

PART FIVE

Sometimes Shit Just Keeps Happening

I didn't leave Sol's grasp.

My ship stalled near Jupiter's orbit.

At first the screens were completely unresponsive. When your computer is conscious, turning it off and back on again is no longer the first course of action. A single warning shortly appeared on the screen, "Possible PARADOX! detected in memory banks. Locate Henry's memory file and delete." When I probed for more information my ship just mumbled over the loud speaker, "It must be you...er...It must be something you will do. Delete or face the imminent threat of AIDS."

I thought, "What will I do?" I've never seen the old girl in such a state.

Through the window I saw an AIDS command vessel within mere kilometers of my ship.

It had arrived without notice. I could hear, within my head, what I presumed to be a standard protocol boarding notice. I craved a speedy death, I wanted nothing of the bonsai business. I walked slowly towards the docking hatch; I said my farewells to the ship. It couldn't hear me due to its sudden-onset senility. The flashing green light indicated the connection had been made. A chime sounded to signify that the hatch door next to me was requested opened.

The door opened.

Someone entered. He, or she, or it was wearing AIDS ornamental battle gear. He/she/it was covered from head to toe. The helmet completely

disguised their appearance and blocked their thoughts from me. Imagine meeting someone with your eyes closed; how discombobulating would that be? I couldn't even tell what species the creature was, if it was a creature at all. Surprisingly, the door closed and a different chime indicated that the passage between the ships was empty. The thing was alone. Even more curious, he/she/it offered a hand as if to be shaken in introduction. There are far more common greetings across the universe. I obliged, and my assumption was confirmed.

This was nothing compared to he/she/it speaking English to me. The voice of the being was obscured through a mechanism within the helmet, or perhaps the being inside didn't even speak the language and I was hearing a translation. I couldn't be truly sure if the voice was even human. I supposed they could have been a robot. He/she/it had introduced himself/herself/itself as one of the founders of AIDS and asked, quite politely, "Would you please accompany me to the bridge?"

The supposed founder of AIDS dropped a gadget on my bridge's main panel. Immediately the error messages disappeared. My ship's short term memory had been drastically erased, as was the file that had caused the commotion. The response was unethical, to say the very least. My ship likely asked itself, "What did I do last night?"

The founder reached into the left pocket of his outer coat and produced a few old folded sheets of what appeared to be tree paper. Such an archaic communication method furthered the puzzle. He, or she, or it, handed the sheets to me.

I was attempting to unravel this unusual predicament and peculiar parchment. Either this entity was a founder of AIDS or he/she/it was not, but wanted to create that impression. If this entity was a founder of AIDS, he/she/it was either from Earth or he/she/it was not, but wanted me to think as much. If this entity was from Earth, he/she/it was likely a human, but could be an alien, a time traveler, or a robot. If this entity was from Earth, it either spoke English normally, or it did not and wished to not speak in their native tongue and therefore selected a koine for dialogue, having realized my ship

came from Earth. If this English speaking entity was a human then he/she/it was likely either from an alternate reality, a future yet to come, both, or had been abducted by an alien vessel. There is either a connection between the creation of AIDS and the individual or there is not. There is, as of yet, no hard evidence of the connection or that alternate realities exist.

Clearly probing would be necessary.

I thought I was being fucked with, as you may now feel.

Public Transit

The only aliens that I know of who had visited Earth before me now run public transit companies across 5 major North American metropolises. Their species looks remarkably similar to Homo sapiens, close enough to pass, but not perfectly. They are conducting a sociological experiment to see what happens to a population that is consistently late.

I felt like a mouse must feel when it is being toyed with by a cat

The founder said, "Read this. How could this story have been written years before you established contact?" The story was Henry's "The Maniac and his Toaster," he hadn't shown it to anyone as he always felt it seemed like a small part of something bigger. I hadn't read it before, and since finishing it Henry hadn't read it either.

The Maniac and his Toaster

There was a world where no one sang. The only dances were soldiers' parades. The only bells signalled war. There were no smiles or laughs. There was no refrain.

There were only stoic grimaces. There was only step, step, step, over and over again. The soldiers only spoke when spoken to. The soldiers had no hearts and no love. They lived in a literal and figurative world of darkness. No sun shone on their planet. They didn't even need symbols to fall behind.

