

POSTFACE

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I neglected to tell you I returned to Nahoto's world on the way home to my planet.

It was greyer than I remember; the atmosphere was all off. My ship read no signs of life. I was not surprised.

The images were unrecognizable. There were the boulders, rocks, pebbles, the mud, the continents, lakes (now polluted), the valleys and the sun, but nothing else reminded me of the place I once knew. Civilizations had passed here and even the seasons had changed.

The atmosphere was thick and toxic. The flowers were long dead, as were the bees; the people as well. Skulls, vertebrae and other bones were littered across the roads next to automotive cadavers. There were purple pendants amongst the corpses that depicted a cloud. Me.

The whole planet was dead, aside from microbes, some insects, algae, volcanoes and the still active core. I doubted very much that evolution would continue much further there under such conditions.

Some tech was still operable, but no operator could be found, so was it? I searched it for a clue to what had happened. No comet, alien invasion or pulsar had doomed them. No obvious war had destroyed them. There were no signs of major armed conflict. There was no fallout readout. It could have been as simple as a pandemic or mass suicide cult.

Likely they ran out of food and the resources to accommodate the altered atmosphere. The tooth marks on many of the charred skeletons thrown into crude fire pits point to cannibalism. The dead rising was a less likely scenario. My search was fruitless.

The tragedy layered upon the tragedy was that I missed their final days by a mere century. If I had only known I could have saved a few of them. I could have learned firsthand what had gone wrong. I declined to simply

travel through time once more. I was done meddling, aside from this tome. I thought, "This is my fault, my meddling." I realized it was just one dead planet among many.

I walked uphill, through the valley, to Nahoto's mansion. The surrounding structures, the ones which remained relatively erect, were devoid of character. They were grey blocks without windows. They were made of recycled garbage.

The flowers were gone. There were no more bees.

A solid gold statue stood unblemished behind the rubble where the podium once stood. Nahoto was depicted there, larger than life. The likeness was impeccable. It was surrounded by a cloud shaped mud pit. Nothing would emerge from the purple mud again for a long, long time, if ever at all.

And I sat there pondering my death and thinking about my life and theirs: "Will they die? What does it mean if they don't? Have I blasphemed against nature, not by creating a monster, like Dr. Frankenstein, but by creating Gods?" I think often about Jack and Henry. Somehow they changed me.

That's when I was struck by far more frightening thoughts: "The founder travelled across solar systems and through time as I had. At least one highly advanced spacecraft was built by them; one which makes the flagship I built seem like a relic, a jalopy. The founder claims to age remarkably well, as I do. He or she seems to have a gift for both science and freedom fighting, as I do. It's quite possible that Henry or Jack had to become like me to destroy me, but what if they didn't. This isn't their cross to bear, it's mine."

Henry's story, "The Maniac and the Toaster," was still troubling me. "It seems likely that someone had implanted that story in his mind. This troubled the founder. But my machines that had occupied Henry, Jack and countless creatures before are unique. A final gift from a long dead world, one whose entire civilization was archived on the same machines, alongside the consciousnesses of many of the planet's people. I could operate the machinery crudely as I had been trained to do so, but even my ship, which is smarter than I, can only complete simple repairs on it through guesswork. How could

someone have found the story in its entirety? It would have to have been through Henry, Jack or I. The founder must share my propensity for implanting stories within minds; the video of my torture suggested as much.

“Is it too far of a leap to question if they share my tendency to lie? If they do lie, then everything they said is suspect. It could all be a story, but then it was a story for me. Perhaps the story wasn’t a lie, but a parable.

What if the founder was me all along? What if there is still one villain I must defeat for everlasting peace: myself? What if I have to kill myself, as I have so many times? Am I the savior or the devil? Who am I?

“I don’t know if it will be they or I who re-establishes equilibrium across time and space, but I know that if it wasn’t for them I would have further lost my way. I would have become what I hate, as so many have before me. I could see humanity’s purpose, your strength, though words fail at capturing it. Maybe I can atone for my sins by letting them have the life I was denied: white picket fences. I can give them a happily ever after.”

Never before had I ever felt this strange turning in my gut, a palpable nausea, that plagues me in old age; a visceral manifestation of the fear that I may have broken the universe through my endeavour to save it. Maybe I am responsible for closing the circles. Maybe I will meddle once more. Or maybe it’s indigestion brought on because I was a puppet all along, and they were holding strings threaded from time itself. Maybe change does not exist, and this was all fated; Jack, Henry and I no more coincidental than characters working towards the end of a novel. It comes and goes.