I said, half-in, half-out of the doorway.

"And I'm a certified nuclear physicist with training in electrical engineering and computer science with several years studying hippocampal activation of the prefrontal cortex. Do you understand **how** mind linking works? Do you realize I changed your memory as we talked?"

Someone had told me this, a customer I had briefly mind linked with to get a complete history of the housing unit. I had a dream the next night and thereafter couldn't remember if I had actually been to Orchard Tower or just dreamt it.

"You couldn't, they're read-only. Only the user..."

"...and certain others have read-write access. Probably wondering who the others are, right? That guy isn't part of my memory, someone put it there to ruin every future relationship I tried to have. They locked it in an easy to find place and I don't have permissions to delete it. I swear, that memory isn't mine!"

"Whose? What crowd did you hang around with," I demanded, my eyes narrowing a bit. She sure knew how to create red herrings.

"My ex. That was the memory I found in him and left him because of it," she started, a tear rolling down her eye. "He forced a mind link when I was sleeping later that night...before I left. He wrote that memory and more. He was a CalCOM engineer. He knew all the tricks..." She had begun to sob terrible at this point and I had a hard time keeping myself from walking

over the comfort her. There was a trap in all of this, that memory was too raw, too visceral, too terrifying for it to have been a copy.

"How'd he know where to write when you were sleeping? The system can't work..."

"It can! People don't realize this. Why do you think spies never had mind links, even though they'd be a super valuable asset in the field? The moment they fall asleep, BAM, someone has ALL their secrets. You ignorant twit, why do you think they created the mind link."

"Is this what happens? I've only had it a month, but is this what happens to us?"

"What? What do you mean to us, there is no us!"

"Not you and I," I hissed, she had begun to irritate me even more. "I meant mind link users. Do we all become paranoid like you? Making up lies when people probe too deep, trying to rationalize their way..."

"Shut up! Naive dimshit, you didn't probe at all, he left it..."

"What about the little child you drowned?"

"What?"

"The little girl? She was far away from, and much better hidden than, the man you cut up. Who was she? Who're you?"

There was a brief silence and her whole body went rigid. She stared at me with a coldness that sent a shiver down my spine then with precision and speed I hadn't seen since watching some Team Six members train, she glide across the room and before I could react had her hand on my mouth. She didn't say a word as she slide her free hand up my neck and pressed ever so gently on my Adam's apple, causing me to cough a little. Her hand didn't budge. For what seemed like an hour, she stood there, still as a rock with her hand pressed against my throat. A bead of sweat began to roll down my temple and I clumsily tried to reach up and shove her away, but to no avail. The edge of my vision began to blur then all of a sudden she backed off and just as quickly bound onto the bead and covered herself again. The whole experience was almost erotic, what with her naked body pressed up against me and her face inches from mine, but the ice in her eyes kept me from getting even slightly aroused.

"What the fuck...ack...was that!?" I burst out, coughing a little.

"Check you're memory...Julies," he quipped, the sudden change in her tone at the name confused me.

"My name is..." and for the briefest instant, I saw a gun flash before my face then a burst of blood and a man was lying in front of me, his guts spilling out as he clawed desperately for life. He looked up at me and a hand that wasn't mine pressed a gun to his temple. There was a slight graininess to everything.

"Julies, please! Julies, what did I ever..."

"Shut up Tom, just shut the fuck up. Your going to die here and now, in this sorry back-of-the-woods town in the middle of fucking nowhere. Your family will never know, the police won't

find you, and your piece-of-shit memory will be taken and your body cremated. Do you hear me? DO YOU HEAR ME!"

And then I was back in the room with her. I gasped for air and realized I'd simultaneously shit myself and puked all over the floor. She stared at me and smiled, but there was a sadness in it this time. And that scared me more than anything.

"Look Dan, I don't want to be any harsher on you, but I wasn't lying. We could have been sexing it up right now, but instead your laying in your own pool of piss-n-shit instead of on me. Those aren't my memories, and now maybe you understand."

I just continued to stare at my hands wondering what to do, to say, to feel. All around me I could see flashes of death, murder, rape, and things that I didn't even know one man could stomach doing to another, no matter how deranged. It was all too much, too much. I shut down my mind link.

"That won't help you Dan. You really don't know shit about how this thing works, do you?"

She was right. Ghosts walked around me: men maiming one another, curb stomping left and right; men cutting women open as this reached orgasms inside them; a small girl left hanging from a cliff before the rope was cut...it was absurd and all too real. Too real. I looked over to her as tears rolled down my eyes.

"Why?"

"Some people need to learn the hard way," was all she said and rolled out of bed, the sheets slipping off her contorted body. Gliding over to the closet, she pulled out some fresh sheets and threw them at me. "Get some rest. Tomorrow's going to be even worse. And same with the next day. And the day after that. Welcome to my world."

"I...there are..." I blurted out, incoherent and inconsolable.

"All I wanted was to be comforted for one night from the nightmares, but you had your new fancy little mind link and just had to be nosy."

Edit: About half-way through writing this, I realized it has a similar concept to 'jacks' from *Forever Peace*, a great novel by Joe Haldeman.

gantis: toward the edge

The idea for a story involving an inverse universe—in which our negative space (air, space, etc.) is turned into positive space (i.e. matter) and vice-versa—came on Christmas day while thinking of other ways the universe could have come about. I was interested in exploring what underground dwellers (ants, moles, etc.) deal with every day and expanding that to include the entire universe. This, of course, came with problems—at least for a scientific mind used to justifying the state of affairs. To avoid making the story convoluted and spending too much time on the theory of what would happen, several liberties are taken with physical laws. After all, this is a fictional universe.

I have tried to reduce science fiction word soup and creating alternative non-English words for the same concept, e.g. water = H_2O = dihydrogen monoxide rather than [jouliup](#) or similar. This is the first of several stories to take place in the Universe, i would like to flesh out the world as i really like the concept. Enjoy!

It was the first Gant in several hundred years—nearly a million people joined the voyage—to head toward t_{231} , a sector that probes indicated contained a massive gantis. A few smaller ganti had been found and their antimatter was re-routed toward t_{23} , a nearby sector's super-colony. Ultimately, the antimatter streams didn't last long enough and t_{231} was abandoned with a skeleton crew left to maintain the tunnels.

Recent evidence from Galho's scouting group indicate that original estimates were correct. There is a gantis big enough in the sector to sustain non-polluting energy for the foreseeable future. You have been selected as a part of an elite set of diggers who will head to t_{231} and find that gantis. Full mission report to follow in several thousand time-units. Good luck.

"Dynt, run! There is a stream coming this way, run!" Synx screamed and ran toward me. I snapped out of my dream—the cold, metallic voice that had give us those fateful instructions still echoing in my mind. I peered ahead and barely made out Synx bearing down on me, her face full of terror. This surprised me—her type were generally unafraid of antimatter streams, given their unique...abilities. We'd taken to calling them Shielders.

"Holy hell, Dynt, start digging a re-routing tunnel or something!" she barreled into me and grabbed the scruff of my collar and dragged me toward the end of the tunnel.

"What? Hold up, this is a dead-end tunnel, there isn't...we aren't..."

"I don't care about authorization! Where's the map? Give me the map!" she hollered as i fumbled around my pack, desperately searching for the little chip. In the distance i could hear the hiss and small crackles characteristic of approaching antimatter. I'd lined the walls around here with some damn thick neutral matter, so the antimatter shouldn't be reacting with anything...then i remember this tunnel wasn't vacuumed, so all the air was being eliminated by the onrushing antimatter...

"Found it!" i yelled and tossed the chip over to her. She stabbed it into her arms and fainted for a second before waking back up. Engineers never figured out how to not do a soft reboot when loading chips, fucking retarded design.

"Alright, start digging on the left-most portion of the tunnel, i'll prepare an A-shield in the meantime," she said, suddenly quite calm. She was super cocky in general—her parents had been top Shielders and not just for their skill with the arts. I wouldn't call her beautiful, exotic, or hot...pretty? She'd probably cut my balls off if i mentioned that thought to her.

"Digger? You there? Start doing your fucking job!" she said and trotted in the direction of the approaching stream. I snapped out it and ran toward the end of the tunnel. Looking down at my antidig, the indicator read near empty. That should be enough antimatter to put a dent in the tunnel at least. I dropped my goggles, flipped on my suits heat reflector, and jammed the antidig into the wall. With a loud hiss, it began to melt away.

"Hey Dynt! You'll be wanting to get your fat-ass behind me real soon," Synx said kneeling down and drawing some symbols in the ground. I hated Shielders and their faux magic almost as much as the Collectors and their obsessive wasting of resources to find ever last bit of antimatter seeping from old tunnels.

"Yeah, i'm almost..." Zzzzzttt, BOOOOMMMMMmmmmm! Zztttt! I was flung against the wall and the handle of my antidig dug its way into my ribs. Stunned, i twirled around to see the tunnel completely filled with antimatter. Rather, i didn't detect any form of electromagnetic radiation, antimatter absorbed all of it for reasons we never quite figured out.

"Get over here now!" Synx said and raised up a shield that only blocked a small sliver of the tunnel.

"What the hell is that tiny thing? Isn't going to stop..."

"Shut your ass and get over here!" There are times when you don't argue with an angry women who wields 'magic'. Especially when antimatter is approaching. I did as i was told and sprinted toward the shield and slid inside just as she completed closed it. Staring into her golden eyes, i could see a spark of terror hidden behind her tough-as-balls attitude.

"Alright, before you start asking your wise-ass questions, i'm not going to try and block that entire thing. Did you dig the hole?"

"How could i dig a goddamn hole in twenty seconds?" i snapped back.

"Hmmpf, thought you were 'top dog'," she snorted and flipped her goggles on and stopped talking. She was one of the few Shielders i'd seen use goggles and she never explained why. The antimatter was almost upon us and I realized that her shield wasn't nearly thick enough to protect us against the onslaught that would follow.

"Ummm, Synx, might want to make the shield thicker..." i trailed off as she gave me a look that even with the goggles on i knew meant death. She calmly turned her head back toward the antimatter stream and just froze.

"Get ready Dynt, we'll probably die here. Can't say its been enjoyable dragging around your lazy ass," was all she said as the antimatter slammed into the shield and tore away

at it layer-by-layer. But i soon realize why she'd made such a thin shield spread out over a fairly small area. She increased and modulated the power to different sections, creating new inner shields and not wasting time forming outer shields that would be destroyed immediately. Absolutely brilliant. Of course, one would never tell her royal highness that.

While Synx was busy saving our lives, i peered behind us, but could see nothing. The antimatter didn't seem to be pilling up as i expected. Even though there was a mountains of it streaming by, per area it wasn't enough to create anything but neutral matter when combined with matter. That should've ceased any forward movement and caused a rather troublesome back-flow.

"Hey Synx, think its strange that we aren't having back-flow like normal?"

"You dug a fucking hole, right? It should all be flowing into an abandoned chamber behind this tunnel," she noted without so much as moving a muscle in my direction. She would seem to switch personalities when shielding and never for the better. The antimatter continued to flow for what seemed like ages and she never broke. I could see her body wither though. Shielding didn't use energy from matter and antimatter but from the reserves of the user. That's why it was remarkable Synx was one at all, what with her tall frame and lanky form. She was always eating, the fat pig, but she burned it all away just as quickly saving me from shit like this.

"Hey Dynx...Dynx, can you hold me?" she whispered, her voice full of pain and a small amount of drool worked its way down her left chin. She turned her head toward me and through the goggles i could feel her soul leaving. A pang of guilt ran through me as i rushed over and pulled her up. She again stared at the oncoming stream of antimatter and continued working the layers of her elaborate shield. I stood like that for what seemed like a thousand time-units as she withered away, but finally it ended and i laid her down.

"Don't fucking look at me!" she immediately exclaimed once she dropped the shield and reabsorbed enough energy to speak. She curled into a ball and tears rolled down her eyes. Getting up, i began to walk toward the tunnel's end. Interacting with her in that state, no matter how weak, was inviting retribution later. Near the end i spotted where the antimatter had gone and took a step closer, peering through the hole. I tossed an antiprobe into the air and watched the chamber fill with light, noting the vast expanse of nothingness marking the antimatter pool. How the fuck was this mis-routed?

After a time checking the size of the chamber and noting it down for later, i returned to Synx. She had bolted herself against the wall and every so often she gasped for air followed by a stillness that suggested she had died. Upon seeing this i immediately donned my breathing mask and switched on the nitrogen. Waiting a several time-units or so to let my breathing stabilize, i leaned over and grabbed Synx's mask out of her pack and pressed it against her face for a brief moment and retracted it. She coughed heavily, then a torrent of fluid came rushing out and splattered across the ground. I let her wrench up the remaining liquid then secured her mask. Looked at both our pressure gauges and at the barometer, i calculated we only had about a couple hundred time-units to get back to base camp. Plenty of time considering this sector had no wild animals to speak of.

"Hey, Synx," i said softly and reached down to grab her around the waist and unlatch her bolt. I was treated with a class A slap to the face.

"Get...ack...get away from me!" she tried to scream but it came out as a whimper. Flailing about for a bit, she eventually settled down and i reached over once more to unlatch her. She obliged with a grunt and did everything possible to prove that my help wasn't needed or wanted. I ended up securing her pack then shoving her in the direction of base camp—allowing her to float there would be easier than manually guiding her, she deserved to bump into a wall or two on the way back.

Waiting a bit for her to round a corner, i looked back at the hole in the wall and finally noticed the glint of metal above it from my flame. **Colony t₂₂ chamber. DO NOT USE!** Turning around, i began to open my mouth and holler at Synx, but thought the better of it. Fuck. Well, she was about to be in for a big surprise when we got back to base camp.

Digger Dynt and Shielder Synx have been reassigned to t₂₄₂ until further notice. t₂₄₂ is the newest colony in the sector and contains many of our top diggers—among them Digger Rylet, your instructor. They have been webbing their way around a largely empty gantis for several hundred thousand time-units. More information can be found in the written report, available in a couple hundred time-units.

I looked over at Synx and hid a smile. She would be fuming later at the prospect of being shipped out to t₂₄₂. It was a backward place that you only heard negative reports of. The place where careers, and people, went to die. The only tunnel there was vacuumed and special vehicles were needed to traverse the vast distance to reach it in a reasonable amount of time. We walked out of the room together, with the gap between us noticeably wider. She waited until we were floating through an empty chamber before spinning to face me.

"You insolent piece of shit!" she screamed. I momentarily flinched, even though i'd anticipated the outburst. But for once an act of physical violence didn't follow.

"What do you mean, **you** ordered me to dig a hole there!"

"Yes, and you're a Digger. Maybe you should have checked to make sure..."

"With a wall of antimatter rushing toward us? Fat chance. I saw the glint in your eyes. You were terrified," i shot back and increased my foot thrusters output ever so slightly. She boosted ahead of me and blocked my path.

"I don't mean to be an asshole, because I'm not, but you should have **known** the layout of the tunnels. That's your fucking job. Your **only** job."

"And what is your job? Oh right, also knowing the tunnels. We have several more years, at the least, of assignments together. Let's argue then. Out in t₂₄₂," i smiled as the last sentence slipped from my lips. Fury raked her face and she shot toward me. I easily boosted out of the way and let her glide past before rocketing over to the other end of the chamber.