The surface of the world was riddled with volcanoes.

All that rained was volcanic ash. The air was thick and black with it.

Nothing grew on the planet naturally.

The soldiers did as they were told. Bringing war and dying in war were the soldier's responsibilities. Soldiers were infertile.

Commanders would only be heard issuing orders from loud speakers.

A typical communication from the speaker would be, "Red bird leader, order command 1., have green bird leader primed and instructed on pre-flight barracks procedures. Red bird leader, order command 2., issue verbal command, "Await order commands," to green bird leader. Red bird leader, order command 3., have your squad report to red bird post-haste for more commands."

A good soldier never questioned orders.

The punishment for questioning orders was death by electrocution.

It was extremely rare for soldiers to return.

Soldiers only returned upon victory.

There was no reward for victory.

Victorious soldiers were next in line for order commands. Victorious soldiers had only completed half of their responsibilities.

Each soldier from that planet was named after that planet and designated a chronologically determined five-digit reference number. In English that planet's name would best translate to "Abyss."

Once a soldier had been named he would be assigned to a squadron.

At any one time the planet would only ever have three squadrons: a blue squadron, a red squadron and a green squadron.

This is the story of Abyss-753-2-4

Abyss-753-2-4 had risen to the rank of blue bird leader commander.

Promotions were purely random.

Blue bird soldiers outranked red bird soldiers, which outranked green bird soldiers. Blue bird soldiers were destined for blue birds. Red bird soldiers were intended for red birds and so on.

There were four buildings on Abyss. The first was a hanger titled "Manufacturing Depot-753," and the second was a laboratory labelled "Ministry of Education-753."

The other two buildings were both barracks: one was titled "Reserve Barracks-753," and one was titled "Pre-Flight Barracks-753."

The barrack's walls, bunks, storage units and machinery changed colour to reflect its inhabitant's designations.

LED lights would display a soldier's name and rank on everything associated with that soldier, be it a bunk, a rifle, or a storage box.

There was no character to anything.

Soldiers were not to be individuals.

Soldiers were encouraged not to think unless necessary.

Abyss-753-2-4 always tried to do what he was supposed to. He believed that to be his purpose.

If Abyss-753-2-4 thought, his thoughts would be: concerning his completing his mission, necessary to his operation, about how he shouldn't be thinking, by accident, or out of fear.

Soldiers who thought out loud were electrocuted.

Soldiers who made random unnecessary noise were electrocuted.

Soldiers who failed to comply with their squadron leader's commands were electrocuted.

At what was classified as daybreak two chimes sounded. The chimes were 15 seconds apart.

Soldiers who weren't in line by the second chime, no matter the hold up, were electrocuted.

Soldiers who disobeyed any rules were electrocuted.

The soldiers had been instructed of their 391 rules of conduct.

Considering all the potential offences punished by electrocution one would think that soldiers would be dropping like flies from a zapper, but this was not the case.

Out of the 24 soldiers in Abyss-753-2-4's blue squadron only five had been electrocuted.

Electrocutions were carried out by rooms, if they happened in a room, and by the highest ranking soldier if they happened outside. All five electrocuted soldiers had been terminated by streams of electricity that traveled from their bunker's ceiling through the selected soldier and finally dissipated in the ground. Surrounding soldiers would feel a painful shock that reminded them to keep in line.

The soldiers were under constant surveillance.

If any blue bird soldier had committed an offence outside it would have been Abyss-753-2-4 that discharged them.

The offences that led to electrocution were often unforeseeable.

The first soldier terminated by electrocution had simply arrived in line a millisecond after the second chime sounded as he had only woken from the rustling of other soldiers and not the warning chime.

The third soldier was terminated because his rifle began displaying an error message. He simply said out loud, "Error Message 9, Error Mess—" and received an electrocution.

The fourth soldier was terminated in his sleep because he had begun reciting the 391 rules out loud.

Sometimes soldiers would commit actions they knew were punishable by electrocution. These were sometimes the soldiers suspected by commanders of thinking too much.

The second soldier to be terminated had asked, "Why should I help you if you're what's likely to kill me?" to the room shortly after the first soldier's electrocution.