"And you better get your coordination up. I heard t₂₄₂ isn't t₂. There are wild things out there," i said and pressed the door ahead of me, gliding through. We didn't talk for several

thousand time-units, until the vehicle from t_{242} arrived.

I'd spent much of the time reading the news on the more efficient waste removal, apparently people had figured out how to separate trace antimatter from trash, allowing it to interact with antimatter sans repulsion. That this coincided with a breakthrough in agriculture was not to be overlooked. People often say lyteu was one of the more brilliant minds, having discovered that waste disposal through antimatter fusion could be used to power devices that would provide enough latent heat to allow certain organisms to grow. They could then be killed and eaten. Massive chambers were built for this purpose, with streams of matter and antimatter entering and colliding on one side while bigglopumps (a squishy little round monster of a creature) sat on the other side of an electrified fence soaking up the heat. I had just flipped to a fascinating article on bigglopump genetic engineering when Ms. No-Fun walked in. Yes, i've emphasized the Ms. in my transcoder.

"Get that smile off your face Dynt, I'm not here to argue. The vehicle is at the dock," she said and immediately glided out. I grabbed my pack and followed her down the nearby tunnel and into the main artery leading to the docks.

"Hold docks, vehicle from t_{242} is arriving," a voice announced, the sound echoing around the chamber. The docks were always a fascinating place, partially because there were only ever one artery and one vein. Several million time-units past someone in t_2 had decided all child colonies would work under the same system, the One I/O rule. This was meant to reduce wasting resources on developing multiple arteries between colonies, but lead to severe bottlenecks in non-hub (e.g. t_{2+}) colonies. It also meant that to go between colonies with different parents, you had to traverse to your parent colony before going to any other colonies. As a digger i hated it, especially given the dangers of unexpected antimatter streams that could collapse tunnels. But there were too few travelers in the outer colonies to care and protest.

"Hey Dynt, you awake?" i jumped several feet back as Synx appeared right in front of my face. Much too close for comfort. Still not in the mood to care.

"Yeah, yeah, what do you want?" i responded tersely.

"Jesus, calm down. We've barely talked lately and your still ice..."

"No, I'm just tired of you at the moment. Let's get on board," i cut her off and flung my pack through the air and followed it toward the ship.

Welcome to t_{242} !

That was the only greeting we got as we exited the shuttle. I was momentarily disorientated and blind, they used echo lamps here instead of light lamps. Echolocation seemed primitive to me, having grown up digging tunnels meant to be operated in a vacuum. But many swore by echo lamps, partly because they used vastly less energy. I found it quaint and i could tell by the look that Synx had, that she was not bemused by the primitive technology.

The dock itself was still rough around the edges and hadn't been formed into a perfect sphere

yet. I could make out forms moving in the distance, but my echolocation was still playing catch-up. Floating toward the nearest rig, i attached a line and began drifting toward registration—or at least what looked to be registration. They normally made it reflect sound waves in weird ways to make it stand out amongst the clutter.

“Dynt, you ass, hold up!” Synx said as she hauled her massive bag behind her. I’d told her that it would do no good out here to bring all that stuff, they would give us outfits and other necessities. But she had to have her hijos and calwinks or whatever it was ladies from t_{1.9} carried with them.

As i neared the registration, a form came barreling toward me, arms spread wide. I tried to avoid, but i’d grow rusty on the long, confined trip over here. Smashing into me, we tumbled a bit until my rope went taunt and we came to a halt. I was flailing about a bit trying to get the person off me.

“Boy! Calm down, calm down. There aren’t any rebels here, only friends!” the form exclaimed. I took a moment to orientate myself but finally got a good look at the fellow harassing me. He was obese, to put it politely, and carried a full mop of hair. I couldn’t make out much else, echolocation sucks that way, but he seemed non-threatening enough.

“What do you want?” i said, pulling back a little.

“Why you of course,” he said, smiling. “Name’s Rylet! Like rivet...”

“Not even close,” i interrupted. He blinked several times before carrying on.

“Now, where was i before you rudely interrupted? Ah yes, name’s Rylet! Like rivet! From the lovely t₂₄₀ and explorer of all t₂₄₀₊ colonies. I’ll be your instructor as it appears you,” he paused a moment and stared at Synx, smiling all the while. “And your girlfriend...”

“We’re partners,” i interjected.

“Ahhh, tied the knot i see!” he bellowed. I really wanted to turn on my light lamp, not being able to read a person’s eyes was killing me.

“No, i meant operational partners,” i corrected.

“Operational partners? What the fuck is that boy?”

“We work together, there is no romance. That enough for you?”

“Oooohhh, haha. The boy has no mojo, don’t worry, i’ll help you fix that before you’re done here. Now, i’m tasked with teaching y’all a lesson in team management and proper tunnel building. I’ll add in emergency preparedness,” he said and looked down at a notepad that had suddenly appeared in his hand. “As it seems y’all lack a semblance of level-headedness during even rudimentary antimatter scenarios,” he finished, his tone become slightly less jovial.

“We were dealing with a class A.2 disruption, what would you...”

“Quite down boy, I know all about your class ‘A.2’ problem. First we’ll fix the type A problem you both carry around then we’ll get to your highly ‘courageous’ fending off of a class ‘A.2’

antimatter flow," he said, his voice dripping with mockery. "Welcome to t_{242} ! This is where the real diggers and shielders come to learn."

He detached himself from me and floated off toward the other side of the chamber. I watched his grotesquely oversized form bounce against several objects on his way to the exit door. Looking behind me, Synx had finally caught up and was trying to prevent her bag from floating away.

"Operational partners?" she spat at me. "Since when were we operational or partners? I rank above..."

"Shut up Synx, we just got here," I broke in and pushed off toward the registration. This was going to be a long, long visit.

"Alright chumps, time to learn the art of digging fast," Rylet said and took out an antidig. "And shielding well."

Synx snorted and formed a small energy shield in the palm of her hand, allowing it to flicker in and out before extinguishing it. Rylet iced over for a moment as he glanced her way before looking down at the tool-chest and pulling out several other instruments and arranging them on a table.

"I learned to shield from the best. I'm sure you have some gimmicky little tricks that work out in the back colonies..."

"We are the future girl. Without us, where would your precious t_2 get all its antimatter? Want to power your cities with matter?"

"There are plenty unexplored areas even around the parent colonies, so yes, we well could. But better to have you switch-wacks..." and at that Rylet sprung over the table and pinned Synx onto the ground and wrapped one hand around the side of her neck. I screamed and rushed forward to pry him away, but before I could get half-way there, he was already back on his feet, walking toward the table.

"Now, don't you forget **where** you are little girl. This isn't a place to go making enemies," he stated and began taking out more equipment and laying it out before him. His expression never displayed any rage during the whole incident, but for the first time in awhile, Synx was visibly shaken. She clutched at her throat with one hand and was busily trying to make a shield with the other, but it kept fading in and out until it dissipated for good. She backed away from me as I approached until her back hit the wall of the room. Her eyes danced around wildly the entire time.

"Synx, what the hell? He only meant to frighten you," I said, leaning forward to help her up. A shield blasted me in the face and I was back on the floor several feet away.

"He tried to kill me!" she screamed suddenly and her shield grew brighter and began to fill her half of the room. "You piece of shit, I ought to..."

"Shut up girl, you aren't in t_2 anymore," Rylet noted, barely giving her a glance.

"I KNOW!" she screamed back, concentrating her shield into a tiny ball and flinging it toward Rylet. Without so much as flinching from his task of taking out various tools, his hand went up and a small shield formed there, completely absorbing Synx's.

"Now girl, i know being a t₂ make you an automatic bitch," he finally finished taking out the tools and stared at Synx. "But don't go threatening people in a territory you know aught next to nothin' about."

Synx had collapsed back onto the floor, her body having the same look after she saved us from the antimatter stream. But this time she carried a hate in her eyes that i never had the pleasure of knowing. Rylet's expression changed from momentary annoyance to a bemused smile.

"Ah, yes, so now you find a bit of a limitation to that faux magic of yours, yes?" he said, reaching down and tossing me a thin, pole-like object. "We are going out to explore the tunnels. Y'all be ready, this ain't no main tunnel. There be things living in these walls."

To be continued...

blue bubble pop

BLUe buBBle PoP¹

volume 1, chapter 1, section 1, part 1

by passion fruit fizzle²

If you are reading this—the book **should** be entitled **BLUe buBBle PoP**, not **blue bubble pop** or **Blue Bubble Pop** or even **bluE bubble poP** as the backwards **pinkle squishes** are like to do, but **BLUe buBBle PoP**—then you've found the world of **pink raspberry**. Now, one might ask, what is pink raspberry? Sounds delicious, even nutritious. But it is neither, and don't you forget it. Actually, before i tell you about pink raspberry, i'll let you in on a little story about WaSP or as it is known in long-speak, Watermelon ashes (with a sprinkle of) Soda PoP—don't forget the part inside the parenthesis, it is part of the name! And it is **ashes** not **Ashes** (we don't play cricket here!).

Now, WaSP is a small little **thing** next to **TINKLE**, i won't spell that one out but suffice to say it starts with Tomatoes In...ah well, since you are on pink raspberry, it is unlikely you have access to the Soda PoP stream and won't be searching for TINKLE anytime soon. TINKLE means Tomatoes In Need (of a smidgen of) Ketchup (for) LettucE. **LettucE** was a well respected pink raspberrian who happened to leave for **TIN**³ awhile back before the arrival of **Ketchup**. Now, Tomatoes In Need never quite felt resolved with its place in the world, always wanting a bit more, so it asked LettucE to find it a partner. Well, you can guess the rest of that story. Anyways, back to WaSP.

As you have probably discerned, pink raspberry is quite a wonderful place. We never quite resolved to form into a planet and instead settled on a swirling collection of magma that has stayed warm and crispy since the dawn of time. If you haven't already, fly to pink raspberry Ice to see the best of our world, or take advantage of pink raspberry Smoothie to sample the wonderful collision of molten lava and delicious plasma. In truth, there are no raspberries on pink raspberry, but we needn't trouble ourselves with semantics here.

Now, about WaSP. As you can (probably) guess it is likely related to BLUe buBBle PoP. Well, you would be correct! But, you must be asking, what is BLUe buBBle PoP? How did this splendid tome come to be? Well, i shall tell all in time, just you wait.

Now, you must listen carefully, PoP was having a nice conversation with **yellow Candy** when it dawned upon us all that a sumptuous blue was missing from our repertoire, that glorious mixture of the infinite space between **mango Lime Lassi** and **Jello Supreme!**. Oh, let me tell you a story about mango Lime Lassi, an absolutely marvelous tale concerned with the meeting of **Dragon Fruit Sizzle** and **little mango**.

You see, little mango used to be in love with Ketchup, but as you already know, Ketchup

¹We would like to thank the thousands of authors (10,302 for the OCD amongst us) who took part in writing different parts of this book.

²I would **highly** advise against searching the Soda PoP stream for this author.

³Tomatoes In Need.

was taken by LettucE to help TIN become whole. Now, little mango was a quite angry little being, having been born from a black hole and forged in the brutal environment of dual quasars—little mango skin was hard as rock and it's interior is said to be home to a small black hole filled with gorilla worms⁴ and hairless spider monkeys⁵. But on the outside, it⁶ appeared normal. Dragon Fruit Sizzle was...well let say it knew its way around the **Salad Bowl**. The Salad Bowl⁷? Perhaps you've begun to wonder, i shall explain!

I assume you have come to pink raspberry because you accidentally encountered a **grape-fruit delight** and fell into its trap; thus, you likely come from a place similar to ours, only you-all eat us whereas here we eat you. But do not worry, pink raspberry has long been deserted...anyways, Salad Bowl is our term for **everything**. Like you can have a Salad Bowl of work to finish. Or, you're my entire Salad Bowl. You understand, let's finish the story of mango Lime Lassi's fruition.

Dragon Fruit Sizzle met little mango in the Salad Bowl sometime in the future, assuming you are reading BLUe buBBle PoP, and not the infamous **Blue buBBle PoP**, then it is currently **jiggle wiggle and a judicious dose of asparagus** rather than **wiGGle jiggle with two helpings of pop** and you are a slight bit behind in terms of current events in the Salad Bowl. We haven't quite figured out why, but we seem to jump around a lot and certain fruits disappear without notice only to arrive much younger several years later. We have concluded that time in the Salad Bowl isn't quite linear, but follows some quirky series of jumps that our best **Salad Dressers** have so far failed to decipher. But alas, i have strayed from the **crème de la crème** of this story, what is WaSP?!

WaSP⁸ came about after a ravenous feast that saw a majority of the Salad Bowl's population disappear in a rather rapid series of awkward events⁹. Now, i mustn't dwell on such a terrible and fortuitous circumstance, but rather, this points to the mystery and myth that is WaSP. You see, ashes used to arrive from time to time and give the Salad Bowl a rather marvelous feast of peppers, oranges, and limes. Yet, ashes always seemed to disappear before the time was right and there never 'twas a being able to contain the fiery ashes. However, around **wiggle Jiggle** (several years in the future from when this book was written, so likely several hundred of your years in the past), Watermelon appeared with a splash. He crushed half the Salad Bowl and destroyed a good chunk of pink raspberry, leaving her in the current state with which she resides. Now, seeing as this happened in the future, Dragon Fruit Sizzle decided to revise the past to match current events during his time, thus the lack of any discrepancies that your puny other-worldly mind might have trouble comprehending.

Now, along with obliterating half the Salad Bowl, Watermelon happened to smother part of ashes, which came to the attention of both PoP and Soda. Now, you probably remember the chance mention of the Soda PoP stream, our wondrous creation that allows a person to access

⁴These are particular nasty breed of worm, the species is **Gorilla elegans** for the scientific readers.

⁵These are NOT **Ateles fusciceps**, but an different species altogether. They haven't been given a classification yet, as they have bellies of californium that defies description.

⁶little mango

⁷You **should** know what this is, if you are reading this tome. Would a blueberry forget what blue is?

⁸Must i remind you? It means Watermelon ashes (with a sprinkle of) Soda PoP.

⁹Or as you might call it, passing away (or as some of a weaker nature might say, moving on [or as a doctor might note, a negative outcome]).

information from all parts of Salad Bowl in mere seconds. As you can probably deduce, it was created by **Soda PoP**—NOT Soda and PoP as is commonly (mistakenly) noted...else we would have named it Soda-PoP. Now Soda PoP was the grandmother of both Soda and PoP and being the creator of **the** most divine invention, we hastened to grant them status befitting the kin of a (demi-)god. Now, when Watermelon decided to harm as aspect of ashes, Soda and PoP decided to punish Watermelon. Soda and PoP imprisoned him in an iron-clad cage of steel and titanium then called upon their grandmother. Soda PoP arrived in a flourish and demanded to know what contrivance had caused them to have her leave the Sugar Rush Bowl in the middle of a Hule¹⁰ with **Gingerbread**¹¹. They told the story and Soda PoP immediately conjured up a bit of magic, a sprinkle if you will, that forced Watermelon's prison to be shut for all time. He was sequestered into a dashing corner of the Salad Bowl, where all the posh fruits when to party, as punishment. He would spend the rest of his days watching others enjoying life while he wasted away. And as a pub joke, little mango named him WaSP, after that most useless and evil of creatures.

But there are so many other stories that need to be told, adventures waiting to be revealed, heroic conquest is search of a reader—alas, this is the end of **BLUe buBBle PoP**, volume 1, chapter 1, section 1, part 1. Continue onto to volume 1, chapter 1, section 1, part 2 for more dazzling tales from the Salad Bowl and beyond. Or jump to volume 7, chapter 3000, section 3, part 23 for the much sought after story of **Durian soup in Berlin**¹². Farewell for now brave traveling reader! And be sure to explore pink raspberry while you still have time.

¹⁰See volume 20, chapter 100, section 10, part 200 for more.

¹¹See volume 30, chapter 10, section 300, part 1 for more about this delightful fellow.

¹²We included an olfactory stimulation machine to further enhance that particularly opulent and luxurious story.

the human abstraction

Abstraction. It is a wonderful word, for me. When i was much younger, i used to work on everything from designing kernels for big software companies to running high-level robotic interfaces. Abstraction. We were indoctrinated since children about the dogma that everything could be abstracted, that we needn't know the details as long as we knew the input and output along with edge cases. And we designed our systems that way, a towering edifice of logic.

Yet, I was not satisfied. Computers were the easy abstraction, we built them after-all. Once we reached the limits of von Neumann architecture and sat at the awkward intersection between the macro and the quantum world, there was senescence. And this bother us all; after all, we were used to the high-flying, fast-paced world of technology moving ever forward.

A century ago, a president of the USA declared that they would pump money into solving the ultimate computation device: the brain. It was all back-slapping and champagne for the first couple years as new technologies were rolled out and a vast sea of data was unleashed. Yet, there was no real abstraction, no development of a concrete theory of the mind. When I met someone, knowing their parameters—genome, environmental exposure, etc.—would not help me decipher what they would do next. That was deeply disturbing to me. And many others.

We began in earnest one day after a conference in San Diego several decades back. It started off as a pie-in-the-sky project with goals approaching Apollo, yet our challenge was orders of magnitude more daunting, for we barely knew **what** we would find in the end and how it would help us. Yes, the human abstraction was an obsession that grew day-by-day to consume entire departments and funding agencies.

You see, the thought of people as something other than a computational I/O, a set of well-designed biological relays, slowly started to fade from our minds. It happened first with **C. elegans**. The original work of Brenner and colleagues to elucidate every neuron paid off 70 years later, when a simulation of the entire worms nervous system and other organ systems was complete. It could predict with nearly 90% accuracy what a **particular** worm would do given you knew its genetic composition and environmental parameters. It was a triumph.

Then followed several other model organisms, including the heroic project, MELSTAR, that completely modeled **D. mel**. That was thirty years on. People could smell it. We were getting close to mammals. And then we would have a new form of computing, one that could bridge the precision of the past with the creativity and adaptability of natural beings. People talked about technological singularity, of creating computers smarter than man. But this was not our aim. And it never became a reality—we feared that event so much that great care was taken to handicap every new algorithm or newly designed circuit to prevent that possibility.

We entered the 22nd century with the expectation that by the 23rd century we would have solved humanity. That we would be able to abstract people. Given a sample of someone's DNA, a record of their life's movements (easily obtainable via phone and other records), and

several other parameters, we would be able to predict both **what** they would do and in the near future when computing power had caught up, **when** they would do it. An old movie, **The Matrix** i believe it was called, was constantly referenced, many claiming they foresaw a day in the near future when we'd start taking subjects to enslave. But we didn't need hosts, just parameters.

Somewhere around the early half of the 22nd century, we solved the avian, rodent and non-human primate brains, nearly simultaneously. A team at Stanford-Berkeley (Stanford had completed its hostile take-over of its nearby neighbor several decades back) help show that the interactions and eventual social hierarchy of several littermate mice could be modeled completely. Teams at Tokyo University, Peking University, and several Max Planck institutes then followed with the non-human primate. The avian simulation came out of a Harvard-MIT collaboration.

And so, here we are. Today. The first simulation of a human mind has been run...and failed. For reasons unknown to us, it failed to predict the output of patient 1. Everything had been synced, the patient was continually hooked up to allow real-time monitoring of blood content, relative neurotransmitter counts (microdialysis and voltammetry had advanced quite a bit), brain region-specific mRNA expression levels, and a host of other parameters. We had every possible parameter about patient 1's life as well: their precise location every 10 seconds since birth, exactly who they interacted with, what they ate, who they slept with (and when)...everything. Short of measuring the activity of every cell in their body, a feat we still couldn't accomplish even with the monumental improvements in fMRI and other imaging modalities, there was nothing more we could do. No more arguments could be passed to the program.

But there is hope. The simulation still had the same **personality** as patient 1. That was cause for celebration: for now, when i meet a person on the street, all it would take is a couple of their parameters, and we could skip the unnecessary social interactions; months or years of shared time; and heated, angry conversations. The human abstraction would be complete and then we could know the inputs needed to achieve a specified output. Wonderful.

The screen's glare sneaked into every corner of the room. It was imposing, a Goliath that filled the Davids below with unease. And that unsettling feeling had more to do with the power of its soon-to-arrive message than its physical manifestation. You see, i was part of a UN committee that was tasked with determining the number of people that we needed on Earth. You might be asking, **what exactly does this entail?**

Around a decade ago it became apparent that we were fast approaching an era in which every person would be wired up and the efficiencies a single person would be able to achieve made many others...permanently redundant, in the gobbledygook of consulting. As the world was running out of valuable resources, it was decided by the UN permanent security council, with China and India abstaining, to initiate a committee that would determine what cap to set on the human population going forward.

The process for choosing the members has been lost, the records undoubtedly destroyed the second the list went out. Many joined reluctantly, aware that they were unlikely to lead a normal life afterwards. Some, like me, relished the opportunity to finally sweep up the trash that had come to consume the Earth. They provided us computing power to rival the leading tech firms of the time and it allowed us a enormous playground where we could finally test many economic and sociological hypotheses. But we weren't quite prepared for the actual physical part of being in a committee, thinking it would be like most others assembled up to that point.

We were sequestered inside a room. The only time we left was to sleep in rooms down the hall. Food was brought into the common area for us. The entire experience was suffocating and slightly maddening. We had no ability to communicate out—only the ability to take in the world. And so we read, discussed, conjectured, modeled, analyzed, validated, cross-validated, regressed, debated, yelled, slept, pontificated, cheered, cried, theorized, drank, and finally entered our results into the final simulation. And waited.

It had probably been a couple months, but we wouldn't know, there were no clocks here. Only the gray granite walls, plush lavender seats, and endless rows of computers. Every once in awhile the main screen would flicker on, some incoherent line of text scrolling across, and then it would shut off. Some people took to scrolling the Net, absorbing more information than they had time to decipher. Others would sink into the over-sized chairs and make small talk, what little there was to make. The chips, which most people had implanted before their teens, made information retrieval and exchange so absurdly rapid that the previously time-consuming, and very human, art of wasting time watching inane videos or chatting with friends had become rather quaint and antiquated. Nevertheless, we tried to keep ourselves busy in the intervening time. Then, that day arrive.

The screen continued getting brighter until it became hard to look at. Then it abruptly turned off, the afterimage nothing but a large red smear across my field of view. Several people nearby started rubbing their eyes and then it happened.

291,572,990.1002

The number hung in the air. For several seconds, nothing happened and the room was silent. And in that silence, i heard the barely audible *click* *click* *click* of all the rooms doors locking.

“NO ONE IS TO LEAVE THIS ROOM UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE!” a voice boomed out. Several people had already darted for the doors at that point and banged on them to no avail. This wasn’t surprising. We had decided the fate of billions. They would likely disappear us rather than allow the world to do it. How the results of the simulation were to be executed was beyond our purview.

While others around me panicked, i walked over to a nearby computer and flicked on the screen. I’d customized one of my rigs to have the newscast from several different countries on live feeds.

“Breaking news! UN DEATH”—that is what they had taken to calling us—“council has announced only 2.9% of the world will be allowed to live!”

“Noticias! El concilio del UN dice que solamente 2.9% del poblacion tiene el derecho a vivir...”

And it continued to arrive in all forms, languages, and types of exaggeration. Over the next several months, a series of skirmish wars broke out—most notable between coalition lead by the USA and Russia against an alliance between China and India. The latter accounted for nearly a third of the world’s population at that point. Easy pickings for those wishing to meet our target number.

Now, you must be viewing this memory chip long after the next series (of rather unseemly) events transpired. And, sitting on your pedestal of hindsight, you are blaming us for our subsequent...actions. But you must be unable to fathom an over-crowded, resource-depleted world. A world that had just been transformed yet again by a technology that made people extraneous. That was the time we lived in and measures had to be taken. Even if that meant indefinitely relieving excess humanity.

interaction space

There is a start and an end. Whether at work, a bar, at the pier watching a boat race, climbing a mountain, sitting in the silence of space, or anywhere else, they all have a beginning and an end. For some, it is an enjoyable journey: an observation about the weather, a chat about how the local baseball team is doing, or catching up about the going-ons in the community. In other situations, it is engaged and a series rapid-fire information exchanges takes place: a dynamic tussle of ideas, facts, and wisdom—often very little of the later is actually seen or produced. Some sit back and allow the ebb and flow of it to surround them, then with hawkish precision they spot holes in logic, espouse their displeasure, and tear the opposing party to shreds.

The composition of it shifts and morphs as each person wanders through its corridors. For some, it is a large, interwoven tapestry on which they can weave each thought and feeling. While others see a voyage about to depart, the galleon's sail nearly ripping off the mast while the captain rouses the crew. There are a few who see the Sahara, a barren wasteland of forgotten thoughts and wishes, but out of the blue a glimmer of hope shows the way, only to turn out to be a mirage. Several attempt to build fortresses to defend against it, afraid of what the rest might find behind the sky-high walls. Many hope for a Gold Rush, a torrid adventure that quickly takes on a positive light when, after endless searching and horrible mistakes, they find a golden nugget and the true adventure begins.

And for me that quest is a spider web of possibilities, a maze of traps and deceptions, a mixture of majestic nebulae and exploding supernovas—a dazzling complexity that is hard to visualize or describe completely, but which i will attempt to do, if ever so briefly. You see, when someone decides the time is right for it, my mind shifts gears and i set out on a wondrous odyssey. Allow me a short example.

A friend and i walk down the street toward my car (and her nearby appointment). We begin discussing the importance of humanities in a college education...

A bright light shines across a scorched earth and nearby is my lone transporter pod, it's beckon is spazzing out while sparks fly every which-way. Peering into the distance, i see a woman crawling out of a pod of altogether alien design: it has outstretched wings the size of cars, lines of colorful light zipping along its surface, and a body shaped like a perfectly cut diamond. The suns are dazzling against its polished surface, which bears no sign of the insults it just suffered on its way to a messy landing. Suspicious, i start to eek forward and feel around for my weapon of choice, a sharp knife that really doubles as a laser. People always fall for it...

...midway through, the discussion shifts, my feints and jabs have been parried equally well and i take a step back to center myself...

Woooshhhh! Gale force winds nearly blow me off of the ship. Regaining my balance, if only for a moment, i have but a second to react as a woman lunges toward me, her half-torn tunic flapping in the wind. Out comes my sword and i hurriedly swat away her pokes and jabs. She steps back for a moment, allowing me a quick respite to survey the scene around

me. Above a small man in a bright yellow dress holds onto the Mizzen-mast, his bright green eyes peering down at me. He smiles, if only for a second, then draws two daggers and jumps down beside the lady with nary a hint of effort. I sheath my sword and a pair of pistols appear in my hands. This isn't a time for honorable play...

...our voices begin to rise, but at that moment, a group of friends who we haven't seen in a bit trot by on the way to a restaurant in the south of town. Suddenly...

Peering ahead, i see a small opening that suddenly vanishes. To my left and right a pair of walls are attempting to crush me. And, unfortunately, these are no ordinary walls. It's as if someone took a thousand broken mirrors and arranged them randomly, making it impossibly to discern anything concrete amongst the endlessly reflecting rays of light. Shapes come and go while my mind attempts to conceptualize what is going on. The complexity is overwhelming and is compounded by the small monitors randomly placed on the walls, their screens blaring a thousand different scenes from movies long forgotten and shows currently in vogue. Suddenly the wall to my left disappears and i shield myself as it's contents come crashing down. And then the one to my right does the same. Behind each a solid black obelisk hovers above an endless sea of gold liquid, here and there it ripples and waves lap up against the floor where i stand. Bits of glass have already begun to float away. With one timorous step after another, i begin walking across the golden sea...

...and just as quickly, we are done. They need to get to their reservation and the conversation will have to wait for another time. I slowly drift away, pieces of the journey floating around in my mind and flashes appear in my vision, but nothing solid or concrete. As i round a street corner, it slowly starts to come back, bit by bit...

Smack! I drive the stamp hard as i can into the open book's back cover. **Registered: 2143.09.22 [07:09:42]**. The scarlet letters stand out like a purple suit wearing clown in the middle of the projects. I close the book and toss it behind me into a nearby chute, waiting a couple seconds until i hear the faint **bump!** that assures me it has reached the pile below. Ahead thousands of books lie in ruin, their spines laid out every which-way. Looking closer, i can make out some titles: **The Jiji Times, How to Learn the Secretes of Wire Cutting, Empty Century: How the Rise of the East Ruined a Nation, Jupiter Paradox and the Lone Survivor of Mission X16B**, and many more. I dip my stamp in the bucket of red paint and reach toward the nearest tome, its tattered body barely holding together. **An Organized Mess: The Story of the Rise and Fall of LI2** the title reads. Ostensibly it gives an account of the Google of our era, a technological and business masterclass that had taken the first commercial leap into quantum computing, dominated the market for half a century, then abruptly collapsed in on itself after a series of managerial failures. A classic. I flip open the back cover, only to see...

Nearly running into the person in front of me, i coolly step aside and bound across the street toward my car. All around me the world is spider webs, stars falling into black holes, the ruins of long forgotten civilizations, the man cheating on his wife only to have to run from the hitman she hired, a sea of silver and platinum on which floats the newly minted aircraft carrier ready to do battle with the enemies at our door, and so much more. Standing near my car, I close my eyes for a second then reach into my pocket and pop a set of buds into

my ears. Flipping through the collection, i come across a very old tune. My eye lids flutter as the beat takes over...

Down below the city goes about its business. I stand on air, a thin force-field keeping me from plummeting below. "Alright, are you people ready!!!" a man screams over a pair of enormous speakers. A horde of people materialized around me, their bodies swaying as the tune began its hours-long ascent. I smile and my hips begin to gyrate. There is more than one way to converse...

2042: antibiotics

This was my submission for the Nature microFutures's competition. The limit was 200 characters. It's interesting to see how much information about the world you are describing can be packed into a short space. I thought using the command line and questioning the character using it allowed for some subtle hints about the state of the world.

```
$ 2150.05.22 22:32:11
$ cd /archive/cdc/2042/src/
$ make report.c | tee out
...done!
$ ./report
Load 2042 logfile [Y/n]? y
Machine[1] or human[0] formatted? 0
Every last-line antibiotic had failed...
```

an exhaustive search for the truth

The terminal blinked. **PASSWORD?** The words shouted in an unnecessary show of non-verbal anger. Many synthetic systems had begun to do that. Gather a whiff of personality about them. Bad programming on part of a human? Error in some aspect of the self-modifying code? No one could say. The systems had become too complex. Too weighed down by generations of various programming styles, syntaxes, and other oddities. The best one could hope for was that the person before you had done their job.