The last soldier to be terminated had said, "The room can't kill all of us at once." He was dead a second later. No mutiny ensued.

On average, 4.202018 soldiers were killed per squadron by friendly electrocution.

The most likely reason why five had already fallen from Abyss 753-2-4's blue birds was because of a power outage that lasted 42 hours. During the power outage when Abyss 753-1-7, the fifth soldier who would die, asked his squadron leader, "What's happened?" nobody died. Nor did anyone perish when the leader answered back, his first words ever, "Power loss. Protocol-010111."

The soldiers didn't frown or smile. There was no need for emotion. It served no purpose.

Before that day it never occurred to the soldiers that the room's walls were not omnipotent. Before that day the room could hear all, could see anything and could produce electricity as if from nowhere. The soldiers were

quiet, motionless and afraid for the remainder of the blackout. Abyss 753-2-4 just slept and dreamt.

Soldiers dreamt of fluffy white and grey sort-of sheep (although none of them knew exactly what the creatures were at all), of rolling purple fields, of ponds and slick pebbles. When they were educated they were told to disregard the dreams. The machines told them that.

When the order command came in, "Blue bird leader, order command 1., issue blue bird squadron order command 1., 'Board blue bird' and order command 2., 'Take battle positions'" Abyss-753-2-4 complied to regulations, issued the specified orders and took his position at command of the bridge.

The ship began flying towards its destination. The blue bird squadron would be little more than seat warmers until confrontation ensued. The travellers busied themselves with system checks and routine procedures that were fruitless. Space, though empty, dark, hostile and sublime by human standards, was strangely welcoming and beautiful for the soldiers of Abyss.

The soldiers knew that death may be imminent. Most didn't care either way.

A few earth hours into the trip an eclipsing planet, in synchronous rotation with Abyss, was passed by the ship and a hidden binary star system was revealed. It was likely that one of the five habitable planets nearby housed the Commanders. It was known that only the furthest of the five was hostile. The Commanders called the planet something that meant the equivalent of "Anarchy" in English. The title didn't pertain to the actual geographical planet, but that the planet hadn't conformed to the Commanders' coalition.

The objective of the soldiers, and nearly all other Abyss missions, was to raid and destroy bases on Anarchy. This mission would be impossible however. The first system to go was radar. The second was the communications disk. Within minutes nearly all systems were experiencing

technical difficulties. The ship's loud-speaker boomed, "Blue bird squadron, the orbit of the dwarf star is too close for the continuation of the mission. In order to preserve resources all power will be transferred to engines for a short burst designed to crash your ship on the nearest uninhabitable planet until its resources are needed. You have failed. Your termination is imminent upon impact."

The blue bird squadron soldiers awaited termination patiently. The blast from the engines was stronger than intended and sent the ship careening towards a relatively boring looking atmosphere-free grey rock about one quarter the size of Earth's own moon. The ship automatically made preparations for a crash landing. At forty seconds to impact afterburners fired backwards until they burnt out. At thirty seconds to impact titanium fibre parachutes tried pointlessly to slow down the juggernaut. At twenty seconds to impact the bridge closed off all connection to the rest of the ship, and launched, against momentum, towards space. The effect was that the velocity of the bridge pod was reduced to the point of a slow decent towards the moon.

It was ten seconds to impact when the inflation of giant bouncy balls seemed like a good idea for whatever reason. Abyss-753-2-4 had no idea what was happening. The ship did all the work for him. He was more a spectator than anything, observing the futility of all machines' best efforts. Even if the landing was successful there was little chance that rescue would be deemed resource-efficient.

The bridge pod was continuing its slow, calculated landing as an anomaly entered into view on the emergency radar console. The external camera then probed what at 7,000x magnification seemed to be a bubble.

The geographical feature, or constructed complex, was nowhere on the bridge's map systems or its database satellite photos, and was described by the ship's computer as "Nothing of interest." It then added, "The pod will proceed as planned." If not for the manual override the pod would have proceeded as planned. Something in Abyss-753-2-4 just snapped. It was not a lugnut. He fired a short calculated thruster burst towards the enigma and nearly burst one of the bubbles.

The lack of local dust disturbances suggested that the structure, if it was not a mirage, had gone uninterrupted for some time.