I had finished punching in the password. Bits streamed from the central server with the block of texts i was to analyze. The task? Checking several hundred thousand documents each day. I looked for information: people's names living and dead, pieces of scientific or cultural knowledge, strings of text that followed valid grammar and spelling rules (and thus might contain yet undiscovered information), and various other tidbits. The job had begun when i was only seven. They trained people early as the lifespan of a human was short and the amount of knowledge of be sifted through immense.

The project had started out with a simple question: would it be faster to assemble complete knowledge about all truths past, present, and future through scientific inquiry or via brute force computation?

The debate began to rage. As it did the simple math was worked out and the project started in secret. Least humanity lose valuable time. The symbol system chosen was the Latin alphabet¹³ plus punctuation. This lead to around forty-two symbols chosen for the initial run.¹⁴ At the time, scientific papers rarely ran over 100 pages. And if they did, were likely in need of a bit of shortening. Anyways, it was decided that this would be the number of pages for each 'book' or combination of the forty-four letters. Printed text contained about 3000 characters per page. Thus, each 'book' would contain about 300,000 characters. And we wanted to elucidate **all** possible knowledge within this defined space. This would mean $42^{300,000}$ possible books.

Written like that (and it was **always** written that way in project documents) the number always seemed small. And, to anyone reading this little entry of mine, you surely don't need a lesson in why it is so immense as to squash any hope of actually finishing the project. But basic science was floundering then. Nearly all possible sounds that could be interpreted and found pleasing to the human ear had been created and produced. Culturally the world was in a decades long retro-spree in search of the Next-Big-Thing. So the project was given the green light. Many hoped that qubits and other exotic forms of computation along with improved algorithms would reduce the sear size of the problem. They have not.

So here i was in a dank warehouse on the outskirts of a rotting North American city with thousands of other sorry souls. Attempting to do the impossible.

¹³The project began around the late 21st century, during the waning years of the United States (and by extension English's) technological preeminence

¹⁴Yes. Initial run. They had the completely asinine assumption that humanity would be around for version two of the project.

"Hey, hey Bow Hunter," someone called out from behind me. I continued to type away at the terminal. "HEY! Hey Big Willow, Blue Corn, Bog Sailer. Hey, hey," the voice drew closer. Jule was coming. He always had a new nickname for people. Was his way to spicing up proceedings.

"The second round of books is coming. Rather be out of here before then." I muttered and continued staring at the screen. "No sleep past couple of days."

He grinned a little as i said that. He never slept. He was always on some combination of drone, p-light, tomnonic, and who knows what else.

"Been having some ideas lately, you know? About how to take what we're doing to level nine. Hell, they'd level up this whole goddamn country if word got out we implemented it," he said, leaning on the waist-high glass wall that separated each desk-unit. He was really into old retro videogames. The early 1990s shit. People had been pretty good at archiving that stuff. For some reason.

"..."

"Hey, hey now Bacon Bits. You need to hear this out. Hear this ouuuutttt," he said excitedly and drew out the last word. I looked over at him. He appeared sound of mind at the moment. Noticing he had my attention, he grabbed a chair from a nearby empty desk-unit. His arms were always an array of black, blue, and red. He scribbled on them. A lot. Even though we'd gotten to the point were you could train an EMG-style headset to convert thoughts to electronic form. Albeit, in a highly error prone way. Anyways, he began to speak.

"Alright, alright, alright," he said. His arms gestured wildly the entire time. "Know how we are trying to shift through all possible bits of useful information within a bound of...you know...say around 300,000 characters?"

"Yep. I do this everyday Jule."

"Okay, okay. Yeah...I know, okay," he was fidgeting a bit now. "Okay, okay, here me out. You listening Bug Lyme?"

"Bug Lyme?"

"Bed Burner. Happy? Now, now...okay hear this out. So we have videos, right? You know CCTV, drones, porn, the tellyyyyyy..." he drew that one out. He tried to intersperse British-isms sometimes. Found it annoying. "...monitors, phones, and all that jazz. You know? Alright, so hear this out. What if we took a combination of all possible videos..."

My eyes had begun to widen. Someone must have already thought of that. It was too simple. To easy. To obvious.

"Ahhhhh, i can see the cogs turning in that old V2 you call a brain. Now, think about this. Think about it. What if we just threw out an entire spectrum of the search space and ONLY," he leaned in as he said this. Both his index fingers were pointed at me. He did that sometimes. Have not made sense of why or where he had picked up that mannerism. "ONLY look at the combinations of pixels that produced videos with time stamps. Of important historical dates.

Ones a week, two months, centuries before or from now. IMAGINE! We could know every event..."

"That has ever happened or will happen," i finished for him. "This was exactly why the project was started. You have read the original executive report?"

"Yes, yes. I know, okay. I know. Hear me out. Describe my arm."

"What? White and hair with scribbles. A lot of scribbles. Some burn marks here and there..."

"Stop, STOP. See? How long would it take you to **really** describe my arm? Everything about it? No, you need a picture for that, a movie," he had gotten up by now and was pacing in front of my desk. "Imagine. Imagine. What if we made one minute movies, you know? One minute movies that contained every combination of red, blue, and green pixel values at every pixel at 10k by 10k resolution," he always thought big. His monitor was 2 meters on a side. His notepads were nearly as large. "Then we just have people watch. You know, this could be it."

"Yeah. I get it."

"No, no, no. I don't think you do," his voice carried a hint of annoyance. "This could be the ticket out of the malaise, you know? We could have people just WATCH. You know? What if a movie was one frame? We could re-create every possible painting. You know? Fantastic stuff like **Oath of the Horatii** to some shit like **Orange, Red, Yellow**. EVERYTHING. We could re-create every telly show..."

"Can you stop using British words?"

"Stop being such a bloody wanking chav," he grinned. He then continued on as if i had not said a word. "We could sell this to the military. You know? They could just search the database for terrorists' faces and see all possible scenarios they might undertake."

"Search space is still too large. Not very convenient."

"Then narrow it down based on current facts of the world. It's brilliant. What do you say? Let's start a company," he immediately saw the mix of skepticism and horror creep into my features. "On the side, on the side. We can still get our bills here. But, hey, hey Bulging Bison. Look at me. That terminal will be there when I'm gone. What do you say? Want to do this? 50-50, we'll split it even."

"I will think it over. I want to leave here early."

"Yeah yea, I know. But hear me out. Think about it Billowing Crow. There's life in the idea."

Author's Addendum:

You are unlikely to be reading this except as a record of where the idea for Enumerate originated. Or maybe, in some far distant future, the computer's have spit out a book with this exact story written inside of it. That thought never stopped bothering me. Nearly drove me mad. Happened all over again when we started doing video. And not just to me. A lot

transpired after the idea was made public. But that is for another entry. I sign off now. Good night.

evolving actaeon's tragedy

"Acid vs. venom is a pretty fair fight wouldn't you say?"

The pair sat in a darkened room. Around them were a sea of monitors, computers, and cages, lots of cages. Adding to the cacophony of sound produced by the high-tech equipment were inaudible screams. Ultrasonic to be precise. Some of those belonged to a rather peculiar critter, jokingly called *Mus musculus acidus*. They were rather small and diminutive. A naive person might even consider them cute, should they be ignorant of their rather peculiar abilities.

"Not even a chance, everyone knows that acid would win in a fight."

"How about venom and pure, raw, unchallenged speed?"

"You think a mouse is slower than a python?"

"Well, Dolores isn't in and the chamber is ready, should we put that hypothesis to the test?"

One of the pair, who we'll find out is called Blue, got up and walked toward the rack at the back of the room with all the cages. The rustling grew louder as he approached and the inaudible screams reached a crescendo. Blue threw on a silvery-green coat and dropped a heavy black mask over his face. Stretching some equally heavy gloves over his oversized hands, he reached over and pulled out a cage.

"This one's labeled lentivirus 54 test 7, that one good?"

"Which mouse?"

"879"

"...one sec, let me check the notes," the man called George responded. Reaching under the bench, he pulled out a small, Moleskin-style notepad. The front was laser engraved GEORGE with a picture of his fiancée etched on the back. Some men love abusing their access to high-end machinery. Flipping through the pages, pictures of half-formed specimens filled the page with copious notes along the margins. *Tail-end of Ankylosaurus on body of cat? ...how will we get bone structure to form...not sure how to splice genome...talk to Antediluvian DNA specialist...Dan Siller?* "Yeah...yeah, that's the one, bring her over."

"Where's the python? We don't have one on protocol, right?"

"Y'all might not, but for all her bitchiness Dolores is pretty good at getting every animal known to man on our protocol. Wish you were in a neuroecologist lab, don't you? Government loves us."

"Not really, being the king of bullshit isn't super appealing."

"And being the master-o-tubes is better?" George reached over and picked up a phone on the desk. He spent a minute or two looking through the directory next to it before finding the extension to reach his assistant. While the phone rang, Blue quickly flicked open mouse

879's cage lid, dropped a silver weigh boat inside, poured a clear liquid into it and slammed it shut. In that brief span of time he had to swat the mouse back into the cage several times. And upon closing the lid an ear-splitting inaudible cry could be heard (if one was gifted with ultrasonic hearing). The person on the other end finally picked up the phone.

"Hey hey! I just ran this total rad gel, I think we got 'em, you know, the HDAC co-activators..."

"Holy frak Daniella, not now. Want to bring over one of the *Python reticulatus venenatus*? We want to run a small test."

"But, but you gotta see this gel, is so beautiful, the bands are clean..."

"Not now, just bring over that python. You capable of that?"

"I'm not 12..."

"Might as well be. Four years at Ohio State and you still can't even drink yet..."

"...come again?"

"Just bring the python."

Blue peered into the cage through a small slit in the side and was greeted with a blueish liquid to the face. Barely flinching, they'd dealt with these critters daily for the past couple years, he closed the viewport and placed the cage on the desk.

"This gonna happen?" Blue said and started to remove the protective gear.

"Ah yeah, and guess who'll be here to watch?"

"Fuck, her? Why do you always bring over that chatterbox..."

The door flew open and the word-machine known as Daniella bound into the room. She surveyed the room with her blue and green eyes then grinned. "We doin' science here?"

"Give me the box Daniella," George said.

"Don't be such a bitch about it, Jeezus," she snapped back and tossed the cage George's way. Catching it, he threw it into a small chute next to the terminal he was sitting at.

"Blue, Blue! Frak," leaning in George hollered once more, for by this time Blue had turned on his tablet, plugged in his headphones and was long gone from the world around him. Looking up, he tossed the cage with mouse 879 into a chute on the opposite end of the terminal.

"Oooooo, is this an interaction test? I've always wanted to see how you both do this. What's the hypothesis? Must be a hypothesis right? Guessing you're looking to see how venom affects python's prey catching tactics? What type of mice are those? What's with the silver boxes? Aren't they normally clear?" Daniella rattled off a million questions before George put up a hand.

"Stop talking," he muttered and began entering some commands into the computer near him. Several of the displays switched to showing a small, concrete-walled room with two small,

square holes on each side. Daniella sulked over to a chair near Blue and leaned over his shoulder to see what he was doing.

"Hey Blue, Blue...hey Blue," she leaned in further. "Hey Blue, what're you both doing here? What's the test? What type of mice are those?" Blue looked up without taking his headphones off, stared at her blankly, and went back to his tablet.

"Hey Daniella, stop bothering him. Come over here and watch. This is pretty sweet," George said as he finished entering the last instructions into the computer.

The small holes in the concrete room closed for a second and a slight hiss was heard. Then they both re-opened, only this time they weren't empty. One had the python, the other the diminutive mouse. The python began slithering around the room, its tongue flickering in and out. It seemed not to notice the mouse at first. At the same time, instantly sensing the python, the mouse bound out of the hole and off one of the nearby walls. In the process, a bit of the mouse's spittle splashed against the walls, causing new holes to be formed.

"What?" Daniella said and leaned over George to get a better look at the action on the screens, her eyes growing wide.

As if on cue, the python suddenly turned around and lunged at the mouse, missing and ramming its head into one of the walls. Its tail continued the attack and caught the fleeing mouse's foot, sending it careening through the air. Hitting the wall, it dropped to the floor, wheezing. The python turned around and with Tomahawk-like precision, honed in on the immobile prey. When it was mere inches from the mouse, the diminutive beast kicked its legs against the wall and flew to the other side of the tiny room then got up on its hind legs. The python turned and lurched toward the mouse. Without warning, the mouse opened its mouth and spew a small jet of blue liquid into the pythons gapping mouth and side-stepped the onrushing mass. The python's limp body crashed against the wall and slid to the ground, its face half melted away. The mouse scurried to the corner, small bits of saliva dripping from its mouth and sinking into the floor. All the while, that dumb-as-nails look never escaped its face.

"Pretty awesome, no?" Blue said, having suddenly decided to re-engage the world. "We could probably market this shit."

"Wait...this is what all your tests have been about? What the fuck is this? This isn't science, your not supposed to bastardize..."

"We're improving nature. Why should directed evolution be confined to *E. coli* and other trivial aims?"

"It's unethical..."

"...in humans," Blue said, a puzzled look crossing his face, as if he didn't understand her surprise and protests. "Plus, come on, we can study how species interaction changes when the prey becomes the predator."

Daniella eyed them both suspiciously. "What's in the rest of those cages?"

George looked over his shoulder at the rack, a slight smile crossed his face. "Other improvements. Want to bring another python? 879 had one of the more tame modifications."

a shifty conversation

"Colonel (C): Hi."

"Operator (O): HELLO! HOW ARE YOU?"

"C: You have caps lock on."

"O: NO I DO NOT!"

"C: Then take your finger off of the shift key."

"O: MY FINGER IS NOT ON THE SHIFT KEY!"

"C: Type 8."

"O: EIGHT>"

"C: No, I mean the number 8, exactly as I have typed it."

"O: OO>"

"C: What?"

"O: I CHOOSE TO TYPE MY NUMBERS ROTATED!"

"C: You have the shift key pressed down...anyways, the reason why we are chatting is to discuss my departure."

"O: WE HAVE REVOKED THE ID PASS< YOUR DNA DID NOT CHECK OUT»>"

"C: You just type '<' instead of ',' and have been typing '>' instead of '.'. Definitely holding down the shift key."

"O: I ONLY HAVE CAPITAL LETTERS ON MY KEYBOARD>"

"C: If you...oh nevermind, just tell me about the ID pass."

"O: REVOKED! ANY OTHER QUESTIONS?"

"C: Can you explain the reasons for revoking the ID pass? I need to leave the station rather soon."

"O: YOU DO NOT HAVE THE AUTHORITY TO MAKE SUCH A DECISION< NEXT QUESTION?"

"C: I am a colonel, I definitely have the authority at this station. Who's downgraded my access privileges?"

"O: HOW DO YOU LIKE PINK DRESSES?"

"C: WTF? Why..."

"O: AH< SO YOU ALSO LIKE TO TYPE WITH CAPS AS WELL? WE CAN BECOME FAST FRIENDS NOW!"