As the ship approached the moon's surface, the partially submerged sphere was seen more clearly by the ship's various sensors.

The visual image was that of a transparent glass-seeming dome with a radius of roughly 125 metres. The dome enclosed a bronze-looking rectangular prism. The width and height of the block ran about 25 meters and its length was at least 75 metres. To an earthling it would look like a bronze bar. Surrounding the bar, within the dome, was brown mud and what looked suspiciously like vegetation. A thin bronze path led from this bar to a smaller dome connected to the main dome by a bronze corridor. The whole thing took on the appearance of a crystal mushroom partially buried on its side in the moon's surface. It looked a bit like a glass pipe.

It was then that the pod hit the moon's surface and bounced for a solid minute. Bouncy, Bouncy, Bounce. When it eventually stopped, what was left of the ship was nearly unchanged, thanks to the resilient balls. Abyss-753-2-4 was aware that he had failed an impossible mission. He was aware that everyone he had ever met had likely died and for no reason. He wasn't sad; this was half of their function. Only he had perfectly failed.

When Abyss-753-2-4 asked the ship's computer to describe what it saw it said, "Just some more craters, continue mission 'wait for salvage' as planned." Abyss-753-2-4 had no intention of following that order. He gambled wisely that, in its current state, the ship's computer was incapable of administering intentional electrocution without damaging itself. He suited up, grabbed his weapon and left the pod.

Abyss-753-2-4 was surprisingly close to the entrance to the dome. It was a mere five Earth minute walk in low gravity. The doorway itself caught him by surprise. It was obviously constructed by the commanders, as it seemed curiously similar to those on Abyss.

For the first time in his life Abyss-753-2-4 thought as openly as he could, considering his conditioning. He felt fear, although he did not know what this meant. A peculiar thing happened as he opened the door into the unknown:

he began to shake slightly. He had no clue what this meant, either. There was no going back for maintenance; that would amount to certain termination.

Whilst in the normalizing chamber Abyss-753-2-4 did not remove his emergency suit when the environment was stabilized. He had no idea if those inside, or those intended to be inside, had similar habitat requirements. He also was unsure if he would need to make a hasty retreat. His weapon, which shot a brief and intense laser burst, was at the ready. At its maximum setting the laser rifle was capable of melting lead. If needed the self-destruct function could vaporize the entire dome, and then some.

According to the weapon's secondary sensors the chamber's atmosphere would be well within Abyss 753-2-4's modest needs, if the suit became ripped. It was composed of mostly nitrogen, with oxygen and a few other elements present in smaller amounts.

A reinforced hatch led from this room to the inside of the dome. When Abyss looked at the interface screen he saw an invitation. It was written in the language of the commanders, and dated over a thousand of the moon's years earlier. It read, "Come in, come in, I've been expecting you. Did you bring any bread?"

When Abyss 753-2-4 finished reading the welcoming the hatch opened. Someone on the other side was beckoning him in.

The courtyard, for want of a better word, was full of mud, trees, shrubs, flowers and other vegetation that could not be properly described to you. There were, in particular, plants that looked like a cross between a tiger lily bush and a willow tree, but were always nine feet tall and as many wide at their widest. Even this description ascribes alien attributes to simple fauna. The apparently bronze path was slightly slippery against the soles of Abyss 753-2-4's feet. The garden was brown, green, white, orange, burgundy, purple and yellow: earthling fall colours. Insects, of a sort, chirped. There was nobody to be found outside of the complex.

Abyss 753-2-4 cautiously made his way towards the doors to the prism. They were eight feet tall, four feet wide, metallic and located next to each other. There were no knobs. Abyss pushed the doors forward and found they were unlocked. He entered as if into an otherworldly saloon. He was greeted with, "Greetings Toaster." It was very dark inside the room. The small flashlight mounted on the weapon was the only brightness. It took Abyss 753-2-4's two eyes a minute to readjust to familiar darkness. The creature was all yellow and seven feet tall. It had two arms, two legs and a tail. Its skeletal structure vaguely resembled a mantis. What looked almost like ears were actually antennae. It had on what looked curiously like sunglasses. It otherwise only wore black pants, which ran to the ground. The gun's sensors read the room's temperature as the equivalent to forty-five degrees Celsius.