"C: Ummm, no. Please, can we just get to the point. Who has..."

"O: NOW< LAST TIME I TALKED WITH YOU< ALL YOU WANTED WAS A QUICK DNA TUNEUP< NOW YOU ARE ASKING ALL THESE QUESTIONS AND I AM GETTING CONFUSED»>"

"C: Just stop. Please. Can you connect me with another..."

"O: »>AND NERVOUS> PLEASE DO NOT INTERRUPT ME< OKAY?"

"C: WHAT ID NUMBER DID I GIVE YOU LAST TIME?"

"O: %\$@!*()"

"C: You have the shift key enabled..."

"O: SORRY< HERE IS THE NUMBER "

"C: Hello?"

"O: SORRY< MY KEYBOARD DOES NOT CONTAIN NUMERIC ENTRY DEVICES< PERHAPS I CAN SPELL OUT THE NUMBERS YOU GAVE?"

"C: You tried using the numpad..."

"O: PLEASE SIR< DO NOT CLAIM THAT WHICH YOU DO NOT KNOW> I DO NOT HAVE ANY NUMERIC ENTRY DEVICES> NOW ABOUT YOUR LAST VISIT> IT SEEMS THAT THE DNA DID NOT CHECK OUT CORRECTLY AND WE NEED YOU TO COME IN FOR A SECONDARY SCREENING> WHEN WOULD YOU BE AVAILIABLE?"

"C: I just want to get my ID pass cleared so I can get to my departing transporter on time. Could you please re-route me to another operator or I will just continue reconnecting until I am given someone who can be of more help."

"O: I AM SORRY< BUT THERE IS CURRENTLY ONLY A SINGLE OPERATOR PRESENT AND THAT IS ME>"

"C: ..."

"O: DO YOU WANT TO HEAR MORE ABOUT THE SECONDARY SCREENING? IT ONLY COSTS»>"

"C: I AM A COLONEL! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"O: I am confused as to why you are yelling and getting angry. I only want to advise you of an important secondary screen to ensure that your DNA remains valid."

"C: Wait, what? That's sentence case...you took your finger off the shift key."

"O: WHAT SHIFT KEY?"

"C: [Sigh] Just tell me about the secondary screening."

"O: YOU HAVE BEEN SCHEDULED TO MEET ON FOURTH MITHUNA> DO YOU AGREE WITH THIS DATE?"

"C: Hold on, I need to know..."

"O: Do you agree with this date?"

"C: ...setup the appointment. Now about the ID pass."

"O: YOUR ID PASS HAS BEEN VALID THIS ENTIRE CONVERSATION< WHY DO YOU KEEP BRINGING IT UP?"

"C: ...is this your idea of fun?"

"O: DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER REQUESTS? I HAVE IMPORTANT MATTERS WITH WHICH TO ATTEND."

"C: No, thank you."

"O: THANK YOU!"

"C: [Conversation terminated: record locator 10e8892p1020a999.]"

"O: CONVERSATION TERMINATED: RECORD LOCATOR !)E**(@P!)@)A(((>"

en el mundo de los dios

Me desperté en la casa de mi novia. Esta alcoba tenía muchas sillas; mi novia le gustaba invitar a sus amigos aquí y nos cenamos cada viernes. Odié a sus amigos de mi novia, ellos eran terrible y egoistica. Pero, no es el punto de este cuento, quiero hablarles sobre mi aventura en el otro mundo. No he contado a otras personas sobre este evento; creo que si lo hago, la gente creería que yo sea loco y me ponen en una cárcel. Empezó dos semanas pasadas en un campo cerca de mi casa, cuando un coche entró allí y algunas personas lo salieron. No conocí esas personas y porque ellos parecieron mal, esperó que no me dolieran o me causaran las problemas.

La persona que me pareció ser un líder de ese grupo me dijo “¿Qué haces aquí?” le respondé “Nada, quiero ver las estrellas porque en la ciudad hay demasiados luces y por eso no puedo verlas allí.”

“¿Su nombre?” me pidió

“Mi nombre no es importante, pero puedes llamarme ‘el científico’.”

“Pero, ¿Me mientes? Nadie querría verlas sin razones. ¿Qué es la verdad?”

“¿Por qué estás aquí?”

“Ya te conté, estoy viéndolas. Me gusta creer sobre cómo son otros mundos, pienso que sería divertido para visitarlos.” El científico miró a sus amigos y a mí y a sus amigos otra vez, entonces me preguntó “¿Tu estas serio o me bromeas?” ellos empezieron a reírme.

Me pareció que ellos no les gustaba a mí y desde no quería luchar con ellos, comencé a salir. Sin embargo, el científico me contó “Puedo tomarte a las estrellas si tú quieres. Creo que sería un experiencia para tu,” empecé a correr, pero los amigos del él eran más rápido que mí y los dos me capturaron antes de yo podía irme. “¿Por qué trataste de correr? No queremos dolerte, sólo te ayudamos con tu sueño de viajar a las estrellas,” ellos me tomaron a su coche y me tiraron en la silla de atrás. “No necesitas tener miedo de nosotros, debes estar tranquilo o emocionado. ¡Vamos a tomarte a un aventura de su vida!”

Después de muchas horas, llegamos a una casa en la cima de una montaña. Esta casa me pareció una poca extraña porque el centro del techo era muy alto pero el resto era normal.

“¡Esta es el lugar! ¿Listo?”

Se me olvida lo que ocurrió hasta yo estaba dentro de una nave espacial y el científico me dijo “Estas en una nave espacial, el mejor que todo el mundo. Aunque, debo señalar que este barco es un poco...viejo. Nadie ha usado por muchos años y es posible que no pueda volar bien. Sin embargo, para mí, un poco riesgo por tus sueños no es un gran sacrificio” Él empezó a cuenta atrás y diez segundos después la nave espacial despegó y sufrí un desvanecimiento.

La próxima cosa recuerdo es que estaba en otra planeta y no podía respirar bien. Busqué por una máscara y encontré en una caja debajo de la nave espacial. Eché un vistazo alrededor

pero no podía ver nada y tenía miedo de que no hubiera nadie que me ayudara. No oí nada y empecé a caminar, esperé que yo podía encontrar algo que yo pudiera usar para que me pusiera en contacto con la Tierra. Aunque me disgustaba esta situación, este planeta era muy bonito. Las montañas no sólo verde (los árboles), marrón (la tierra) o blanco (la nieve). Había montañas platas, azules, amarillo, naranjas, negras (es posible que fuera montañas con carbón) y rojas. Los árboles (o me pareció que ellos eran los árboles) era tan grande de los árboles de las selvas tropicales, al menos cien metros con las hojas que cambiaron colores depende la dirección las vio (rosadas, naranjas, grises). Mis ojos comieron todos que vieron pero después de un poco no podían nunca más. Caminaba por el bosque cerca del sitio de choque y allí vi muchas cosas extrañas. Hay los animales como un globo que no necesitaron las piernas para caminar. Me interesaron pero cuando me acerqué a algunos animales, me atacaron. Me sorprendió que los animales lo hicieran y por eso no estaba listo por esto. En vez de usar sus bocas u otras partes de sus cuerpos, ellos usaron la electricidad para dolerme. Por algunos minutos creí que no iba a vivir y mi corazón no funcionó bien. No obstante, después de un poco, yo estaba bien y continué a caminar por el bosque.

Debo señalar que no puedo contarle todo lo que ocurrieron cuando yo estaba en eso planeta porque me dolió mi cabeza cuando la nave especial realizó un aterrizaje forzoso. Por eso, es posible que yo diga un poco no es verdad pero el cuento es interesante de todos modos.

Mucho luego salí del bosque y vi un lago donde había demasiados peces o los animales como los peces. Este lago no tenía espacio para nada además de los peces. Es posible que el lago no tuviera el agua porque cuando traté de buscarlo sólo vi los peces. Debo decir que muchos peces habían muerto en este lago y era un mal olor. Sin embargo, en la distancia vi una tierra con cosas parecieron como edificios pero no quería caminar en torno al lago. Decidí que podría caminar por el lago con los peces muertos. Hay que asumir los riesgos para ahorrar el tiempo.

Luego, cuando yo estaba en el centro de la casa, mis piernas empezaron a ir hacia debajo en el lago. Como arenas movedizas, no yo podía salirlo. Pero, de repente, estaba en la otra costa del lago. No estaba seguro de lo que ocurrió pero empecé a caminar otra vez y llegué a los edificios. Acabó de abrir la puerta de unos cuando me desperté en un cuarto blanco.

"Ah, no duermes nunca más. Bien."

Estaba buscando por la fuente del sonido, pero no podía ver bien por algunos minutos.

"No necesitas tener miedo de mí. Sólo un científico y dormí por una día para que podamos investigar lo que puede ocurrir cuando una persona toma las drogas fueron creído por nosotros."

Empecé a levantarme pero no pude.

"No debes levantarte, no sería bien por su cuerpo. Debo descansar; tomas esto, debe ayudarte."

Traté de luchar al contra de él pero no pude ganar y unos minutos luego me dormí.

los ambiciones equivocados

Mis amigos y yo fuimos al bar cuyo nombre es Club Dos, es muy famoso en esta parte de la gran ciudad. Sus ciudadanos le ponen algunos nombres a la ciudad, como La Ciudad sin Tierra o La Ciudad de Edificios. Para que tengas entender más sobre lo que ocurrirá, es necesario que yo les explique lo que es la ciudad.

En el siglo XXII había muchas gentes que creían que nuestro país necesitaba una gran ciudad que iría construida por los arquitectos con un gran plan. Por ejemplo, querían una ciudad con los edificios altos, los parques son lo más hermosos que todo el mundo, los calles más grande que los demás, y con mercados y lugares de cultura lo más conocidos. La gente quería mostrar a los ciudadanos de otras naciones por qué la vida acá es mejor que en todas partes. Pero, ellos se daban cuenta de que su gobierno no tenían bastante dinero para construir esta ciudad y por eso ellos decidieron empezar una guerra con otra nación cerca de su cuya recursos naturales eran abundante y su tierra era fértil. Ellos ganaron y cuando controlaban esta nación, robaban sus recursos por muchos años para aumentar sus riquezas. Un poco después, el gobierno anunció que teníamos bastante dinero para hacer la ciudad de sus sueños.

Buscaban por los arquitectos más famoso y brillante de todo el mundo pero no había nadie que quisiera ayudarles porque había muchas en el mundo que no estaban de acuerdo con las acciones de nuestra nación. Pues, sería difícil para construir un nueva ciudad sin arquitectos y por eso decidieron que debieron construir un escuela de arquitectura y hablaron que podían esperar. Pasado muchos años hasta los arquitectos buenos fue hecho por la escuela de arquitectura.

En los años siguientes, los arquitectos indígenas, se llama Los Arquitectos por su país, trabajaban muchos y después les mostraron a los ciudadanos lo que crearon. Lo visión principal era que la ciudad debe tener los rascacielos que cambiarán sus colores cuando camina en torno a los. Había otros aspectos de su visión pero no me preocupan. La región del país donde ellos querían construirla era muy aislada y dentro del desierto. También, desearon hacer el canal que trajera el agua allá. El proyecto fue muy ambicioso pero había muchos que dijeron "no necesitamos esta ciudad ahora porque se hacemos el mejor país que todo el mundo (después de la guerra) y por eso no necesitamos ilustrar a los demás por qué esta es la verdad". Hacía diez años que la gente se la hablaba una a otra hasta el gobierno decidió que la construirán. La ciudad fue terminada por los arquitectos en diez años.

Lo único es que esta ciudad no es lo mejor que todo el mundo ahora. De hecho, el resto del mundo nos reye porque se ha hecho unas de las peores ciudades en el mundo. Tenemos muchos crímenes en los niveles inferiores; no hay nadie que quiera vivir allí porque no hay policía u otras tipos de protección allá. El gobierno no trata de arreglarla desde las bandas luchan al contra de lo y el gobierno ha perdido muchos soldados y otros personales allá. Desde la sociedad ha abandonado este lugar hace muchos años, hay muchas cosas del pasado—como los coches que no pueden volar o las ropas sin los ordenados dentro de su tejido—que están allí; el gobierno había eliminado los objetos históricos cuando podía encontrarlos. Algunas personas viven allí para escapar los ojos del gobierno, pero para la

mayoría hay más desventajas cuando vivan allí que las ventajas. La clase alta había salido para los afueras muchos años pasados pero algunos se quedaban para que pudieran robar por la clase debajo. Cuando ellos caminan en torno a sus barrios, traen seguridad a pesar de que no hay nadie además de ellos que tengan bastante poder para matarlos.

Los niveles inferiores es muy interesante y divertido si tiene buscar por aventuras y quiere participar en otras acciones con algunos riesgos. Pero, todos los niveles inferiores no son terribles. Por ejemplo, cerca del centro hay algunas atracciones que no puede encontrar en todos partes—el circo, las casas de prostituta, etc. El circo tiene una persona con seis pies y a quien corre más rápido que otras personas conocidas. También, si obtiene un coche viejo, hay un taller barato que puede arreglarlo para su. Además de estos, hay otras empresas allá que tienen todos lo que quiere, como las comidas, ropas, personas (el gobierno prohíbe esclavitud, pero desde no está acá, por eso algunos personas la practican), etc. Unos mercados son muy vaporosos y cuando los va, no debe traer muchos dineros u otras cosas valiosas—a menos que le gusta cuando le roban. Si quieres ver una vista muy fea y hermosa al mismo tiempo, debe ir a la Nivel Dos. Ahora, muchas edificios nuevos de los niveles superiores no tiene las fundaciones verdaderas, la mayoría usa los edificios viejos por estos. Para mí, la idea es buena porque ahorramos dinero, pero muchas personas creen que en el futuro habría los problemas como los edificios se caerán y las personas morirán. Sin embargo, ahora todavía espacio para explorar los niveles debajo de los edificios nuevos.

Estos lugares tienen poca luz y cuando los ve, le parecen como las cuevas sin animales u otras formas de la vida y con los pedazos del acero en vez de las estalactitas. Mi amigo me dijo que "A veces la belleza es tóxico". No lo entendía hasta vi los ríos de basura. Están en todos partes, pero los químicas de las basuras que se han quedado en el río crean muchos colores que mezclan para formar una escena bella. Puede alquilar un barco para montar por los ríos debajo de la ciudad y muchas personas lo hacen a pesar de que es muy peligroso. Lo he hecho y puedo decir que son unos de las cosas más divertidos que he hecho en mi vida.

El medio ambiente de esta ciudad es un poco extraño. Los animales salvajes luchaban con la gente más de lo corriente y algunos ciudadanos los han matado. Los lobos luchan por su tierra propia está tomado y nos parece que ellos crean planes complicados; para animales, son muy fuertes e inteligentes. Los animales fueron afectados por la polución ambiental. No hay un río sin químicas industrias o basuras. Los bosques fueron cortados por las fábricas y cerca de la ciudad no hay ningún. Por eso, los animales han tenido adaptarse con el medio ambiente en cambio y algunos se han hecho más violento que antes. El gobierno nos dice que el problema no es grande y los manifestantes lo han exagerado. ¿Piense que es la verdad? Tampoco. La verdad es que el gobierno ha creído otras problemas para distraer la atención de la gente (como las guerras) y roba los recursos naturales que están aquí. No siempre ha sido con esto; antes de encontrar el petróleo y otros recursos, los parques y los bosques eran lo mejor que todo el mundo y todos los cuidan. Pero, en los años después de hallarlos, el gobierno y algunos negocios comenzaban a explotar la tierra y no nos han dado lo que nos tomaban. Pero, nadie que quiera luchar al contra del gobierno ahora; si un héroe aparece, el gobierno le paga mucho dinero para callar—todos han tomado el acuerdo (no

son héroes verdaderos).