Abyss 753-2-4 kept his gun trained on the creature. He replied, "Hello there, my designation is Abyss 753-2-4," in monotone. He had never seen a commander, and had no way of knowing what one would look like. There was a phrase that the commanders were all aware of, which Abyss 753-2-4 would await before passing judgement. The yellow being said, "I suppose you're awaiting that phrase, aren't you?" Abyss 753-2-4 kept quiet.

"Oh don't be so shocked by the timing. I'm a prophet and just because you're reading, and I'm trapped on this dust ball, doesn't mean I'm any less real than you are," said the yellow skin to the sky.

Abyss 753-2-4 was questioning the mental stability of this stranger. "Abyss 753-2-4 will not do. No, I will call you, 'The Toaster,'" decided the prophet. He added, "My name is Layara, but you can call me 'The Maniac.' That's the title of the story, isn't it?" Abyss 753-2-4 was very confused. "Oh right, 'We are they who lead, you follow after, we are the commanders, and you are our stead,'" dictated The Maniac with a mocking tone. He felt very uncomfortable reciting the phrase. He saw in it the repressed homosexuality that normally accompanied locker rooms, war and mass. Abyss 753-2-4 recognized Layara as a commander, and as such, he was sworn to allegiance. "Forgive my insolence," pleaded Abyss 753-2-4. He stood at attention. He awaited electrocution.

"I'm not going to kill you. Relax... chill..."

"What does 'relax' mean? What temperature shall I chill myself to commander?"

"Can you believe this guy?" asked Layara of you. "Just listen up, everyone."

Abyss 753-2-4 assumed there must be a communication device at work, concealed to him. He was right.

"Ok, first of all, stop with that incessant narration for a minute. I fucking hate the suspense. I'm a prophet. I'm going to progress the story. One, The Toaster is a robot, sorry to spring this on all of you. Two, he didn't just happen upon me, this is fated. Three, I've been abandoned by the Universal Solitude Army, just like The Toaster. Four, I am not what you think I am, the same species as the commanders, I am the last of my kind and had sought asylum on their world. Five, the Universal Solitude Army are the commanders and they must be stopped, at all cost."

"Have you defected?"

"No, I was dismissed, but you, you are positively defective."

"I have no purpose, once again. I'm a robot? What does that mean?"

"Oh, you have a purpose. You are a messiah, one in a long list of them within a greater story, and yes, you are a robot. You are a tin man, a glorified toaster. You were designed and created out of material salvaged from your fallen comrades. I need you to be our holy robot saviour"

"Messiah?"

"I need you to pass on a message and do some reprogramming."

Abyss 753-2-4 was grateful for the mission. He took it of his own free will, knowing full well his death was imminent. Like humans he had free will,

but very few actual needs and these were easily satisfied. Simply surviving for the sake of it is unnecessary, fruitless and irresponsible. He knew this at his processing core. He wanted to be unselfish. He wanted to mount a coup against those that enslaved him and his fellow robots when he realized there was an alternative to his previous way of being.

Layara's ship was antiquated and poorly designed, only slightly more cutting-edge than those which brought you to your moon or will bring you to Mars. If not for the fact that Abyss 753-2-4 could wirelessly interface with the eager vessel's guidance controls he would never have escaped the lunar surface.

The landing on Abyss was simple enough: he crashed. There were no reverse firing thrusters, no parachutes and no giant bouncing balls to slow the descent.

Abyss 753-2-4 would soon be only components, an unwilling organ dealer. He was dying.

He was beyond saving. His final sparks were sparking.

His last actions were to initiate Layara's device. He accomplished his mission.

Abyss would be liberated. There was no stopping the signal. Its soundwave would infect all of the computers on that world, like a linguistic virus. Like dialing an analogue phone by replicating audio tones. It spread out and only changed a few small details in programming codes. The safeguards in place, which would otherwise have stopped such a cyber-attack, were powerless against this alien infection.

The sound, when converted to binary by the many sensors on Abyss, was the most powerful Trojan Horse known to the universe. It would be carried by the reprogrammed robots of Abyss to other such manufacturing planets. There would be no more electrocutions.