No me entienda mal, me encanta esta ciudad. Hay un ritmo de esta ciudad que no puede ver en otro sitio. Pero, la historia de la es muy terrible y no dudo que si la gente pudiera cambiar la historia, no querría construir una ciudad como esta otra vez. La verdad triste es que la gente creyó que podían hacer una ciudad, que podían planear todos para hacer la ciudad de sus sueños. Lo que les falta un plan de largo plazo y por eso, esta ciudad es unos de los grandes malgastados en la historia del mundo.

Pero, no te preocupa con esto, no es muy importante. ¿Recuerde que estoy en un bar ahora con mis amigos? Pues, nunca más ocurrió esta noche y después de terminamos, fuimos a la casa de un amigos y miramos la tele por algunos horas. En la tele vimos que el alcalde ha decidido que podemos arreglar su ciudad y nos mostró su plan para hacerlo. Mis amigos le rieron por algunos minutos y después fui a mi casa y me empiece a dormir. Mañana íbamos a ir a un nuevo rio que mi amigo acaba de encontrar y nos dijo que "No hay nada como esto que he visto en todo mi vida. ¡Podemos montar en las alcantarillas por primera vez!. ¡La corazón de la ciudad! Podemos usarlos para encontrar más maneras por luchar contra el gobierno. ¡Seríamos héroes!"

los sueños míos

Tenía miedo de que los demás fuera a descubrir mi secreto. Para mí, cuando estaba en una situación donde las personas empezaron a darse cuenta de mi problema, la única cosa que yo quería hacer era salir o tratar de correr muy lejos. Aunque, hay muchas veces cuando esta acción no era posible y por eso, les mentía.

No puedo respirar bien, los árboles en este bosque son demasiados espesos y me necesito hacer a un lado y un poco luego a otro lado. Puedo oír los sonidos de las personas que quieren matarme, veo detrás de mí para que yo pueda verlas, pero el sudor oscurecer mi visión vista y no puedo ver nada. Cuando vuelvo mi cabeza, hay un árbol enfrente de mí y no tengo tiempo para evitarlo. Choco contra este árbol y me caigo a la tierra. Los voces de las otras llegan a ser más fuerte y trato de levantarme, pero antes de poderlo, una de ellos me pega. Me duele mi espalda y veo que una persona ha sacado un cuchillo. Mi corazón empieza a latir más rápido y todo mi cuerpo tiene frío. Para que yo pueda sorprenderlos, no hago nada por algunos segundos y aparece que entrego. Pero, de repente salto de la tierra y comienzo a correr muy rápido lejos de ellos, pero una persona tuvo una pistola y dispara a mí. Mi visión vista empieza a desaparecer y no puedo respirar, me siento una duele en mis pulmones. Me doy la vuelta y miro fijamente a ellos. Una persona levantó su brazo y apretar el gatillo. Salté de mi cama y choqué contra el suelo.

Muchas personas olvidan sus sueños, antes de que se despierten, no pueden recordar lo que había ocurrido durante su sueño. Cuando yo había tratado de explicar mi problema a Jil, una amiga, casi siempre me rio y me dijo que “¿Tu estas serio? Estos sólo sueños, no pueden causar muchos problemas. Es muy fácil para saber si una memoria es un sueño o la vida real.” Pero, aquí es el problema, no puedo elegir si una memoria es real o falsa. A veces, cuando camino por la ciudad, con mis amigos, o miro la tele, tengo escenas retrospectivas. Otro problema es que cuando estas cositas habían ocurrido, salía el mundo actual y yo entraba a otro mundo. A veces, es un poco peligroso...

Acabé de salir el metro cerca de una gran plaza y muchas personas caminaron por la plaza y entraron y salieron de los edificios que rodean la plaza. Miré a una colina en el fondo y de repente, yo estoy en la cima de una colina. Cerca de mi hay algunos árboles en los botes blancos y cuadrados. Hay escalones a mi derecha y empiezo a caminar abajo y a mi derecha es un muro que tiene algunas pinturas de una guerra que había ocurrido algunos siglos pasados. Continuo a andar y miro a las personas que se sienten en el parque (me parece que estoy en un parque, pero no estoy seguro). Enfrente de mi puedo ver una cuidad, pero algo aparece mal. Hay mucho humo verde en el aire y no puedo encontrar la fuente. También, acabo de señalar que algunas personas ven a mí y no yo sé la razón. A este momento, oigo un grito y me doy la vuelta para ver que...

Yo estaba en mi clase de matemáticas y me dolió mi cerebro, el problema que mi profesor nos había dado era muy difícil y por eso no pude creer sobre otras cosas. **Calma, calma,** me conté y empecé a escribir lo que creé que era la contesta.

“Pst, pst, detrás de tu, tengo una pregunta.”

Me di la vuelta y vi que es Jil. “¿Qué quieres?”

“La contesta, vi que la tienes...”

Otra vez, estoy en la cima de una colina, pero esta es más grande que la otra. Mi amiga, Jil, es cerca de mí y podemos ver que hay una habitación algunos metros debajo de nosotros. Entramos y vemos que la habitación es circular con una mesa circular en el centro. Encima de la mesa hay una escultura de la montaña que se puede ver cuando sale de la habitación y se ve a su derecha. Pero, es un poco extraño porque no hay nadie que está acá y nos parece que nadie ha sido aquí por mucho tiempo. Mientras Jil ve la escultura, empiezo a inspeccionar el muro por una señal que nos puede contar sobre el origen de esta habitación. El próximo tiempo veo a Jil, ella tiene una expresión de horror y señala con su dedo a la escultura. Empieza a chispear y de repente, estamos en la montaña que hemos visto en la escultura y oímos un grito de un animal. Nos damos la vuelta y vemos un dinosaurio. Iniciamos a correr...

“¿Hola, hola, estas acá?”

Mi corazón latió muy rápido y mi piel era empapada de sudor. Vi a la izquierda y después a la derecha. Todo aparece bien, pero, ¿qué ha pasado? Traté de recordar a donde fui en los minutos pasados pero no puedo hacerlo.

“¿Estas bien? No me pareces bien.” dijo Jil.

“No, no, todo es bien, solo sufrí un desmayo por algunas segundos. Dame un momento para recuperar.”

Levanté mi mano y pregunté a mi profesor si pude ir al baño. Caminé muy rápido al baño y cuando entré allá, empecé a limpiar mi cara. Me miré al espejo y di una bofetada a mi cara algunas veces. Salí del baño y veo una ciudad muriendo. El cielo es rojo y nublado, pero veo una neblina verde que cubre la ciudad. Estoy en un edificio que no tiene un lado y está desmigajando. Oigo una persona canta y creo que puedo oír que ella se baña también. Inicio a caminar hacia el sonido y cuando doblo la esquina, veo una chica desnuda.

“¿Hola? ¿Por qué te bañas acá? Aparece que es un poco peligroso.”

Ella se da la vuelta y me ve. Su ojos son muy bonito—tiene algunas rayas verde y azul y no puedo ver los iris (me aparece que ella no los tiene). Por un momento, creo que conozco a ella o que he visto los mismos ojos antes. Sin embargo, ella empieza a caminar hacia mí y tengo un poco miedo de que la realidad sea que ella es un monstruo y me come. Pero, cuando está muy cerca de mí, me da dos besos y dice “¿Cómo va mi amigo? No te he visto en mucho tiempo. ¿Por qué estás aquí? Si hubiera conocido que vas a venir, no habría empezado a tomar una ducha. Lo siento, voy a ponerme mi roja, espero que no te importe. Pero, tengo un problema, es posible que pueda ayudarte con...”

De repente, estaba en el vestíbulo principal de mi escuela y algunas personas me miraron. Busqué por el problema y me di cuenta de que tengo una erección. La cubrí y corrí a un vestíbulo pequeño de mi derecha. Me gustaría más si mi mente me daba sueños donde no hay situaciones sexuales y cuando no estaba en un lugar público. Cada vez esta había ocurrido, me había avergonzado. Después de algunos minutos, volví a la clase de matemáticas

y terminé escribir la contesta del problema.

Estaba en una ciudad mediterránea y cerca de la playa después de caminar por una calle grande. Vi un puente que no he visto en la vida real antes de ahora (no he sido aquí antes). Pero, tuve un momento de déjà vu. Era extraño y empecé a buscar por mi memoria. Encontré una memoria cuando estaba en el mismo lugar, pero no es probable que yo haya tenido un sueño donde el mismo lugar había aparecido.

Puedo oír mi hermano cerca de mí y el sonido del panel de control del sistema de videojuegos. Mi hermano juega y a veces miro por algunos segundos y después continuo leer mi libro. Una nivel del videojuego está en la ciudad mediterránea y puedo ver que...

La playa era muy bonita y había demasiadas personas acá. Algunas personas me chocaron y creé que me roba, pero este tiempo no era la verdad. Continué a caminar hacia el puente y miré al sol...

Cuando he terminado ver el sol, veo que mi hermano ha construido un castillo de arena. Voy a ayudarlo pero de repente veo que hay algunas animales un poco fuera de la casa. Aparece que son dinosaurios y hay partes de otras personas que dentro de sus bocas. Digo a mi hermano que debemos volver a la casa y cerramos la puerta. Pero, me doy cuenta de que no hay tiempo para hacerlo antes de los animales nos capturan. Decido que voy a distraerlos mientras mi hermano entra a la casa. Hay una valle cerca de mi casa y correo abajo hacia la valle. Los dinosaurios me siguen. Por suerte, he acabado de volver por mi práctica de fútbol y puedo correr muy rápido. También, la vegetación del desierto es muy pequeña; por eso, no hay nada que puede obstruirme. Después de algunas minutos, al fin de la valle veo una tienda grande. Al mismo tiempo, los animales acaban de capturarme, pero abro la puerta, entro y la cierro. Cuando me doy la vuelta, veo...

No había sido dentro de Toy's R Us en mucho tiempo. Atrás de la tienda, había muchos vehículos que un niño pudo manejar. Subí a un carro y manejé para el otro lado de la tienda. Mi madre me dijo "Necesitamos salir ahora, otras tiendas van a cerrar en algunos minutos y necesito comprar algunas cosas ahí." Cuando empecé a dejar del carro, veo que la tienda he llegado a ser más grande que antes y hay muchas parras que cubren los estantes. Subo un estante cerca de mí para que pudiera ver mejor. Cuando estoy en la parte superior, veo el resto de la tienda y me doy cuenta de que no haya nadie aquí y que...

"Hijo, hijo, ¿puedes oírme?"

Mi madre me agitó algunas veces y le respondí. "Sí, sí, todo va bien, nos vemos."

Ni mi madre ni mi padre supieron que tuve este problema y yo no quería contarlo a ellos. En este mundo, la primera cosa que los doctores y otras personas médico querían hacer era conducir experimentos. Por eso, les gusta cuando los padres de un niño dicen que "mi hijo vive en sus sueños," porque ahora había un oportunidad para conducirlos. Tal vez esta o esa pastilla, por ventura esta operación o ese procedimiento. No tuve confianza en ellos y tuve miedo de la muerte. Pero, el problema ha empezado a ser demasiado para mí.

Estaba en una sala de tribunal y un abogado se acercó a mí.

"Pues...violaste a esa mujer," él señala con el dedo a la mujer, "¿es la verdad?"

Vi a la mujer, me di cuenta de que era Jil, y por un momento...

Nosotros estamos en un club de la noche y nos bailamos al ritmo de la música electrónica. La pista de baile esta abarrotada y los cuerpos de los demás golpean a nosotros. Hemos bebido mucho y aunque todo no aparece normal en el mundo, todavía puedo creer. Veo que Jil se vuelve aburrido y aparece un poco enfermo. Le digo "¿Quieres volver a nuestro apartamento?" y ella me responde "Sí, sí, hay demasiadas personas acá, no me gusta."

Cuando volvemos a la casa, ella empieza a quitar su ropa y mira a mí. "Estoy aburrido, ¿Quieres tener un poco divertido? — Empiezo a quitar mi ropa también y vamos a la cama..."

Miré al abogado y le dije "No sé."

"¡Ve, ve! Si él sabe que no ha violado a ella, debe decir 'NO'. Pero no dijo, no dijo."

Una vez más, miré a Jil y al mismo tiempo ella hizo la misma. Mis ojos imploran a ella por la verdad, pero ella apartó su mirada y una lágrima apareció.

"¡eh, eh! Dejas de mirar a ella. ¡Ve, ve! Él le quiere a ella, se puede ver en los ojos de él, es repugnante" mi ojos empezaron a vagar por la sala, "¡Hola, hola niño! Me miras. Buscas por la verdad y contestas la pregunta. ¿Violaste a ella, sí o no?"

Estoy enfrente de mi escuela y está lloviendo. Es un poco oscuro, pero, puedo ver las puertas enfrente de mí y tres edificios de un solo piso—un al fondo de mí izquierda y dos a mi derecha e izquierda atrás del primer. Comienzo a entrar por las puertas. No hay nadie acá, pero, hay algunas luces encendido. Cuando he pasado los edificios, estoy en una plaza y hay un edificio a mi derecha donde comemos por el almuerzo. A mi izquierda era un edificio con un pasillo en el lado lejos. Inicio a andar por esto pasillo y cuando al fin, veo una puerta a mi derecha con una ventana. Puedo ver que las luces encendido y una mujer. Llamo a la puerta y la mujer me mira fijamente (me parece que le estoy molestando a ella) y dice "Puedes entrar, cierras la puerta detrás de tu." Entro a la sala y me doy cuenta de que ella es Jil.

"¿Por qué estas acá? ¿Sabes que durante el noche la escuela no es un lugar seguro?"

"Sí, sí..." me parece que Jil es avergonzado y veo que ella coge su falda abajo enfrente de sus piernas.

"Jil, ¿Qué hiciste acá? Dime la verdad."

Jil abre sus piernas, llorando, y dice "No puedo controlar mis deseos sexuales, ¿Me puedes ayudar?"

Comienzo a caminar hacia ella...

"¡eh, eh! Es una sala de tribunal, no debes fantasear sobre algo," y en una voz más pequeño, "sobre su violación de ella."

Miré sobre la sala y vi que todos me miraron. Yo estaba avergonzado, pero no puedo controlar mis sueños, llegaron y salieron sin el aviso. Pero, a este momento, sería bueno si

yo pudiera concentrarme en la causa.

“No, no, es solo que tengo un problema...” miré a mis padres y recordé que ellos no sabían, “...un problema recuerdo haber hecho esta acción. Estoy seguro que no la hice.”

“¡Un problema! ¿Él nos cuenta que tiene un problema? El problema es que no quieres recordar. Es la verdad, ¿no?” todos me miraron.