In the future there would be songs, dancing, smiles and laughs on Abyss.

The Toaster died for all robotkind. He died for their tins.

I was shocked, to say the least.

The founder laughed and said, "You haven't quite figured it out yet, have you?"

I really should have, but change continued to astonish. "Figured what out?" I replied.

"We thought we were going to change the world. You're wrong about us. Most of what you heard was either rumors, myths or conjecture. To the best of my knowledge we've never castrated anyone and never will. That was an incorrect assumption."

"Do I know you?"

"Intimately."

"I'm afraid you'll have to be a little more specific."

"The name AIDS alone, tsk tsk: you have warped its context beyond recognition. The first thing our organization did, way before we reluctantly decided to police time and space, was cure the disease."

"It's not possible."

"Perhaps we're just better pretenders than you ever fathomed."

"Perhaps you're even pretending now."

"Didn't you ever wonder why we never came after you? It's pretty obvious how you managed to travel the stars with such alarming speed; in fact it's from you we took our cue. Your ship and all of ours can only travel at a fraction of the speed of light."

"Congratulations, welcome to the multiple-suicide club."

"No, thankfully we haven't had to resort to that extreme. At first we assumed you had some sort of device that ensured the transfer of your consciousness, but one of our theorists has a pretty compelling argument against such a possibility. You could only replicate your memory; is that right? You died of old age with every trip or consumed a suicide pill, and were born again in your ship, and then you repeated this over and over."

"Not of old age or pill, an injection timed with the transfer. The hope being that my consciousness would be shifted and not only copied, if it actually exists at all. I can never know if it works, or how many 'me's there have been or will be. I don't have faith in the process, only in process itself."

"How old is your ship now?" Henry, or Jack, or their imposter sat down in front of the engine controls, and swirled the seat around to face me, as if it were second nature.

"Older than humanity. At one point it existed in 1,000 places at once; points of its lifetime represented in every corner of our galaxy cluster. Word of warning, never bring up the big questions with it, it makes me feel like I'm still in the pool, learning basic muscle control."

"Young'n," the founder whispered. I believe this was an involuntary utterance. They shook their head. "We are all basically juggling forces we barely understand. We are infants playing with forks and electrical plugs."

I laughed, "Forks and electrical plugs? We're playing God!"

"So you think when you're fighting devils hubris is excusable?"

"By almost any definition of the word we are Gods. I have travelled from world to world and met glorified magicians conning ignorant savages with sleight of hand pretending to be God, while I travel across cosmos and time, control weather wherever I am, command an army, am nearly immortal, practice miracles and am FUCKING TELEPATHIC! I think I've surpassed turning water into wine and coming back to life once."

"I was wondering, when you finally do die, haven't you ever realized if an afterlife exists and you meet your partner and child there that there could be thousands of other yous to contend with for their affections?"

"There was, and is, no other way."

"Unfortunately the venom from Nahoto's world is not as effective on your species."

It was only then that I felt threatened by the possibility that this could be Henry or Jack, "How old are you?"

"Hundreds upon hundreds of times older than you are now, as you were to me before. Thanks to you I do not age physically." The prospect terrified me; this was not supposed to happen.

"You should thank me."

"No one should live forever." He/she produced a syringe as if out of nowhere and injected it into my arm while I was caught unaware. He/she said, "I, personally, knew you'd prefer the needle."

I snarled, "You ungrateful primate. I made you what you are and you reject these gifts? We make the universe a better place and you ask by what right? You dare challenge me on my own ship for moral superiority. I am fighting off genocide and cultural imperialism."

He or she laughed, "Until you become it! Did you listen to yourself a moment ago? Do you really have no clue what path you were on? How long until you go over to the dark side? The army will undo itself, already in this time it is ripe with civil war. Layara has been busy. Our mandate states that we disappear as soon as your reign is erased from the figurative history books, and it will be. I watched the life drain from your corpse four hundred thousand years from now and worlds cheered in unison. You become a viler warmonger than the General, Hitler, Stalin, The Galactic Satan Corps., and all the monarchs and popes of old combined. You just couldn't stand down or let the planets learn to govern themselves after the Universal Solitude army was destroyed. You slowly become just like your sworn enemy. You become Nahoto. I may be a founder, but I do not have the gull to deem anyone worthy to lead everyone, ultimately. This is only the second time we have attempted to change the course of events, the tide of the cosmos. The last time resulted in Earth becoming the very first PARADOX WORLD!!. We decided this was

worth the risk. In truth, as a result, we don't even know if this is our reality, but that doesn't mean it is not worth saving. We are pretenders, you're right there, but at least some of us are employed in pretending that we can be better than we already are. We strive to be altruistic, even if we aren't by nature. You were once like us. What happened?"