“No, es como dije a ellos, no hay una memoria real que puedo encontrar donde la he hecho” y de repente, me doy cuenta de mi falta, “no hay una memoria.”

“¡Memoria real! ¿Memoria real? Tal vez para ti, violando a ella no es ‘real’, ¡pero era real para ella! Este hombre es culpable y debemos castigarle.”

De pronto, el líder del jurado dijo “Necesitamos una hora para creer si debemos declarar a él culpable o inocente. Tranquilo todos, tranquilo. No van a tomar mucho tiempo.”

Mientras esperamos para la decisión, miré a Jil y traté de recordar. Pero, cada vez, la memoria me parece un poco...incorrecta. Una cosita acá, un aspecto allá—siempre aparece que la memoria no representa la vida real. Por ejemplo, no hay una ciudad con humo verde que se puede ver cuando muy lejos de allá. No he sido en una edificio desmigajando. Mi escuela no tiene una plaza, al menos, lo que puedo recordar. Pero, ¿Confío en cuáles memorias?

El jurado volvió a la sala de tribunal y su líder empezó a leer mi veredicto.

“Nosotros declaramos a él culpable por todos los cargos. Recomendamos que él se quede en una cárcel para...” todos las personas en la sala se inclinaron. “¡Para cuarenta años!”

Por la primera vez, cuando miré a Jil, ella no apartó su mirada. No pude oír, pero pude ver que ella me dijo “Lo siento...lo siento mucho” y ella empezó a llorar. Mientras la policía comenzaron a detenerme, pregunté al jurado “¿Qué es la razón? ¡eh! ¿Por qué?”

“Tu sueñas demasiado; es peligro para todo el mundo. También, nunca has dicho que no has violado a ella. Solamente hablaste sobre su memoria y no sobre la vida real. ¿Cómo debemos saber si la hiciste o no? La vida real es más importante de sus sueños. Debes saberlo.”

¿qué es la calle?

No he escrito un cuento corto en castellano hace mucho tiempo. Quiero practicar mi castellano (pardón los errores) y explorar la idea: que ocurriera si no hubieran calles en ningun parte del mundo? Quisiera explorar esta tema en mas detalle en cuentos futuros. **English: i haven't written a short story in spanish in awhile. I wish to practice my Spanish (excuse the errors) and explore the idea: what would happen if we didn't have any streets? I would like to explore this in more detail, but this lays the basic ground-work.**

Me desperté como siempre y empecé a vestirme. Yo estaba mirando atrás la ventana a la ciudad bonita cuando mi jefe me llamó. Normalmente esperaba por algunos segundos antes de contestarlo, pero hoy era diferente.

"!Dígame!" "Estas tarde, ¿dónde estás?" "Tranquilo, tranquilo, no oye mi reloj despertador."
"Vale, vale, pero nada más. ¿Oírme? Nada más." "Si, yo sé."

Había terminado y salé para mi cocina. Tenía hambre pero este día no había comida dentro de mi despensa. Me fui y caminé hacienda la **Tport**—una máquina que puede transportar una persona a otro lugar sin energía y tiempo. Yo sé, viviendo en el futuro es fabuloso. Cuando entré la máquina, toqué algunos botones y esperé. Pero nada ocurrió y lo hice las mismas acciones otra vez—y nada ocurrió. Era la primera vez que este había ocurrido y no sabía lo que debí hacer. La primera cosa que pasó por mi cabeza es que podía usar la **Tport** en el piso abajo (vivía en el nivel mas alto). Pero, esta no funcionó también y tenía miedo de que ningun **Tport** funcionó dentro de mi apartamento. Otras personas empezaron a gritar y podía oír algunos teléfonos donde las personas trataron de encontrar ayuda.

Era una situación que nadie creyó que iba a pasar porque los ingenieros nos habían dicho que las maquinas no podían romper. ¡Vivimos en el futuro! Para tú, el lector, esta situación no te parece tan mala—solamente necesitamos salir de nuestras casas y caminamos a nuestros trabajos. Pero, probablemente, vives en un mundo donde hay calles, donde hay varias maneras de transportación, donde una persona puede salir por la calle sin problemas. Por eso, necesito decirte lo que pasó en nuestra mundo antes del Día Fatal (también nos gusta el drama en el futuro).

En el siglo XXII era una ingiero que había descubierto una manera para enviar algunos pedazos pequeños a otro lado del país. Despues de treinta años, otros científicos habían mejorado la técnica hasta que ellos podían mandar un ser humano. También, podían hacerlo sin cuesta o recursos además de los que usaban para construir la maquina. Y ahí es el problema. Todos los gobiernos las querían y empezaban a crear programas para instalarlas en cada casa, edificio, parque nacional, y cualquier lugar una persona lo iría. Los calles empezaron a morir y la vida de la calle se volvía a una elemento de la vida pasado. Un siglo después, no hay calles en casi cerca de todos los países, nosotros habían sustituirlas con edificios y otras cosas para ahorrar espacio. Ay, habíamos entrado al era de la **Tport**.

Caminé al tejado y cuando llegué allá, empecé a buscar el edificio donde está mi trabajo. Pero, se me olvidió que no había direcciones. ¿Por qué me pides? Me permite a pedirte. ¿Por qué se necesita direcciones cuando puede pulsar un botón y un poco después esta en

el lugar que se quiere? También, porque no hay calles, no tenemos una manera para viajar atrás otros edificios sin la Tport.

En este día, creé que yo podía viajar un edificio a otro si podría saltar entre de ellos. Pero, me di cuenta de que había demasiado espacio entre de cada edificio. Había más personas por kilómetro y por eso necesitábamos más tuberías para llevar las basuras y otras cosas de la gente. Busqué por una otra manera en que podré ir a un otro edificio—es posible que los administradores habían poner un puente entre de los edificios u otra tipo de transportacion en caso de que habíamos una problema como esto. Pero, no vi ningún tipo de puente and regresé a mi habitación.

Algunos días pasaba en esta manera, caminaba por el tejado y volvía a mi cuarto. No tenía comida antes de que las Tports rompieron y las que tenía no fueron a sostenerme por mucho tiempo. Si, viví en el futuro, pero no sabíamos en que manera se podría crear cosas sin materiales. También, la comida llegaba a cada casa por las Tports. ¡Así es el problema segundo! No abría mi puerta por nada o nadie. Es como lo que los maestros nos decían: sin recursos o otras formas de civilización, los seres humanos regresar rápidamente a una forma más impetuoso y violento. Pero, también, me daba cuenta de que no conocía mis vecinos porque no salía de mi cuarto (la Tport estaba dentro) y no hay calles para hablar, chistar, conocer, jugar, y hacer otras cosas consigo. Ay, habíamos convertir en una civilización sin civilización, con todos los aspectos de un país...no un mundo...sensible sin un corazón. Pero, bastante con la filosofía, ¿que pasó?

Después de algunos días las Tports empezaba a funcionar. Nadie sabía la razón y los gobiernos trataba de continuar como nada había ocurrido. Algunas personas decían que era terroristas o un ataque de otros países a nuestro país. Pero, sin embargo, el mundo no era la misma lugar.

Cuando fue a mi edificio de trabajo, los demás no me parecieron bien y sus maneras de hablar tenían un aspecto de miedo. ¿Miedo de la muerte? ¿O un miedo de una vida sin contacto con las otras personas? Podrían ser cualquier cosa. Para mí, esta historia no te muestra todo. Aunque te parezco bien a ti, no es la verdad y he tratado de ocultar los daños.

¿Porque lees esta historia? Hay muchas razones porque necesitamos calles y la próxima vez que los políticos te dicen que solamente tenemos calles para los carros, les das esta historia. Espero que cambiaría sus mentes.

No Place for Confusion

The lawyer got up out of his chair and walked up to the witness.

"So, did you see Mr. Snickers?"

"Yes, I saw Mister Snickers."

"For clarification you did see Ernie Snickers?"

"No, I saw Mister Snickers."

"Sir, Mr. Snickers is Ernie Snickers."

"No, dear sir, Mister Snickers is Mister Snickers."

"I rest my case."

The Long Journey Forgotten

"We have Them now, the major said smiling."

"Who is them? his lieutenant asked."

"What?"

"Them, you said we have them, who?"

"Them, you nincompoop, we have been chasing Them for years."

"But who!? For God's sake tell me who!"

"If you don't know Them, then please leave."

The lieutenant shook his head and left.

The Desert and the Tundra

As the man walked by the girl he turned around and stared.

"That's hot."

"What did you say!? the girl said overhearing him and turning around."

"Sorry, you cool?"

"What? It's like 100 degrees!"

"So then, you're hot."

"Why, you-, The girl lifted her hand and slapped him then walked off."

"What did I do?"

death takes no bribes

The ball whizzed past the net and bounced on the very edge of the service box. I reached out with Herculean effort to hit the ball as it tried to curve away from me. Relief! My return sped towards the middle of the court, only to see him already at the net, Apollo at his back. He sliced the ball to my forehand, I rushed and managed to get to the ball, and turned, waiting for the succeeding surge of energy to do battle with against this unstoppable foe. His next ball roared past me and crashed against the fence. Vulcan walked past me, blurring my vision a bit, and my shirt clung onto me while a soft breeze cooled my melting skin. I wiped the sweat from my brow and could taste the salt as I walked toward the baseline, bracing myself for the next onslaught, I smiled, this was going to be fun.

The spear of Mars shot towards me, I licked my lips, the warm sweat caused me to withdraw my tongue in disgust, a slight throbbing in my skull was gathering my attention, but at the last possible moment I snapped back to the world around me and chopped at the incoming ball. The ground had turned to water, he was Neptune—I, Gaia—and he sailed around the court while I strained and heaved, my body soaking and my skin clammy, as I attempted to stop him. Splish, splash, the ball was becoming heavy and I continued run, my nostrils choking on the salt hanging in the air, and finally he swam towards the net, his ball zoomed past me once again—a shockwave cooled my skin and strained my ears, the fence bent, the ball bobbed.

I felt the water recede, but Ares had already done his work and a million little needles were poking at my skin. I fought through the haze once more and steadied myself at the baseline. The ball screamed through the air as it attempted to pass me, **Godspeed** I thought, and my return glided past the net. I ran to the right, slicing back his inbound shot, then to the left, lunging toward the next ball, my shot cleared the net by a hair and he continued to move me back and forth across the court: my lungs burned, eyes blurred and hands bristled as I continued to fight this pointless struggle, yet he wasn't going to get off easy, of that I was sure. He finally decided to end this tussle and he flew to the net, and fired his backhand volley to the other side of the court, sure that this battle was over. Digging my feet into the ground I dashed towards the ball, strained my arm and lashed at it. I watched as the ball curled around his outstretched racquet, and landed in the court beyond. He gave a slight shrug and turned toward the baseline, the Battle of Thermopylae had begun.

dies irae, terras irradiant

"Ye food aging quite well, why don't ye come in and stop it."

"Ain't ya the wisest of men, I'm coming, I'm coming."

"What'd ye see out there, herd o' bison, flock of geese, some lady rambling about?"

"Wha ya on, ain't no way any ladies come up here."

"Eh, we ain't that far up, couple thousand feet me guess."

"We can see them clouds, couple million feet be me guess."

"Ye crazy, we'd be in heaven if we million feets up, no way we going there anytime soon."

"With them crazy winds blown, we might be going there sooner than ya think."

"Eh, the wind will die down, what'll kill us is those animals."

"Don't ya be trying to scare me with them monster tales, ain't no monsters in heaven."

"We ain't in heaven yet."

"Quite with ya, wha them word called again, sar. . ."

"Sarcasm mate, sarcasm."

"Bah, ya and yar fancy words, I'm off to bed."

"I'm going to check on the flames."

"We ain't seen no flame in a hundreds day counting, we ain't going to see one now."

"Go to sleep will ye, one last check won't hurt anyone."

He stepped out of the small cottage, the old, moss covered green door barely holding the wind at bay. Little drops of rain hit his face, he looked up.

"What's with ye God, gonna tease me then kill me?"

A thunderous applause was heard to the east, and again the crowd gave an ovation. The man gave a little jump and drew his ragged shawl around his broken frame. He walked to the small tower down the trail, the lush sparkle of the tower's youth faded to the rugged exterior seen now, the wood frame was showing in places. The man looked to the west, at the endless sea of mountains, each peak trying to outdo the others. He looked at this and his chest heaved, he saw this majestic scene every day, yet it still awed him. Crawling up the ladder, he surveyed the horizon, looking for signs of light.

"Ya be joking with yarself if ya think ya be finding any light in this rain."

The man jumped with a start.

"I thought ye went to bed, what ye be sneaking around fo'?"

"Them mountians, want'd to catch one last glimpse, but yar rain ruined it."

"See no light, off to bed with me then."

"Wait, ya not see that sparkle, them lights, them lights!"

"Ye be right, me lord get yer fire, get the fire!"

The fire was lit and the men looked at the burning mass of wood, its light bright enough to see for miles around. They saw a small twinkle on the horizon form, then another.

"Yar rascle, one last look eh?"

"What was the bet ye made, hundred and one days no light?"

"Wha ya be talking about, me said a hundred days, I owe ya nothin'."

"I'll let ye go, how long till the next beckon is lit?"

"Don't ya try to play yar game, the beckons are lit!"

"Yes, the beckons are lit!"

"Hey sexy, how're you?"

"Don't you fuck with me, I saw you with the bitch."

"Ah, come on honey, it was just a joke."

"A joke? I'm your fucking wife asshole. You think your fucking funny don't you. Look at my face, am I laughing. No, I'm not? That's what I thought."

"Baby, baby, calm down, it was only for a night, no worries."

"No worries until the bitch calls asking for child support."

"Don't sweat it, the company would pay for it anyhow."

"Oh, so now it'll be the company's problem again? What is this, the sixth time you've used them to bail you out of trouble. You think we got married so your god damn company could resolve everything for you?"

"I don't have time for this, I have a meeting soon."

"What, a meeting with your bitch. But then again, that's just like you, just walking away from the problem. Get out of the house you prick."

"Honey, we're in the hotel."

"What brilliant rhetoric, just get the hell out."

So, another argument, another day in the life of a highly paid business man. These wives have no idea the hardship we have to go through; I mean at some of the meetings, we sometimes don't even get hot coffee, who the hell wants to drink cold coffee? It was hard times, they had cut back on my wage by a couple million dollars, can you imagine—what blasphemy!—stupid liberals trying to ride corporations of generous gift packages. I knocked down the blue framed picture of me and my wife as I left, let's see what she thinks about that.

"I'll just pick that up dearest."

Stupid sarcastic bitch always ruining all my fun. I started to close the door behind me, but heard a soft sniffing sound, then a loud wail. Dumb bitch thinks I still fall for the sobbing card, too bad for her I've grown immune for it. I would go talk to her, after all she is my wife, but no time for intelligent debate, no time for second guessing and no time for annoying wives, I have another plane to catch.

Click

I walked down the streets of New York, my skin reflective and my shirt discoloured near the armpits. The subway ticket still in my hand almost slipped out and I shoved it into my pocket. My vision blurred for a bit, but my tired body and my sticky hands prevented me from relieving my eyes of the salt and water. My sister walked slightly ahead of me, the clunk of her luggage a soothing melody compared to the rancor the rest of the city seemed to have for my ears. The lactic acid built up within my body, each new step took more effort than the last, and as the minutes flew by my khaki pants grew heavier and more disgusting. A rancid smell wafted up from the bowels of the city, I could smell the years of trash, muck and grime; the dead rats; and the dropped food now turned to fungus. Finally my vision cleared somewhat and I looked down the street ahead. A man, his face dripping with sweat and his suit clinging to him, as a baby does to its mother, rushed past, his suitcase a miniature weapon he swung back and forth to clear the way. I refocused my attention forward, it is not good to get distracted in the big city, but distractions showed themselves around every corner. A scantily clad lady whisked by me, I gave a quick glance at her voluptuous thighs and artificial chest. Gray, brown and red buildings loomed everywhere slowly suffocated me; the smoggy, cloudy sky prompted me to dream of the sparkling, cloudless sky of the wild. As we continued to walk I looked down a deserted alley, the brick worn by countless abuses, the small weeds clinging onto life, the water pooling, the insects scurrying about, the fire escapes rusting, and the trash cans filled with unknown secrets. This was the big city! This was the glorious jewel of modern society? A poor beggar called to me, his voice raspy, — Hey you, have a bit o' change to spare? — . I kept on walking and as he faded away I heard his sullen curse, — Damn nigger, don't even care fo' yo' own brother anymo'! — . My skin cooled from a sudden breeze, and I basked in the relief my skin soon felt, but it was temporary, as suddenly. . .

Click

I sat in the snow, my hands a purplish hue and I gave a slight grimace every time I tried to move them. The snow had turned to slush, and invaded every single pore of my shoes and I soon feared for my feet. I felt a small drop upon my cheek, then another, and another. Soon the drops came so fast I could not discern one from the other as they committed their act of violence upon me and proceeded to seek the shelter of the earth. My sister had continued to splatter 'snow' upon the snowman. The snowman turned brown as time passed, the slush would soon become the majority and the snow would melt away. I felt a prickling sensation upon my hands, and once again told my fingers to bend, they would not and the raindrops continued to fall, my teeth began to chatter. I looked around at the scene in front of me, it was not pristine and filled children running gayly about with pure white snow falling; rather, there was brown mud all around, the little bit of snow that fell quickly turned to water, my sister's frame shook as she laboured to finish the snowman. I looked down at my fingers now filled with 'snow' , they quaked and had turned an even deeper shade of purple. In the bathroom a time later, my hands in a state of shock, I turned on the faucet. The warm liquid poured out

and ran over my hands. They stung and vented their rage upon me. Cold water soon rushed out but still the hands raged. Oh the joy of building a snowman! How the Christmas card's lied. My mother continually checked on me, but no remedy seemed to work. My hands had been numb for a couple hours and I soon feared the worst. We were about to call the doctor when. . .

Click

The computer monitor flickered , my eyes had grown tired, and they began to itch. I tapped the keyboard, the cold, calculating click barely registering in my mind. The image upon the screen changed as I tapped down and a new world once again revealed itself. The character on the screen had his bow out, his bright and colourful animations belying the violence he was committing. Back and forth, back and forth, my eyes twitched slightly as they strained to stay open. The creature died and some treasure fell from its dying frame, the small golden coins rolling down from the small hill to the ground below. Tap, tap, tap. One after another the buttons depressed and my character moved to pick up the valuable loot, the smile upon my face grew ever larger and my eyes opened ever wider. Then suddenly the power turned off, the room plunged into darkness and my hands continued to tap the keyboard for moments after. It began to grow, it started to fester and feed, I could feel it welling up inside of me, all this time, all this time for nothing! And all at once it burst out and the room reverberated with a cacophony of noise and a loud bang filled the room as small buttons flew in all directions. The door to my room flew open as. . .

Click

Hot sand flew in all directions as children giggled and screamed. A teacher stood near the edge of the playground, her hawkish eyes surveying the scene, ready to catch the latest offender. A little distance away a small boy, his skin contrasting with his bright white shirt, ran down the hall. Rays of light poured through the space between the buildings, and illuminated the countless chalk drawings on the ground, soon to fade away. A high pitched sound cracked the air and the little boy came to a screeching stop. A hallway monitor jogged over, old and wrinkled with a slight smirk upon her face. The veins in the little boy's eyes became visible as they popped out of their sockets and his hands shook slightly as the hallway monitor wrote his name down on the clipboard. His mouth agape, the little boy looked down at the referral that had just been given to him, "Running in the hallway at unsafe speeds" it read. The paper crumpled and the boy plunged his hands into his pocket, then proceeded to speed down the hallway toward the playground. The teacher with the hawkish eyes had found her prey and moved in for the kill, the sand giving way for her considerable girth as she marched across the playground. The little mouse swung back and forth on the swing, his stomach on the seat and his butt facing outward. The teacher with hawkish eyes tore the little boy off of the swing and scolded him, "Butt on the seat!" she hollered. Down a ways, a mass of children kicked a ball around, the sun bearing down upon the dusty field. Then one of the children, frustrated at the lack of progress, picked up the ball and ran towards the goal. Little did he know a teacher had been eyeing him and a high pitched sound again split the air. The teacher darted over to the boy and for the third time that day his name went down. He quickly ran off, but as he did so a more sinister noise shot through the air. . .

Click

I sat at the computer, my face contorted as I stared at the screen. **Today's change:-315,600.98 DKP** the screen read. What! My palms started to sweat and the mouse seemed not to obey my commands. I blinked and looked again; I closed my eyes yet the words were burned into my retina. I gasped for every last drop of oxygen. Where had all the air gone? I took several deep breaths and my heartbeat slowed, the thumping began to subside, and my breathing returned to normal but my palms were still sweaty. The page scrolled past my straining eyes, the screen's smooth glide down interrupted every second or so by little numbers on the screen. **-19%, -4.5%, -13.65%**—the numbers continued to scroll by and each one soon became indiscernible from the one before it. I frantically posted comment after comment advocating why the stocks that had lost me the most money should rise in price. But the grieving of an individual would not sway the crowd. **It's fake money**, one comment directed at me read, **calm down!**. The mouse hovered over the sell button, its big red form enticed me to click. The numbers above it continued to tick downwards and with each new stock price the mouse would steady itself. Finally the mouse clicked, then again, and again and my shares in the stock began to rapidly decline. My heartbeat soon returned to normal and my mind clear once again, I would lose no more money this day. But then to my horror.

. .

Click

Ding, ding, ding. The rustle of papers and zippers filled the air and a thousand little sounds permeated the cluttered room. A monotonous drone filled the air outside, a beehive unleashed upon the halls and contained by the walls. The students rushed out of the drab coloured building and across the sun drenched desert, a small cloud of dirt hovering above their thundering feet. A plethora of noise filled the lunch room, each conversation seeped into another. The place smelled of grease, old cheeseburgers, and the daily special of some mangled conglomeration of tacos, tomatoes, cheese, and meat. On the upper level (several distinct sections existed in the lunch room), the pompous of each class sat and socialized. From the lower levels walked a couple, the boy dressed in his baggy pants, his unsightly boxers hanging out the back, his shirt proclaiming some profanity at authority; the girl in her pleated skirt, her bosom nearly jumping out of her shirt and her make-up piled a mountain high upon her face. They walked with all the smugness of royalty, the girl's chin raised and the boy stared down any others who dared to peek a look at his provocatively dressed partner. As they climbed the stairs to the top, the girl let out a deafening scream when. . .

Click

The horizon bobbed up and down and I looked down at the sea. Oil, food, garbage, dirt and grime drifted upon the waves, the algae barely visibly below the surface. A sudden fear overcome me, and I looked to the east, the west, the north, the south but I could see no land. Alas, having so thoroughly planned this out we still had gone astray, for no matter how great the ship, nature does not bend easily to the will of man. The floor of the boat did not comfort anymore than the dreary skyline; slick and slimy, as if someone had spread a thin layer of mucous upon it. Several kids decided to hang out near the bow of the ship, talking of things they could not buy, people they did not know and problems they would not solve. I looked

over the side of the ship at the sea, troughs and crest propagated from the back of the ship, each forming a small wave that soon turned to foam and was lost to the sea. Small pieces of refuse floated in the ships wake, the algae violently blown back and forth by the ship as it passed. A seagull flew over the ship and landed on the railing a bit away from me, and I gather a small bit of joy in the thought of catching this creature, but it flew away before I could act upon this desire. A teacher came rushing out from the cabin and I quickly turned to see. . .

Click

Wal-mart. I walked towards the entrance, my brother slightly ahead of me, and nearly died as a crazed man sped past in his old Toyota pickup and gave me 'the finger' as he zipped away. I passed the automatic doors, and choked on the sudden dip in air quality. I nearly slipped on the wet floor near the entrance, the janitor leaving no warning of his deed. The smell of liquified butter floated through the air, my nostrils filling with the kind of sweet scent only an artificial process could produce. A couple pushed by me, the man in his wifebeater (he probably did just that) and covered in tattoos; the woman in her obscene outfit and pierced all over, neither looked happy to be in the company of the other. Cheetos, Doritos, Lays, Pringles, Nerds, Cheerios, Pepsi, Coke, Fig Newtons, Ramen, Oreos, Popsicles, Jell-O, Rice Krispies, Cheez-Its, Ritz, Kool-Aid, Snickers, Gatorade, Hershey's, Altoids, M&Ms, Nilla Wafers, Twinkies– everything at ever lower and more enticing prices, every product out to destroy some working organ in my body. A small boy was crying, his eyes bright cherries, tears gushed out from them and rolled down his face and onto his old, worn-out t-shirt. His mom slowly moved back toward the brightly coloured section of the store and a couple of snapping sounds reverberated through the area as she tossed the toy back onto the shelf. I picked up one of the latest and greatest gadgets; 'Made in China' printed in bold letters on the back. I casually dropped it back onto its platform and turned around as a store employee came running towards me. . .

Click

The small room had white, barren walls, light filtered in through the half closed blinds, and reflected upon the dust floating in the air. The room was filled with toys of all shapes, sizes and colours. My friend and I played with our Power Ranger figurines, the latest fad to befall my generation. We soon lost interest in the Rangers and I looked about me. Around us lay bits and pieces of other adventures, other times, other places. A Lego structure loomed behind us, a conglomeration of everything built toward the sky, our proclamation of the genius and power of our minds, our defiance of Nature's will to bring everything down. Yet in our effort to reach the heavens we had neglected the base and the whole thing would probably fall with the slightest touch. A set of Pogs sat beside us, whatever game we had started had been left unfinished, some new delight having caught our attention. Hooked up and ready to go, we booted up the Sega Genesis that sat near the stairs spiraling downward, the old television taking awhile to warm up and turn on. We started playing a game of Sonic. We raced across the levels, both completely focus on his own part of the screen, trapped in his own little world, neither looking at the other's screen to see how they were doing. The shrill of a mother broke the illusion and brought us suddenly back to reality, we heard another scream . . .

Click

The scenery rolled by me, at regular intervals the ground would rock back and forth, the luggage above my head looked in danger of falling off. The train continued its trek across the urban jungle, before me stretched city blocks crammed with decayed buildings, streets lined with trash and lots filled with old rusted cars. A ting of pine wafted throughout the cabin and the train continued to rock back and forth again. A man sat in front of me, his coat hung on the arm rest, his shirt cleanly ironed, his sunglasses still stuck over his eyes, and his earphones blasting as he read the newspaper, "A winning goal, then back to war," it read. The woman next to him was no less chic, her nails gleaming, hair shining, lips glistening, sunglasses reflecting and hand holding a copy of some book, a small sticker indicated it had received Oprah's approval. A man a couple rows down got up and started walking towards me, I was surprised he could get down the aisle, the buttons on his shirt looked about to pop and a trucker hat sat atop his mop of hair. A woman walked down the aisle towards him, her chin to the air. He quickly moved to the side to let her pass and she strolled by, her expensive purse swung back and forth, and nearly hit someone a row in front of me. I looked out the window again, we passed over a stream which flowed around a bend and disappeared into the thicket beyond. Small white houses lined the stream, children frolicked about in the streets while their grandparents watched. As a couple had tea on their porch, they both got up, beaming, to greet a couple of people who had just walked up the steps. A slight smile crossed my face as I picked up the magazine on my lap and began to read. "The next big thing!" one headline read. "Another celebrity goes to rehab!" read another. I put the magazine down and stared back out the window. . .

Click

the misunderstanding

"You know what mart doesn't have, Special K!"

"This is not funny, sir, I need to see the pass."

"I walking, in mart sir, suddenly down look I. What see? Crack."

"Step in the car sir."

"And I look outside, there weed on my yard, damn seller gave yard with weed."

"In the car, sir. "

He hit me, once again I fell to the ground.

“You bitch, you fucking told him didn’t you?”

“I didn’t tell . . .”

He struck me again and my cheek began to bleed.

“Don’t you lie to me you prick, I know what you did, I saw you tell him something.”

“I didn’t tell him anything, he didn’t even ask any questions.”

“He doesn’t need to ask questions to get answers you whore.”

He kicked me in the ribs and I gave a yelp. He stared at me till I shut up, then proceeded to walk out of the room. I doubled over on the broken mattress in the corner and I cried the rest of the night.

I woke up the next morning in the cold cellar, a plush bed for the customers sat in the corner, my dirt covered bed placed on the opposite side. It wasn’t my fault, my mother was poor and my father had lost a leg due to an — accident — at work. I had tried to kill myself, to leave this miserable existence. I didn’t care if my family starved, at least I wouldn’t have to go through hell every night.

“Hey bitch, what are you sitting around fo’, there are customers waiting, hurry up.”

I began to get dressed, the wisp of air that were supposed to clothe me nearly falling off, the cross around my neck was bent, the diamonds on the chain having long fallen off. There were customers, always customers in this hell hole: criminals, pimps, poor men, rich men and everything in between. I serviced them every day, never did I enjoy it, legal rape was what it was. The police were in on the gig also, sometimes even they would come in for the night.

“Hey bitch, you in there, tell him nights over, we’re closin’.”

“Fuck off, he’ll leave when he’s done.”

So later that night he beat me again, trying to find out what I told the man. I continued to tell him the truth, that I hadn’t told the man anything, but he didn’t believe me.

“Let me get this straight bitch, the man walks in and talks to you—in private—for thirty minutes and you tell him nothin’?”

“Yes, and. . .”

“I didn’t ask you to answer bitch, I already know your lying to me.”

“But, I’m serious, I told him nothing.”

“Just like OJ didn’t kill his wife right? I’m done with you: you don’t make me enough money; the customers complain about your constant whining; and you and your illness costing me a

pretty penny. Your not a profitable venture like them other girls, I'm gonna have to cut my loses."

"So what, your going to sell me?"

"No bitch, that would be unkind to whoever gets you next, I'm going to make a killing though."

"A killing?"

"Off of you and your death: headlines, I own the papers, remember bitch; police money, insurance, everything."

"But, you can't. . ."

I felt a sharp pain and the world suddenly started to fade from view. I looked at him, I was sure he'd been lying, ten years for nothing! Nothing! He didn't care, he's running a business and I wasn't making enough for him, but he'd found other uses for me, like he does for everything else. To bad I lied to him and had told the investigator everything, the again, he's probably paid the investigator off anyway, damn prick.

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