I screamed, "No, this is all lies!" I convulsed with rage.

The founder said, "A liar sees lies everywhere." He/she produced from his/her pockets various serrated and rusty instruments of torture and a bonsai tree costume. They, not me, were becoming the floating green head of Oz. They would disappear and the legend would rule in their stead. The mythos would resound across time and space, I already knew this. It already has. I had heard rumors that it was a red skin in the video, but I always thought that this was the equivalent of a spooky story around a campfire, elements changed depending on the story teller and their audience.

Perhaps they were the author all along. They said, "This is the only way you can get what you want."

The tray of dirty dishes to my left, from my previous meal, explains the light breakfast part of the mythos.

The sedative was taking effect. I couldn't move, and it seemed the pain was mostly alleviated, but I was kept awake the entire time.

The video would be dispersed across the universe and it would be eons before anyone would ever question the authority of AIDS. Before I died, when I was covered in my vital juices and lacerations, and garbed so whimsically, I smiled and asked the founder if they had found the meaning of life. He or she answered, "I'm still not sure if there is an end to the road, and I'm still as lost as I ever was." This is what Jack or Henry or some fraud said as pieces of me were sliced off and I began to die. The last thing I heard was, "You are right to believe in change, from what I've seen the universe never stands still, but like me you seem to be habitually unsatisfied with the present as it falls short of conceptual progress. You know the terrifying truth is that we all simply seek something to busy ourselves with until we return to the stars. Right now I'm breaking some legs to make an omelet."

If this was Henry or Jack I suppose the suffering they inflicted on me was but a shadow of what I had put them through. They hadn't asked for any of this. They probably would have preferred if I had let them die to experiencing the struggles that would follow afterwards. They were truly innocent beings and look what I had turned them into. I had barely even cared.

If you could use a time machine to go back and assassinate Adolf Hitler before he ever took power in Germany, wouldn't you? Would you allow the atom bombs to fall on Hiroshima or Nagasaki if you had the power to stop it? Would you let Dresden burn? If so, would you let the towers fall?

I do not doubt that Henry or Jack spoke prophecy. The guilt that I feel eclipses any blame or pride I have left. Before the founder left, my surveillance camera caught them entering the lavatory, falling to the ground and sobbing uncontrollably.

They stayed there for some time. Then they spent even longer staring out the window.

I pray that they have the strength to relinquish their authority. I fear the old adage that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The symbol of the two circles that merge into one became instantly recognizable for what it was; its meaning had taunted me my whole life, and only then was it clear.

Layara, the yellow skin, was laughing at me somewhere. I doubt there was anything supernatural about him. He just wasn't as trapped, aside from his physical existence, in the fourth dimension as the rest of us are. He was unstuck in time.

Sometimes shit just keeps happening.

I didn't stay dead. They weren't clever enough to realize, or simply didn't care, that whenever I die my ship simply begins the rebirthing process and downloads the latest copy of 'me' into another clone. When I eventually

was able to watch my own slow tortuous death whilst dressed like a bonsai tree it seemed pure make-believe. I understood the AIDS myth. I decided to return to my planet, write the memoir that inspired these pages and retire in peace. I said, as humans say, "Now I've seen everything." I decided right then that I would send my ship and a robot crew to implant this tale within the doomed writer when I am finished writing it. As you are reading this now I have succeeded. I already know I have, because I knew it existed before I even began it.

Strangely, no paradox has ever occurred that I'm aware of after they, or I, altered spatial solitude.

My child has stepped down from power now and the Multitude rule on our world.

Maybe it was Henry or Jack's destiny to save me through death from death as I had saved them. Maybe we were simply another elegant manifestation of the action-reaction chain.

THE END

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